

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: ADDRESS TO CATHOLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS IN CHRISTCHURCH

PART 1 Why Catholic Social Teaching?

The Second Vatican Council noted:

“The split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age” (Church in Modern World, 43)

The essential purpose of CST is to make the connections - between faith & daily lives.

The focus is usually on social, political and economic issues. And it needs to be. The NZ bishops work with Caritas and others (including sometimes the Anglican bishops) to make occasional statements or make submissions to parliamentary committees, etc. on such matters.

I am suggesting we need to go to deeper level, take a closer look at the underlying culture out of which we consciously and unconsciously do our thinking about social, political and economic issues; the mindsets, assumptions, inherited values & disvalues, prejudices etc that influence our thinking.

The specific question I am addressing here is: “what difference does it make whether faith is or is not part of one’s mindset or culture when addressing social, political and economic issues?” And what further differences might we expect as more people profess “no religion” and fewer profess religious faith? Most NZers don’t even bother to ask that question; = an opportunity for leadership for all of us.

The Second Vatican Council dealt with “the proper development of culture” before it dealt with social, political and economic life. And it had a great way of expressing the union between our ordinary lives and our everlasting future: “All the good fruits of human nature, and all the good fruits of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured”. In other words, nothing precious to us will have been lost... everything beautiful, every fond moment, every good deed, every loving encounter... - cleansed and transfigured we shall find again.

CST draws on natural law, (which gives us common ground with others), but also specifically on the gospel. Talking of connections: social justice also flows from the meaning of Eucharist. Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI emphasized *the connection* between our celebrations of Eucharist and the spill over into our daily lives – saying our celebrations of Eucharist lack authenticity if they don’t.

This is highlighted in St John’s account of Last Supper, where the “washing of the feet” actually replaces the words of institution that the other gospels report. By that action, Jesus taught that all his disciples were to be servants of one another. And it is the point of our “Amen” when receiving Holy Communion: we commit ourselves to becoming one with the “body given up” for others and the blood (life) “poured out” for others.

The Church has no blueprint for social or economic planning. Rather, as Pope Paul VI taught, the gospel needs to permeate all our thinking - “affect, even upset, our criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration, and models of life..” (On evangelization, 9,29) That’s the recipe for radical transformation.

Part II The need for wisdom

Healthy social, political and economic life requires much more than just information: it requires wisdom. Confucius, Buddha, Mohamed, the Hebrew prophets all emphasized this.

But something is amiss today. Someone has asked “whatever happened to wisdom that it got lost in knowledge; and whatever happened to knowledge that it got lost in information?” Becoming “lost” indicates a very serious disadvantage.

Wisdom is enshrined in community, past & present; presupposes that “no one is an island”.
Knowledge is also collective; presupposes historical awareness; ability to synthesize; it builds up understanding;
Information on its own is essentially fragmented – so too will be lives that look only to be gratified by information.

The transformation of information into knowledge & wisdom is a process; it needs time, hard work; stillness, careful thought... It is jeopardized by busyness, and noise.

Unprocessed information makes for a mindset that is individualistic, easily impressed, vulnerable to spin (both commercial & political.) Superficiality can rightly be called the plague of our time.

Speaking of gains from recent social changes in Britain, Prof. Ian Bradley (St Andrews) says these changes make more room for spirituality, the mystical, the visual, more joy, more diversity... and that’s good. Nevertheless, he says: “something has gone with the demise of restraint, reserve, seriousness, thrift, temperance and rationalism.”

Celebrities, glitter, banality, consumerism are a cover for emptiness. Prof. Jordan Peterson (Toronto) speaks of “a glib, juvenile search for happiness that has bewitched modern culture”. Same thing!

It is hardly mere coincidence that people who trivialize the sacred end up idolizing the trivial. Check it out!

Second Vatican Council (in context of positively affirming modern developments) asked:
 “how will people preserve the ability to contemplate and to wonder from which comes wisdom.” (GS 56,59).

Note: it linked “wisdom” with the “ability to contemplate and to wonder”.

Contemplation is a way of seeing. The book of Wisdom (ch 13) makes a scathing commentary on those who see a wonderful world but don’t recognize its Maker. Of course, he was talking of unbelievers – but also sleep-walkers, i.e, most of us most of the time. We see world around us without seeing the “extraordinary side of the ordinary” (John Paul II); the “presence of the ultimate in the commonplace” (Abraham Heschel).

Cf Iraneus: “the glory of God is the human fully alive; and being fully alive comes from seeing God.” He wasn’t talking about Heaven, but about seeing, in the commonplace and the ordinary, something more than meets the eye. That kind of seeing is contemplative living.

To see or not to see = the difference between faith and secularism. (next section)

PART III Secularism

Secularism is a way of not seeing; and sometimes not even looking:

The Second Vatican Council noted that because progress in the sciences and technology focuses so predominantly on observable data, we can easily start to assume that what can't be known by the sciences can't be known at all. And so we no longer seek any higher realities." (Church in Modern World, 57) = not looking.

The Council's attitude to the sciences is positive, and it affirms that scientific thinking does not have to lead to agnosticism.

Allowing secular reality to be secular, and respecting the proper autonomy of the sciences, is not "secularism"; it is right, proper & necessary. Animist religions regarded the world as the abode of gods, demiurges & demons; had people tip-toeing around in fear of breaching some taboo, and never being sure of having appeased the gods. This kind of thinking leaves little room for human creativity, human responsibility for the planet, the development of the sciences, or even human rights.

Judeo-Christian faith would change all that: there was only one God, who made all things good, wants us to enjoy our lives, harness the world's energies, exercise responsibility. The liberation of secular reality to be its secular self owes much to the faith that came down from Abraham.

Moreover, the Hebrew people's experience of God came through their experience of a love they knew they had not merited/deserved/not owed to them = what they were being taught by their history of failure. New Testament writers would emphasize that *our* experience of failure and sin also puts into relief God's unmerited, undeserved mercy – salvation as gift/grace = the point of all history, including the history of the Christian church. Marvelous mercy reveals a marvelous God.

Secularism (even when it is lived in more or less good faith) represents a huge deprivation, because when people don't know how greatly they are loved by God, they don't know how greatly they matter – or even whether they matter at all.

Yet, is there anything we need to know more than this? After all, - life "isn't fair"; - can take away those nearest and dearest to us; - people can find themselves trapped in impossible situations; - humans still commit terrible atrocities against one another... To live in that kind of world people need a reason for hope that stands beyond the reach of every disaster, and can still find meaning whatever happens. This is what people are deprived of if they have no reason for hope beyond what this world can offer.

What is worse, the descendants of Abraham (Jews, Muslims & Christians) must accept some responsibility for agnosticism's doubts and secularism's indifference (cf Const. on the Church, 19)

We cause scandal

- by that "split" between the faith we profess and how we live;
- by religious fundamentalism, and unscientific interpretations of reality;
- by versions of religiosity that are 'lite' and unsatisfying.

Secularism underestimates God's love. How could it not? But religious faith, like secularism, can also underestimate God's love - e.g.

- when it indulges pious practices which imply that we need to earn God's love;
- or practices which suppose that we can put God in our debt;
- or claims that would put a limit on God's presence or love or mercy;
- or that sees worship as separable from our daily lives and business practices;
- or sees church-going as the main measure of Christian discipleship.

Religion that presents a diminished God is a diminished religion, and cannot satisfy hearts that are made for the Infinite God. Anything we can earn or manage or arrange ultimately can never satisfy our thirst for the infinite. And walking away from what doesn't satisfy won't feel like any big deal.

Is this what we already see? And is this what Rahner meant years ago when he predicted that tomorrow one will either be a mystic/contemplative or will not be a Christian at all?

Part IV Faith's relevance to social, political and economic life

In the second session we reflected on contemplation as a way of seeing reality. The God that Abraham, Moses & the prophets "saw" was a God they were not expecting; was not beholden to their questioning; not answerable to us; not at our disposal; supremely free; did not owe us our existence; did not need to create. We don't begin to know ourselves until we know we might never have existed. The mystery of our own existence is located in the mystery of God's transcendent freedom! Really knowing that is a transformative experience.

It is how contemplation becomes conversion: being fully awake to the fact that our existence was not owed to us, i.e. pure gift, *moves us from* taking the world for granted *as if* – no one to thank for it; *as if* we were not accountable... *towards* treating it for what it actually is – i.e. gift!

What is sometimes called "spiritual poverty" = living with the knowledge that ultimately *nothing is owed to us* and therefore *everything is gift!* This really is cause for wonder. It's conversion in a radical sense. And it radically changes the way we relate to everything, including social, political and economic realities.

Conversion brings us to compassion, because loving others in the way that God loves us means loving beyond what is deserved or due; beyond boundaries of what others have a right to, beyond what is owed to them, or fair, or even reasonable.

This kind of loving is a circuit breaker, because it is not caught in the cycle of getting even, of just deserts, of pay-back, and what's fair...

A society that doesn't exercise compassion becomes punitive, unforgiving, not open to new starts, rehabilitation, reconciliation. This is an entirely different culture. In that culture, compassion is counter-cultural.

It is no coincidence that the virtue most absent from the pre-Christian world – and the post-Christian world - is compassion. And no coincidence that the virtue most distinctly Christian = compassion.

CST dares to take mercy, compassion, into social and economic planning. = polar opposite of usual assumption that “the business of business is business”. For CST the business of business is *people* – “he tangata..” and the wider agenda of “making human life more human”. And so

- the well-being of workers, families, livelihoods have to be *factored into* economic planning. That's different from giving market forces free reign and then trying to redress the imbalances afterwards.
- Trading relationships, industrial law, commercial practices must make room for what Pope Benedict called “gratuitousness”, - compassion, giving and forgiving factored in; (*On Integral Human Development.*) It makes room for “the exile, widow, orphan...(Deuteronomy 24:10-22)
- Similarly, it is no longer possible to pursue justice, nationally or internationally, without factoring in the needs of the world's poor. They must be included as of right, not merely as recipients of “charity”; they are entitled to be participants in the economies of the world - a world that belongs to every human being before parts of it belong more to some - national boundaries.
- Nor can we speak of a “right” to have a child – because a child can only be a gift (not a commodity, or possession, or owed to anyone... and not a manufactured product!) Similarly regarding any supposed right to adopt based on the wants of adults regardless of the natural needs and rights of children.

Judeo-Christian belief that every person is made in God's image, personally chosen and called into existence by God, provides a basis for re-discovering the sheer wonder of each person. Nothing else does that. And this is the most radical basis for transforming all our thinking about social, political and economic issues.