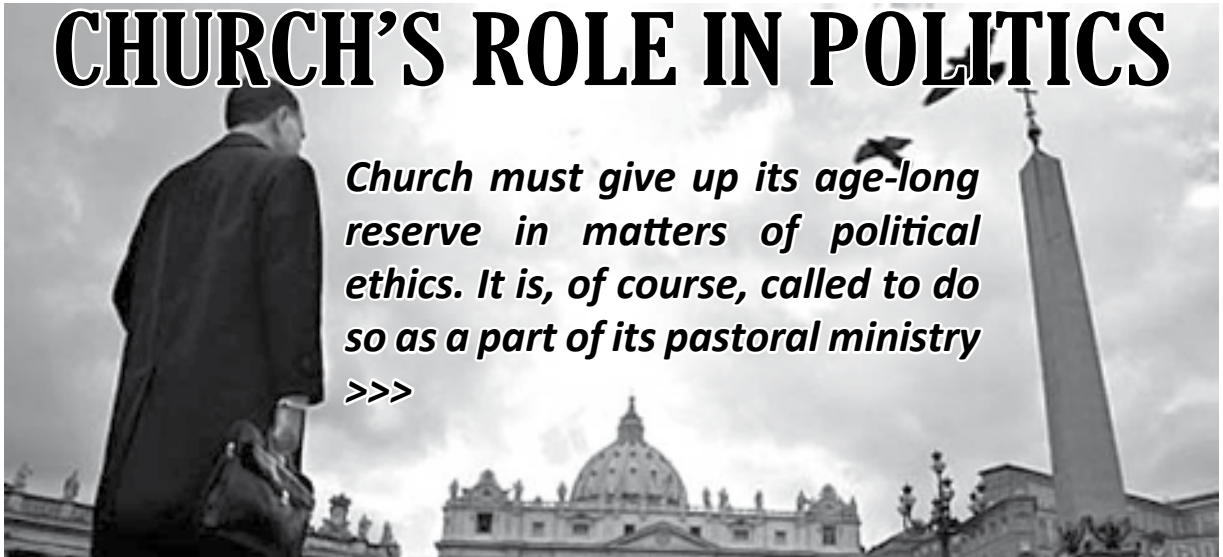


CHURCH'S ROLE IN POLITICS

Church must give up its age-long reserve in matters of political ethics. It is, of course, called to do so as a part of its pastoral ministry

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BY DR. FELIX PODIMATTAM

On February 8, regarding the Church and politics, Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) president Cardinal Oswald Gracias said "the Church knows its limitations. It takes positions only to carry the voice of the voiceless".

Further, the Cardinal said the Church's mandate is to address issues like uplift of the poor, social development, empowerment of women and children, dalits, and the marginalized.

The Church neither supports nor associates with any political party but it will not ignore the plight of the oppressed and the downtrodden, said the CBCI vice-president, Major Archbishop Moran Mor Cleemis.

These prelates were replying to a question at a press conference on the conclusion of the CBCI plenary assembly in Bangalore.

The above views of the CBCI

president and vice-president may give the impression that the role of the Church regarding politics is only social, but never political. I shall argue that the Church can intervene in political matters as well.

Church's Obligations in the Sphere of Politics

The Church cannot refuse to take a stand on the political questions of the day. It is of course called to do so as a part of its pastoral ministry. Think, for example, of the highly political decisions the Christian has constantly to make in the totalitarian state, of the crises of conscience these decisions entail, and the pastoral obligation they impose upon the Church. Yet quite apart from this pastoral kind of concern, the Church is summoned to take a stand on the current political, economic, social, and cultural situation in order that it may not become the unwitting agent of the spirit of the age -- in whatever form -- instead of being impelled by the divine spirit.

The very destiny of men is constantly being decided in politics and social organization. How many lives are lost in a war! How deeply it affects the family!

What testing and temptation goes with it in the moral sphere, and even in the most intimate circles of faith. This is why the Church must be deeply concerned with this question of war and peace, a cardinal political question, precisely for the sake of man. For, the question involves life and death, love and hate, the building up and tearing down of the souls of men for whom Christ died. Obviously the Church must deal with these questions. Obviously it must speak out and make its confession in respect of them.

To take another example, the Church can question as to what role if any, labor should have in the management of industry. There is such a thing as the Christian answer to this question. Let no one say that these are purely technical questions unrelated to the humanity of man, that they are not directly a matter of conscience and hence that there is no need of pastoral direction here. In the last resort it is a question as to how the effective operation of the economy, which requires a measure of individual responsibility and free initiative on the part of the owner, can be harmonized with the need of the employees to share in the responsibility. The humanity

man is very much at stake in this question.

For we know -- and do not need Marxism to tell us -- that the technological age has put the prerogatives of power into the hands of those who control the means of production, so that those who are dependent upon them are in danger of being reduced to the inhuman status of being mere means to an end, of being valued solely in terms of the worth of their productivity. We also know that this threat becomes all the greater as business concerns become more impersonal, directed by managers rather than personally responsible owners. In face of these developments, who would dare to say that the Church is not involved in this question? Is it not a matter of protecting the members of a particular social class lest they be reduced to mere functioning objects and be treated as things rather than persons?

Limitations of Church in Politics

Nevertheless, it cannot be the Church's task to advance the Christian solution to the problem, and to recommend or even make obligatory a specific system in which responsibility is divided between owners and employees according to some "Christian" formula. For, a host of factual considerations also enter into this human question. The apparently simple and Christian recommendation that for the sake of the human dignity of the worker employees must share full responsibility with the employer is not only technically naive.

By its oversimplification it also constitutes a threat to true humanity from the opposite side. For the question at once arises: How can this co-responsibility be actualized, and who will represent the employees? Might



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it not be that in all but the larger firms and plants there would be a shortage of workers fitted for this task? And might it not be that in such instances representation would be taken over by union people who may know little or nothing of the local operation at first hand? And would not this perhaps mean - we are simply raising the question - the introduction of all sorts of ideological involvements and new political entanglements? Would the worker then be any less an object, any less a mere means to an end, than he was before as a pawn in the hands of the impersonal corporations?

We would only raise the question, and in this admittedly sketchy way. Merely to raise it, however, merely to mention even a small fraction of the problems involved, is to show clearly that in terms of its vocation the Church has no substantive solution to this problem. The individual Christian, however, whether as an indirect participant through the ballot or as a direct representative of one of the two social groups concerned, has to struggle to arrive at a concrete solution, a *modus convivendi* which at the same time is in accord with the postulate of an effectively operating economy. This cannot mean, of course, that the Church may pander to quietist reserve in respect of this

question. Indeed, the Church has three main tasks.

First, it can help man to gain a more precise knowledge of the real issues. It can clarify the interests, ethical intentions, and proposed solutions on both sides, thus assisting the individual in the decision of conscience which is his to make. It can free him from dependence on demagogic slogans by laying bare the substantive and human concerns which are really at stake. Conscience cannot be sharpened simply by making more or less abstract and general appeals. Conscience grows by the decisions -- indeed the substantive decisions -- it has to make. This means above all that the pastor must orient himself to the issues and be able to state them clearly.

Thus, to guide the conscience in the matter of taxes one must know the actual problems, including the institutional friction in which the conscience lives today. He must know the considerations that must be involved in the levying of taxes. The depressing failure of the Church's pastoral ministry is due not least of all to the fact that the Church is suspiciously bound by the fetters of an individualistic theology and ethics. It has not yet begun to see and to consider the extent to which individual decision of conscience is all mixed up with problems which derive from the

institutions of society and from the various social and political systems.

In a theological examination it can still happen that students will be able to spout endlessly about the duty of honesty, without having the faintest inkling of the real theological and ethical problems which can arise for the person who is trying to be honest in a dishonest system, e.g., a dubious tax system or a bad economic system. It is said that "even the best of us cannot live in peace unless the bad neighbour allows it." Can I be righteous if I live in the midst of organized injustice? Can I be honest if I live in the sphere of institutional deception? One has only to consider the situation in a totalitarian state to see extremes of both. Thus it is that even the orders within which we live are a matter of ethics. This is why it is essential that the Church and its pastors know the facts and understand the situation.

Second, the Church has the duty of speaking to both sides -- e.g., to both labour and management -- and of showing them what is ultimately at stake. It can point out, e.g., that human dignity is the real issue, that human dignity derives from the fact that Man has been "bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23), that there is consequently more to man than just his capacity to produce. The aim will be, not to surprise both sides by coming up with an unexpected solution, but to address both sides with respect to the ultimate object of their decision. Once this is known, they can be left to argue the matter out. The fact is that there are questions which can be handled only by those directly concerned, or by the arbiter who has listened to both sides.

Third, the Church must see to it that the parties to the dispute

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meet face to face, and in an atmosphere charged with the influence of the living voice of the gospel, so that they confront one another as "neighbours." For it is profoundly Christian to see in the other person not just the champion of an interest, ideology, or front, but the Man who is of value to God, who has cost God something. It is an eminently pastoral act, where a conflict of principles is involved, to relax the rigidity of the lines of opposition by transforming a confrontation of abstract positions into an encounter of living persons. One need not have lived very much to know that real results always follow from this kind of assistance, which is itself a product of the realism of the gospel.

If we have said that the Church as such is not competent to take a position regarding a particular political conception, and if we have strictly distinguished between the substantive questions involved in political action and the pastoral concerns which the Church must have in view, we must now consider whether this is still true in respect of modern totalitarian states. The answer must be negative.

In a totalitarian state things are radically different, because the totalitarian state is always an ideological state. A large proportion of its political acts have an ideological significance. Social measures, e.g., are taken and demanded in the name of ideological goals. The same is

true with respect to educational policy, the organization of the sciences, and foreign policy. It is also true with respect to the campaign against undesirables (e.g., the campaign to exterminate the Jews and the mentally unfit in the Third Reich).

This is why every time the Church confesses its faith over against the ideological confession of the totalitarian state it is logically construed by the state as a protest against its political measures, from which the ideological content cannot be separated. As a matter of fact, the totalitarian state's diagnosis in such cases is quite accurate. This is why in the ideological state the Church is repeatedly forced to take a direct stand on political measures.

The question then becomes acute as to the obligation of confession thereby imposed on the Church. More precisely: Is it not the Church's duty from the very outset, i.e., from the very inception of the ideological tyranny, to confess its faith by dissociating itself from the anti-Church, refusing to acknowledge it as state and secular kingdom, and abstaining from every kind of collaboration? Or, in virtue of certain functions of state which even the most perverted state still discharges (e.g., the regulation of traffic, the provision of a monetary system, etc.), should not even the most dubious state still be respected as a kind of emergency state, and accorded at least some measure of co-operation?

Can this limited co-operation be justified on the ground that even the pathological state is still to some extent a bulwark against chaos so that, however corrupt, one cannot do without it? Or should one withhold even limited collaboration on the ground that the seeming order of the totalitarian state is really "organized chaos," and that the Church's only option is to speak out against its sabotaging of the divinely willed functions of order?

One certainly has to respect a Church which answers that its obligation is to bear witness against the ideological dictatorship and to make no secret of the fact that it fundamentally rejects the totalitarian state as being anti-human in its very structure.

The crucial thing, of course, is that in its preaching of judgment and in its condemnation of actual injustice the Church should not be a mere moralist or defender of culture and civilization (though it may have to play this role as well). The Church has to preach real judgment, not mere morality.

How can it do this? It has to attack the crimes of the state in its preaching, confession, and pastoral work in such a way that they are seen to be not merely actions contrary to the moral law but the necessary result of a decision with respect to God. In terms of our present discussion, this means that when God is done away, and a deliberately atheistic state arises with the corresponding ideology, man too can no longer be esteemed. For the dignity of man consists exclusively in his alien dignity, i.e., in the fact that he is related to God as child, as image, as one who is bought with a price. He thus stands under the patronage of an eternal goodness. He cannot be touched, for he is "the apple

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of God's eye" (Zech 2:8; Deut 32:10; Ps 17:8). If, however, he is dis severed from this sustaining relationship, then he can only be evaluated -- and must necessarily be valued -- in terms of his immanent worth, which means in practice his utility.

We may now sum up three main results of our discussion as follows. First, the Church must be careful not to let its political preaching consist only in abstract and empty appeals to conscience. For conscience grows and develops -- indeed first comes into being -- precisely in the making of decisions, including the substantive decisions.

Second, the Church must be informed on the facts that are pertinent to these decisions, e.g., labour-management relations, gender equality, defensive alliances, etc., and it must elaborate the pastoral concerns involved in these

controversial issues. Then too, the Church must be careful not to reject categorically specific judgments and programs, just as it must be careful not to endorse categorically certain others -- or set up its own -- on the ground that these alone are Christian and in keeping with God's commandments. The Church has all Christians under its pastoral care, whatever it may think of their particular social or political convictions.

Third, theology and theologians, pastors included, must give up their age-long reserve in matters of political ethics. They must strive to answer from the standpoint of the theological center of the Christian faith -- the doctrine of salvation -- the question as to what a conscience which is taught by God and lives in the peace of God has to say and signify for the way of the Christian in the world, even the world of politics. 