

Is There a Catholic Social Ethic?

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In the May local council elections in the borough of Congleton, Cheshire, I stood as a Labour Party candidate in one of the wards. It consisted of rich Cheshire farmland and the result was quite predictable. I received 106 votes to the Tory 432. If Labour had won in the ward of Brereton, it would have signalled “the end of civilization as we know it”, and, to employ the phrase of Caspar Weinburger, U.S. defence spokesman, when interviewed on BBC World Service, the capitulation of the west to “Soviet hordes”. That, however, is not the point of this article. I am a “practising Catholic”, by which is meant a Catholic holding to the teaching of the Church and attending the sacraments. Now, a little down the road on which I live there happen to be a number of Catholic families, also “practising”, indeed pillars of the local Church. But in contrast to me two of these families supplied the bulk of the ten signatures the local Tory candidate required for his nomination. That is quite a public commitment because their names went up in print on the town hall and local parish notice boards, where I spotted them. As a political commitment it is second only to standing as a candidate. It was this which set me thinking if in fact we can talk about a Catholic social ethic.

The moral theologian will immediately reply that of course we can, and he or she (almost invariably ‘he’ in our Catholic culture unfortunately) can point to a thousand tomes, some of great antiquity, and to papal encyclicals to prove it. Yet here we have three Catholic families, two of whom openly sponsor the Tory political philosophy, and one of whom goes a little further and stands for Labour. I am Labour because as a Christian I am a socialist. I am not a socialist and a Christian. I am a socialist because I am a Christian. So I tell myself and I can command any amount of biblical texts, both Old and New, in support. Indeed, when I read the Bible, I find myself quite honestly and frankly unable to understand how any Christian can vote Tory, let alone sponsor Tories. However, we have Catholic Tory MPs. And I know that if I were to discuss the matter with those MPs or with the Catholic families down the road, they would state deeply-felt religious reasons to support their political commitment.

The differences between Labour and Conservative, especially Thatcherite, philosophies are profound. Mrs. Thatcher’s declared aim, her great crusade, is to roll back almost forty years of socialism.

These differences touch at all points on moral questions and matters with moral implications. Unemployment, the Welfare State, the National Health Service, immigration policy, educational expenditure, the environment, sex discrimination, defence (cf. the statement of the American hierarchy on nuclear weapons), private schools—these and many more matters have moral implications, and are among the most important social ethical issues of our time.

Now, a Catholic cannot justify his or her support for any of the three main political parties by reference to their respective stands on more familiar Catholic moral issues like family planning, divorce, abortion, homosexuality. (An aside: why is the Catholic Church identifiable by a catalogue of sexual issues? What does it say about us?). These issues command like support and opposition across the parties. The Liberals introduced the 1967 Abortion Bill. Divorce law has progressed steadily since 1859, irrespective of the type of government. The Sunday Observance Laws are being assailed by a Tory private member's bill, and when their amendment last came up it met with a very solid resistance from Labour ranks—not for religious reasons, but to protect the working conditions of shop assistants. The Conservative Party is traditionally linked with the Church of England, and the Labour Party can trace its roots to, among others, Methodism.

In practice, then, when it comes to issues of a distinct moral nature, there is no Catholic guideline. A Catholic social conscience which is identifiable does not exist. I am repelled by the policies endorsed by Mrs. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, for example, the US representative at the United Nations. By no stretch of the imagination can I conceive of any justification for the subversion by the CIA of Nicaragua, involving not just the aim of changing a government, but the death and maiming of thousands. Mrs. Kirkpatrick, however, openly defends this. She and I share the same Communion. The Pope held a meeting with President Reagan in Alaska en route to Korea. Not a word passed between them on the subject of the latter's declared aim to subvert the government of this Catholic nation.

The Methodist Church in England has a very definable socialist moral philosophy. Not the Church of England. The Catholic Church is not capable of being catalogued. It is slightly more Labour than Tory in its membership, though not in its leadership, but not for reasons of social theology but rather because of its members' social background (e.g. in the Irish working class). In 1981 it was reckoned that 54% of Britain's Catholics were voting Labour, and the recent research of the Culham Institute on religious attitudes among British youth found Catholic youth more Labour-inclined than the youth of any other church. Yet my reflections lead me to believe that on the major social issues of our day, other than sex and the defence of its

own schools, the Catholic Church has no stand.

The Sunday after the local elections I have referred to, in a warm glow of self-esteem, seeing myself the champion—though a defeated one—of Christian principles of charity, fraternity, equality, social justice etc., against Tory meanness, selfishness etc., I went to Mass and Communion. In the same aisle, receiving the same Sacrament, were the two Catholic families, and indeed the treasurer of the local Conservative Association with his family, certain no doubt that they had done their duty against the forces of socialist atheism, state domination, the threat of the kulag, the threat to Catholic schools, to Christian family life and so on. Each of us sees it differently, from an angle formed, not from the Bible or theology, but from our backgrounds and the media. There is no Catholic social ethic. There we all were in the same Church, forming one congregation, one body, one family in Christ, to use the common phrases. We all agree on the articles of the Creed, on the sacraments, on abortion, on divorce and on 90% of sexual morality. But just imagine what would happen if the priest, in what undoubtedly would be a fit of absentmindedness, were to ask that congregation to bare their souls on such questions as:

Do you agree with keeping nuclear weapons as a deterrent?

Would you agree to work in a nuclear defence establishment?

Would you do what Sarah Tisdall did if you were in her position?

Would you vote for a parliamentary candidate who supports a policy of cutbacks in the NHS? or education? or social services?

Would you work in an industry that manufactures chemical weapons?

Would you work for a bank which invests heavily in South Africa?

Would you vote for a parliamentary candidate who supports the nationalisation of banks? or major insurance companies?

Do you agree with a sports boycott of South Africa?

Do you think women may leave their families for months or years to campaign for peace at Greenham?

Do you think men can leave their families to fight in a war?

Do you believe in selective schools? or private schools?

Do you believe in a transfer of investment from the NHS to private medicine?

The list is very long, and the one given reflects just my preoccupations. If put to a congregation, to my congregation, our unity would be shattered. Of that I am certain. Every priest knows this. Every theologian knows this. Today, in practice, as far as the Church is concerned, most major issues of social morality are matters of private conscience. So such questioning is unthinkable. Wisdom dictates that in the interests of Catholic unity, indeed Catholic survival, let there be peace, not the sword. Mrs. Begum, who was married to a British citizen and whose child is unequivocally British, suffers the loss of her husband. She is found by the police, and placed

on a plane with her child and deported to Bangladesh. It was a cruel unjust action, but a legal one. There was widespread condemnation. If a Catholic immigration officer had refused to assist in the deportation would the Church have supported him? If precedent is any guide, the Church would have told the officer that he had a duty to obey "the commands of his superiors" and said that whether or not we condemned the deportation would be a matter for our consciences. The Catholic conscience on social moral matters other than sexual ones is 800 million consciences. In practice there are no guidelines of any authority to talk about.

Indeed, the situation is actually worse (if, that is, you—like me—consider this lack of guidelines bad in the first place). The Church is openly divided. I have referred to Mrs Kirkpatrick already, with whose politics many Catholics openly disagree. Or take the nuclear issue. The French bishops contradict the American bishops. Individual clergy, religious, people condemn Cruise and Trident, while the Apostolic Nuncio to Britain condemns them in turn in very forthright terms. In the matter of third-world poverty, the teachings of liberation theology are passionately supported by some, roundly condemned by others. The Vatican may issue guidelines, restricting the use of Marxist categories by theologians, but instructions of this sort are not going to give Catholics any guidance on how to face the social issues which liberation theology has tried to respond to. And these are the divisions which attract the full glare of publicity. Besides them there is the deep divide on all sorts of daily pertinent matters, as I have earlier described, which tell us that there is no Catholic social ethic. The Catholic is just another citizen in a democratic society. The Catholic Church has nothing of practical value to offer. The real moral struggle, where the hard decisions are made, is at Party conferences or in Party headquarters or in the trade union meeting.

Now, it will be argued that such issues as unemployment, health care, education policy, nuclear weapons, relationships with states that offend against human rights, the armaments industry, ecological matters, poverty in the Third World, etc. are not capable of a moral directive. Which is my point. Put it another way, there is no significant Catholic social moral teaching ('significant' here meaning 'being binding in some way'), outside of sexual matters. The Catholic Church of the more recent historical period especially cannot point to a single major moral campaign in which it has given a lead and pushed the world forward. It went along with slavery for centuries, following St. Paul's status-quo admonition; with sex discrimination which relegated women to a lower status (and it still does); with male chauvinism; with imperialism; with wars of all kinds, even initiating some; with economic systems which were based on and encouraged inequalities, even inequalities of the most oppressive kind; it practised

religious discrimination and even persecution. To take recent examples, its attitude towards nazism and fascism was ambivalent, to say it kindly.

Two principles have determined the reaction of the Catholic Church to a social reality. The first of these has been the preservation of its own institutional existence. If that is achieved or guaranteed, it will put up with a lot. The second has been a quite extraordinary distrust of the commands of the Gospel. When confronting a challenging social phenomenon, it has not applied the criteria of the Gospel in preference to a secular interpretation, or a Christian but non-Catholic interpretation, but taken its cue, its direction, from one of these. It was the secular or non-catholic world which took up such issues as sex discrimination or slavery or economic oppression. When the campaign is fought and won, when the race is over and run, the Church recognizes that this is what the Gospel meant, and approbation duly follows.

These are very serious criticisms. Coming to realize these things is very disheartening.

An article by Gary MacEoin on the economic situation in the USA under Reagan appeared in the May 12th issue of *The Tablet*. Following Reagan's 1980 Presidential victory, it said,

environmental protection regulations were weakened, safety and health provisions unenforced. While military spending was increased, funding was cut for vocational education for the handicapped, adult education, food stamps, housing assistance, and other social services, producing a rapid increase in the number of people below the poverty line. From the 11% low of 1972, it was back to 14% in 1981, and it is estimated that it has grown another 2 or 3%. As always, those most widely affected are the non-whites. A third of all blacks and a quarter of all Hispanics lack a subsistence income. As the numbers grow, the aid funds shrink ... Fund cuts have forced 500,000 off the rolls of just one feeding programme—that for women, infants and children. (p. 442)

I would firmly propose that such politics deserve the sternest condemnation from the perspective of Christian ethics, and deserve equally the call from the Church to its members to disassociate themselves from them, in the same way as abortion is condemned and Catholics told in no uncertain terms, not only not to have an abortion but also to avoid participation in abortion surgery. Many fellow catholics would agree with my proposal. But the Church as such would not. It would leave such a decision to the individual conscience. It would not advocate anything which can be characterized as "Catholic politics". There are no Catholic political ethics.

I can picture in my mind those thousands of seminarians now engaged in the study of Catholic moral theology, all very well meant, and I would not discourage them. Will they, however, when they emerge from their studies have anything to offer? It is not worthless to preach kindness, charity, consideration, justice, honesty etc. Of course not. They are the values on which any civilized society must be based. Catholic teaching has never faltered in asserting these values. It is in the area of their social, and not individual, application that the Church has made no contribution of any value. A personal note in its way illustrates this. My secondary education was from Catholic clergy, and naturally included history, which for the requirements of the O-Levels examination specialized in the period 1700—1900: years of empire, continuous war in every continent, parliamentary development and reform, the world-wide extension of trade and the subjugation of foreign countries to the requirements of our developing industry and financial institutions, the industrial revolution and momentous social movements. In all that time the clergy I refer to made no interpretation of these events, no evaluation of that history, no assessment of empire, war, democracy, social reform etc., which could be classed as Christian. Our education consisted in learning that history in preparation for examinations, as required by the standards of examination success. It was outside the Church that I learned a Christian interpretation and evaluation of history. Those clergy were not isolated from or unrepresentative of the Church. They had all gone through the whole set course of seminary life, of philosophy and theology, of spiritual training, of all the required disciplines. But that long seminary training had not given them a Christian viewpoint by which to assess history or society, a Christian critique. Their education had not placed in their minds a consciousness that there is a Christian view of historical events and that that view is of its nature a critical one, one that would be in the world but not of it.

The reason for this state of affairs, this practice of abstaining from giving clear directives in social matters other than sexuality, are deep and diverse. It is more important at this stage to recognize the situation before attempting an explanation. Only if and when Catholics acknowledge that they lack a social ethic will they examine why, and try to do something about it. At present they live under a great delusion, within a colossal myth of their own making, that socially they are ‘the salt of the earth’. However, if an explanation is required, there are some areas we might consider. One surely must be the fact that Christianity is hard, and the implementation of Christ’s teaching in social matters is rigorous. For the Church to stand up and challenge the mores of society involves the risk of reducing the membership of the Church. Political parties have much the same

problem. They can experience conflict between principle and the requirement to win votes. I have already indicated what possible divisions there might be in the membership if the Church was rigorous in the application of Christian principles to socio-political matters. Can you imagine the collective hierarchies of the EEC denouncing the Common Agricultural Policy as blatant social injustice and calling upon all Catholic farmers and politicians to renounce any part in it and instead (a) to organise the giving of excess agricultural products to the starving and the poor and (b) to rethink their agricultural policies to stop the rape of God's green earth for profit and to preserve and improve it? It is quite unthinkable. Can you imagine the US hierarchy denouncing Reagan's policies in Central America as downright imperialist and directing all Catholic soldiers to refuse to participate? Again, unthinkable. Even though the unthinkable is what the world cries out for, the Church could not risk the resultant rebellion in its own ranks, let alone the implicit repudiation of its own power position in the world, and this brings me to the second area which we might consider.

A Church which rigorously applied Christianity would put itself outside the pale. It would be a Church in opposition to the world. Now that is thinking the great unthinkable indeed. For if one looks hard, honestly and candidly at the history of the Church, past and present, one must recognise that Christ's command to be in the world but not of it has been contradicted. Association with and collaboration with the rich and the powerful have been the order of the day. There have been the occasional reminders of the Gospel: the Francis of Assisi and his poor brothers, Bruno and his monks, the occasional saint. But they have all been easily accommodated, regulated and domesticated. The barque sailed on. To be Christian is to repudiate worldly wealth and worldly power—and that's the rub indeed! Christ's word stands out against the world, but not only has the Church accommodated, but it has openly embraced and sought the power and wealth of the world. And of course done so in the name of religion. It is important to realize that this is as true today as it was in the past.

Wherever a section of the Church, as in certain circles in South and Central America, actually applies the Gospel, the central power of the Church uses its power to bring it back into line. The sanctions are quite devastating, and the most powerful of all is to utilize the very faith of the "rebels" (as they would be classed) against themselves, namely to declare that not to obey is to renounce faith itself. A masterful stroke! If history is anything to go by, liberation theology will never be anything more than a fringe movement, and the Church of South and Central America will continue to conform and to serve the powers of this world. The Church is no threat. A dreadful and

disheartening indictment, but quite true. The Church can be relied upon.

The Church has not understood spiritual power, or the power given by Christ. Instead it has allowed worldly power to provide the model. The monarchical structure of the Church renders churchmen uneasy in the presence of democracies or democratic movements. All institutions prefer things to be in their own image and likeness. However, it would help the Church to be Christlike if it took God's almighty—monarchical—power as its model. God gave his creatures the freedom of the will and independent intellect. If the Church could make that sort of monarchy its model, it would assist greatly in ceasing to be identifiable with worldly powers. It would be a repudiation of worldly power. But, as I have said, the Church has found the model of worldly power more amenable, and has adopted the styles and trappings of that model, which are its undoing, today possibly more than in the past. Consequently it associates easily and naturally with the people and institutions of power, and favours the status quo.

I will conclude by saying that this indictment is not made lightly. It has been forced upon me by years of social and political activity, during which, in meeting after meeting in trade union and political circles, I have endeavoured to put across a Christian view of an issue, and during which time I have worked closely with people who do not take their inspiration from Christian sources. People whose profound social conscience and commitment to the welfare of their fellow men and women puts me in mind of the words of Christ, that not even in Israel had He found such faith. It will be of no value to meet this indictment with that type of defence of the Church which concedes nothing. It would be worse if the response were only to acknowledge that minor repairs are needed, but that the bodywork is sound. I can think of only one proper response, namely to repent and believe in the Gospel. By that is meant, to acknowledge that our whole mentality is simply wrong, and to replace it with a new one, that of the Gospel outlook. But, to quote an Irish song,

You might as well go chasing after moonbeams
Or light a penny-candle from a star''.