

Vote for the Common Good

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2001

To follow Christ always demands a personal commitment. This can never be something wholly private, because the commandments to love God and our neighbour go hand in hand. They are inseparable aspects of the single command to love. The Gospel invitation to love includes helping those in need and playing an active part in building a society of justice and compassion.

Before the last election in 1997, the Catholic bishops of England and Wales published a statement, *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching*. That teaching still applies today, and so with the next General Election imminent we again encourage Catholics to reflect on the Church's social teaching and its application to present circumstances.

This teaching provides a set of principles and goals for life in society. Its focus is the common good. It illuminates our view of society and how we evaluate public policy. It is not a political programme and committed Catholics are rightly to be found in all the main political parties. It is not our job to suggest to anyone who to vote for, and we do not do so.

We ask you to take part actively in the democratic process, and then to vote with this question in mind: 'How can my vote best serve the common good?'

We also invite you to pray for our countries and the processes of government at this time.

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Catholic social teaching: serving the common good

the Church's social teaching

The foundation of the Church's social teaching is the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus Christ about the dignity of the human person. From conception to death each human life has a value that can never be lost and should never be ignored. Everyone is made in the image and likeness of God, and has a dignity that does not depend on age, race, gender, wealth or any other attribute.

We depend on each other profoundly, and we are responsible for each other in a variety of ways. As our relationships become deeper and more loving, we grow as human beings; if, on the other hand, we become so tied up with our own self-interests that we neglect our neighbour, then we are diminished. We are also an integral part of the planet with a duty to care for it even as we change it.

solidarity

Our bonds with other people go beyond face-to-face relationships. We also relate as members of groups, united, for instance, by a common nationality, or culture, or language, or religion. Fundamentally we are members of one human family, who live in our one world. Every time we donate to a famine or disaster appeal, or express concern for people unknown to us, we are acting from an instinctive awareness of our shared humanity. This solidarity lies at the heart of the notion of the common good.

common good

The common good is not 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. It is the sum of all those social conditions which allow the human dignity of all to be respected, and their basic needs to be met, while giving men and women the freedom to assume responsibility for their own lives. It is, then, the task of every government, local and central, to ensure that their policies serve the common good by protecting the weak and vulnerable, and by promoting the integral human development of everyone.

subsidiarity

The Church's social teaching emphasises that the role of government and of every public authority is to be at the service of the human person. It is wrong to take from individuals or voluntary bodies what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry. Furthermore, decision-making should always be devolved as close to the grass roots as good government allows. This is called the principle of subsidiarity.

human rights

In both secular policy and law, and in the Church's social teaching, human rights have come to be central to the defence of human life and freedom. However, our society sometimes over-emphasises individual rights and personal freedom, and risks neglecting the common good. Key elements of the common good such as peace, justice, compassion and mutual respect can only be protected and promoted through the collaboration and engagement of all.

This solidarity with others, a lively awareness that we are members of one human family responsible for one another, will lead us to find practical ways in our own lives of living out the Gospel command to love one another. We must try to resist the temptation to pass the buck to other people or institutions. By the same token, governments and other public bodies have a clear duty to serve the common good, and to do what they can especially for those most in need.

Some contemporary issues

It is not for us to offer an 'end-of-term' report on the Government or a manifesto for any party. Moreover, in a short leaflet it is simply not possible even to touch on many policy areas that our statement, *The Common Good*, explored at length. Out of particular concern for those in need we simply draw attention to a few of the vital issues facing our society, while recognising that these are not the only issues.

families

In common with many people of all faiths and of no faith we are gravely concerned about the increasing instability of family life and the very serious consequences of widespread family breakdown. As well as the tragic personal suffering, the massive economic impact of family breakdown is increasingly felt, as too are its effects in increased child poverty, poor educational achievement and dysfunctional behaviour. Addressing both the causes and the consequences of family breakdown is essential to the future moral health and spiritual vitality of our country, as well as its long-term prosperity.

This is not a matter of public policy alone. Promoting family stability is for everyone. All of us can play a part in supporting marriage and family life. Nonetheless, public policy does matter, as is widely recognised across the political spectrum. Economic factors that threaten the family include job insecurity, poor housing, poverty and debt, and improved but still inadequate support for poorer and single parents with young children. The increasing commercial pressures of longer working hours and Sunday trading leave many families with little or no shared time together. Most importantly, the good of society requires the promotion and support of the institution of marriage. This is the framework most likely to produce stable relationships and most fitting for the nurture of children. Appropriate education in schools and funding for relationship counselling are also necessary to support the family.

human life

A matter of supreme importance is human life itself. The first and most basic duty of the democratic state is to protect the lives of all citizens without discrimination, particularly weak and vulnerable people. Since abortion was legalised in 1967, this country has failed in this most fundamental obligation, at a terrible cost in human lives. Dramatic contradictions are apparent in our legal decisions, public policies and health services: a wanted human life is sought and cherished at great cost; an unwanted human life is readily destroyed.

The fundamental obligation to defend human life was undermined further in 1990 when destructive experimentation on human embryos was legalised. Most recently a moral chasm has been opened by parliament's decision to permit the creation and destruction of cloned human embryos. It is possible that in the next parliament attempts may be made to legalise euthanasia. To do so would be both wrong and dangerous. Whatever the motive, euthanasia amounts to murder. It is wholly against the common good.

Catholic electors need to discover the views of their local candidates on these fundamental issues, which directly involve the intentional destruction of human life. They may very well decide to vote for, or against, a particular candidate because of their views on these issues. But since the Church's social teaching entails a consistent ethic of life and is concerned with every threat to life - not least those posed by global poverty and deprivation - the candidate's views on these and other issues should be considered before voting. Although a General Election is not a single-issue referendum, a stance on certain key issues can be very revealing of a candidate's overall values and priorities.

global poverty and injustice

Even today, despite astonishing scientific advances being made, more than 800 million people do not have enough to eat, and many millions of people die of starvation each year. British Governments have been prominent in trying to reduce the burden of the unpayable debts of the poorest nations. It is essential that this work continues.

What is also of great importance is generous and well-targeted aid to the poorest nations, a commitment to environmental protection and sustainable development, and a reform of the international trading and financial system so that globalisation proceeds in a way that benefits the poorest instead of making their lot even worse. Nor can we ignore the death and destruction resulting from armed conflicts, which do so much to impede development. The arms race diverts massive resources from constructive use, as well as fuelling new wars and encouraging an unnecessary expansion of the arms trade. The nature of our country's involvement with the arms trade, its nuclear arms, and the possibility of a renewed international arms race present us and our next Government with urgent moral challenges.

asylum seekers and refugees

In the Gospel, Jesus makes clear to his followers that in welcoming and receiving the stranger and the outcast, they are welcoming and receiving him. The tradition of receiving and caring for those fleeing persecution is a noble one. The vast majority of the world's refugees flee from very poor countries to neighbouring very poor countries. The world's rich countries receive far fewer.

Successive British Governments have sought to try to meet treaty obligations by receiving refugees whilst excluding those with unfounded claims and economic migrants. The requirements of the common good and human dignity mean that applications should be dealt with fairly and quickly, and that all those seeking asylum in this country are treated decently, with their basic needs met.

It is a principle of Catholic social teaching that the goods of the earth are intended by God for the whole of humanity. This forces us to ask uncomfortable questions about our attitude to economic migrants and, more specifically, to the help given to our poorer European neighbours.

Important debates about the political and economic future of Europe must be inspired by a vision of a united European family in which the needs of its poor are paramount, and which also looks outward to the world's poorest.

family members needing care

One of the consequences of greater participation in the workforce by both women and men is that many more carers of elderly and housebound people are struggling to combine work and care. If carers are not given adequate support, there is a danger that more elderly people will be wholly dependent on help and support from their local community. Too often the level of this care is inadequate. Many older people are left feeling that they are a burden and are unwanted, excluded by ageist prejudice from making the contribution they wish.

A number of voluntary associations, including many run by faith communities, already do a great deal to supplement what family carers and public authorities provide. But in a society where fewer volunteers are available, where families are often unable to cope unaided or at all, many are at risk and suffer indignities because of inadequate care. A society committed to the common good will care properly for older people and enable them to participate with dignity.

crime and prison

The demands of the common good require public authorities to do all they can to prevent crime and to safeguard people and property, and where offences are committed to hold those responsible to account and to care for the victims. In a society where materialism is pervasive, where the bonds of mutual responsibility are being weakened, where moral norms are being eclipsed and where family life is fragmented, it is hardly surprising that crime becomes of increasing concern.

One important issue is the current effectiveness of the penal system. With prison populations rising fast, and rates of re-offending on release very high, is there not an urgent need, without compromising public safety, to consider how best to educate and rehabilitate prisoners rather than just contain them? At present it is quite clear that many of them are not being treated with the dignity and respect which is theirs as human beings. The prison population in Britain is higher per head of population than in any other European country. Do they all need to be in prison? Should not other solutions be urgently and carefully explored?

democratic participation

In a democracy we have a moral if not a legal duty to vote, which those who live under non-democratic regimes would treasure. We should be careful not to withhold our vote out of indifference, apathy or cynicism, all of which are destructive of the democratic process. The right to vote carries with it a corresponding obligation to exercise that vote responsibly, and so to affirm political leadership as valued and necessary for the common good.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) are encouraging in each constituency a meeting with candidates. We urge each parish to become involved and for as many people as possible to take part in these meetings.

Conclusion

Political involvement is an important part of Christian discipleship, which has at its core our relationship to the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ and who calls us to him in this life and the next. It is the task of all of us to seek to transform this world through prayer, witness and action.

To mark the close of the great Jubilee of the year 2000, Pope John Paul II has written a letter to all Catholics, urging us to a deeper awareness of the face of Christ in the poor. He writes:

‘Our world is entering a new millennium burdened by the contradictions of an economic, cultural and technological progress which offers immense possibilities to a fortunate few, while leaving millions of others not only on the margins of progress but in living conditions far below the minimum demanded by human dignity. How can it be that even today there are still people dying of hunger? Condemned to illiteracy? Lacking the most basic medical care? Without a roof over their heads?’

‘The scenario of poverty can extend indefinitely, if in addition to its traditional forms we think of its newer patterns. These latter often affect financially affluent sectors and groups that are nevertheless threatened by despair at the lack of meaning in their lives, by drug addiction, by fear of abandonment in old age or sickness, by marginalisation or social discrimination. In this context Christians must learn to make their act of faith in Christ by discerning his voice in the cry for help that rises from this world of poverty. Now is the time for a new creativity in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by “getting close” to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters.’

We must beware of an easy pessimism that focuses only on stories of doom and gloom. There are indeed many serious problems, but also many signs of light and hope. Think, for instance, of the deep moral instincts of many young people committed to justice and truth, or of their zeal to protect the environment; the sense of vocation and dedication shown by so many teachers and nurses; the extraordinary generosity of those many people who give their time and money to help people in need at home and abroad; and the quiet selflessness of those caring for dependent relatives. At the level of public policy too, whilst there are always problems to be overcome, there are also always considerable achievements to be recognised and built upon.

To recover faith in the possibility of a better future demands a renewal of the spirit of solidarity. This presents deeper and greater demands at the level of the human spirit. It is here that we as a Catholic community are called to witness by what we do and how we live, as much as by what we say. Through such witness the love of God is made manifest, and it is that alone which can bring fresh hope to a troubled world.

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