The Problems of Priest Politicians, The Urgency of Lay Leadership

By Cardinal Donald Wuerl

“Why doesn’t the Church do something about this?” The woman who met me as I stood outside of church greeting people was waving a newspaper article that recounted some legislative body’s recent approval of physician-assisted suicide. This was not the first time in 50 years as a priest and 30 as a bishop that I was confronted by men and women annoyed at what they perceived was the silence of “the Church.”

What they are all really asking is, “Why don’t bishops and priests do more politically?” Why are priests and bishops not more engaged in the political issues that result in the re-defining of our culture? Today those same questions might be directed to issues of family and marriage, religious freedom and immigration, human life and poverty and more.

The short answer is the Church should do more – that is, the Church understood as all of her members, with their different responsibilities and roles. If we want a society in which public policy defends the life and dignity of all, supports marriage and family, promotes the common good, recognizes objective right and wrong and religious freedom, personally and institutionally, then of course the Church must be involved. Especially, the lay faithful must speak out and become “salt and light” in our democracy.

The idea that somehow priests or bishops should be the primary ones addressing public issues and the framing of laws, and advocating for specific public policies, is too narrow a vision of the Church which would leave out about 99% of its members. Yes, bishops and priests have a very distinct and important role. They are the teachers of the faith, they pass on revelation and received tradition, they call the baptized to live their faith every day. In fact, at the installation of every pastor, I ask him to renew his ordination promises, one of which says, “Are you resolved that in preaching the Gospel and teaching the Catholic faith you will worthily and wisely fulfill the ministry of God’s Word?”

This formulation of the renewal of priestly promises reflects Church teaching today as it has been so clearly spelled out since the time of the Second Vatican Council, now 50 years ago.

The Council saw the role of the laity to be the sanctification and transformation of the temporal order. In the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, this is made explicitly clear:

The mission of the whole People of God [...] is exercised when they work at the evangelization and sanctification of men; it is exercised too when they endeavor to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order (2). The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity, they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere (7).

The clergy’s task of teaching and helping to form the consciences of the laity, as envisioned by the Council and subsequent popes, requires patience in dealing with diverse opinions, fidelity in presenting the fullness of Church teaching and perseverance in continuing to teach, to teach and to teach.

There are times when bishops and pastors have a duty to share our Catholic teaching, to point out the moral and human dimensions of public issues and call for the protection of the weak and the pursuit of the common good. But these obligations cannot substitute for the leadership of lay men and women. Pastors need to encourage, inform and assist lay women and men in their duty to bring the values of our faith into civic and public life.

The temptation might be to short circuit this process and have clergy impose specific political approaches or policies and even proclaim their preferences for candidates for public office. This practice is not new. Shortly after the Council, I recall vividly the debate over whether priests should run for political office. I thought it was a bad idea then as I still do now.

For the bishop or priest to get directly involved in partisan politics is to confuse and distort the correct understanding of the distinctive and complementary role of clergy and the role of the laity. For many of the faithful and clergy, this mixing of roles – pastor/teacher and political authority/advocate – would have the unfortunate effect of diminishing the bishops’ spiritual

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authority and moral credibility by reducing, in the perception of many, the bishop to the role of a lobbyist or partisan.

The appropriation by the bishop or priest of the lay persons’ essential role also implies that our laity might not be capable, even if properly informed, of carrying out their own unique responsibilities in the area of politics and public policy. Lay men and women are called to be “leaven” in our democracy and bring their faith and experience into the public square.

The understanding of the distinctive role of the laity in the mission of the Church and in the transformation of the temporal order and its sanctification was developed further after the Second Vatican Council by Pope Saint John Paul II. In his apostolic exhortation, Christifideles Laici, he connected the vocation of the laity in the world to the living out of the Universal Call to Holiness spoken of in Lumen Gentium: “The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities...” (17). A further distinguishing feature of the laity for John Paul II is their secularity. “In this work of contributing to the human family, for which the whole Church is responsible, a particular place falls to the lay faithful, by reason of their ‘secular character,’ obliging them, in their proper and irreplaceable way, to work towards the Christian animation of the temporal order” (36).

Building on the work of his predecessor and the Council, Pope Benedict XVI would assert in his first encyclical that justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. Pope Benedict outlined a careful balance:

The Church cannot and must not take upon her self the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always de mands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper (Deus Caritas Est, 28).

This is a far cry from the days when the Church viewed herself or her leaders as a willing, secular, political authority or even military power. Yes, there are examples historically of Church leadership attempting to determine political questions – even to use the sacraments and ecclesial penalties in these efforts – in ways that did damage to both church and state.

In more recent times the Church has changed her pastoral approach. For example, Saint John XXIII lifted the excommunication imposed in Italy on some politicians and voters for choices that ran counter to the will of the Holy See.

Today it is the central role of the bishop and priest to teach the faith, share Catholic moral and social principles, and to encourage lay men and women in their primary responsibility to take these truths and values into the economic, political and cultural world. In regard to the teaching role of the Church, Pope Francis writes in his first apostolic exhortation:

In her dialogue with the State and with society, the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue. Together with the various sectors of society, she supports those programs which best respond to the dignity of each person and the common good. In doing this, she proposes in a clear way the fundamental values of human life and convictions which can then find expression in political activity (Evangelii Gaudium, 241).

The document, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, issued in November 2015 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops with nearly unanimous support, speaks very clearly to the Church’s primary role of forming consciences and the particular duty of the laity in the political order and in the realm of partisan politics. The bishops quote Pope Benedict:

The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest... (28).

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In an interview with the Italian newspaper La Repubblica he says:

I say that politics is the most important of the civil activities and has its own field of action, which is not that of religion. Political institutions are secular by definition and operate in independent spheres. All my predecessors have said the same thing, for many years at least, albeit with different accents. I believe that Catholics involved in politics carry the values of their religion with them, but have the mature awareness and expertise to implement them (Interview with La Repubblica, Oct. 1, 2013).

Pope Francis in his address to the Italian Episcopal Conference on May 18, 2015, insisted on the responsibility of the laity for the temporal order without unnecessary clerical supervision and interference: “Lay people with an authentic Christian formation, should not need a pilot bishop or a pilot monsignor or a clerical presence to take on responsibilities on all levels. From the political to the social. From the economic to the legislative.”

When I reflected on that statement, my thoughts turned to my experiences years ago with a parish priest who would use the designated “Pastor’s Corner” of the weekly parish bulletin to officiate with his very clear partisan political views and his analysis of candidates and politicians. His justification, which his congregation found quite unpersuasive, was that he was writing simply as an American citizen, not as their pastor. But he was their pastor, using the parish’s bulletin which was distributed to all who came to Mass.

Sometimes, I fear there can be a temptation to substitute sharing our political and ideological preferences for the very demanding and challenging role of teaching by word and example the principles of our faith. I believe our efforts to preach and persuade are more credible and effective than proclaiming our own political opinions. It is also the way Jesus gave us and the example of Popes, including Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now Francis.

Each year in which we move toward a national election, I remind my brother priests that we are in the pulpit as proclaimers of the Gospel, not as political leaders. No one elected us as their political representative and there might be serious reason to believe they probably would not. We are there to present the Word of God. Our listeners, who come from differing political parties and have diverse ideological perspectives, have a right to hear the Gospel and the Church’s teaching on faith and morals proclaimed with fidelity, consistently and courageously and not packaged in someone’s personal, partisan political views.

When we look to the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ statement, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, the historic presentation of Pope Francis to our Congress, or the writing and example of his recent predecessors, we see the best ways to offer a principled, serious and challenging call to Catholics to bring their faith into public life. It is essential for laywomen and laymen to take up the responsibility of standing up and speaking out for the values of our faith.

My hope is that we might read and reflect on Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship since it provides authentic and practical guidance in the face of the complexity of moral decision making when exercising political responsibility in these challenging times. It is clear about the distinctive and complementary roles of ordained and lay members of our community of faith. As pastors, we are called to teach, teach and teach. As lay men and women, Catholics are called to be “salt, light and leaven” in our democracy.

There is much at stake in public life: questions of life and death, war and peace, religious freedom and human dignity. There is simply no substitute for informed, faithful, active and courageous lay women and men who will bring the truth of the Gospel and the wisdom of Catholic teaching into public life.

U.S. bishops’ “Faithful Citizenship” document

A link to the U.S. Catholic bishops’ statement, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship can be found online at: http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/index.cfm

In a 2012 photo, Catholics Caitlin Heaney, right (holding blue sign), and her sister, Elizabeth, show their support during a rally for religious freedom in downtown Minneapolis.

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As Pope Benedict XVI explained, the Church seeks to inform the moral deliberation and the political participation of our members, as well as other believers or persons of good will with its public social teaching, but this is not intended to dictate outcomes in the political arena. “This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: it has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just” (Deus Caritas Est, 28).

Pope Francis has consistently echoed these themes of the Council and his predecessors in his own teaching. Like Pope Benedict, he has insisted on the autonomy of politics and religion. In an interview with the Italian newspaper La Repubblica he says:

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