

Address at launching "Church in the World"

Bishop P J Cullinane

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Your Excellencies Sir Michael & Lady Hardie Boys, you honour us by your willingness to be associated with the launch of this book; we thank you for that, and for your thoughtful comments.

We have felt especially pleased by your association with us, for we have all admired your own public support for those virtues which make it possible for people to respect one another, to accept differences, and to live together, and which therefore undergird civility, freedom and democracy.

The Catholic bishops do not consider it their role to propose particular social, political or economic programmes. In fact, our Christian faith, by upholding the dignity of persons, commits itself to upholding the kind of freedoms and democratic processes which result from every person's right to think and to choose.

However, those who do propose social, political or economic programmes need a reason for doing so that is ultimately about the human person, human community and the human destiny. And those who profess the Nicene Creed have a greater reason for respecting the dignity of persons and political freedoms than could ever derive from the cavalier agnosticism that leaves no ultimate basis for respecting human dignity.

We don't seek establishment status for our beliefs or any prerogative that would compromise the proper separation of Church and State. Perhaps, in a sense, we are asking for more than that just by hoping for a fair hearing within a culture that has already granted establishment status to agnostic secularism, and "tolerance" to religious faith (provided it doesn't claim to profess more than mere opinion, and for private use only.) Our culture has done this despite agnostic secularism's professed doubt, even indifference, as to whether or not the human person has transcendent value; and despite its gradual down-grading of persons to the status of objects in the sense that they may be manipulated, or even disposed of, for others' ends. Of course, this is what we must accept if persons do not have transcendent value.

There is a lot at stake here. As we see it, human rights and the freedoms that properly belong to politics and the economy, the equality that goes deeper than all differences, authentic human development and education for a meaningful life, are all too important to be left entirely to any ideology that is ultimately unable to defend these values precisely because it can't base them on the transcendent value of the human person.

Clearly, these are moral/cultural issues more fundamental and more urgent than questions of social, economic and political planning because these latter questions presuppose a certain consensus on what people mean to one another, and on how we ought to live together.

The Catholic Church's reflections on these moral/cultural questions are part of what one commentator has called "arguably the most sophisticated body of moral reasoning about the free

society on offer in a world poised on the edge of a new millennium". This body of Catholic social teaching hinges around the dignity of every person and the responsibility we have for one another.

Its emphasis on the human person is different from the modern cult of individualism with its narrow focus on individual rights. Persons, made in the image of the triune God, are persons in relationship with other persons. Personal rights are what they need in order to be persons-in-relation. This translates as a responsibility, and so rights are what we need to be able to fulfill responsibilities. They do not derive from choices the individual makes, and they are not self-serving. They derive from beyond each self, are rooted in moral responsibility, and their ultimate source is the One in whose relational image we become our true selves.

Even without such a high view of human personhood and human community, many feel entitled to challenge that intellectual flippancy within our culture that regards choice as self-validating, needing no reference beyond the fact of being a choice, and regards truth as being whatever the individual considers it is, regardless of what it means to others.

These perceptions of freedom and of truth effectively deny the very grammar of public debate and the possibility of any consensus on how we ought to live together. In that climate, even the parliament, whose real purpose is to maximise the conditions in which each person, not just majorities, can pursue integral human development - (the opportunity to be more, not just have more,) - can itself become just an extension of the marketplace, where people can use their advantaged position to promote merely sectional interests, thereby widening and entrenching the gap between the strong and the weak, the winners and the losers.

And so, in the spirit of respect for persons, for pluralism and democracy, we offer the teachings contained in this book as a contribution to the formation of public opinion. The book's weakness is that it was never written as a unit. It merely brings together, in a convenient and ordered way, some fifty of the statements we have made over the past two decades. They are but a shadow of the Church's main body of social teaching, but they address in the context of our own country the kind of moral/cultural questions which underlie the social, political and economic questions of our time.

On behalf of the New Zealand Catholic bishops I congratulate those who have brought these statements together so well in this book. And on behalf of all of us present I thank Your Excellencies for hosting this occasion and being associated with the book's launch. Thankyou.