

WHAT IS THE CHURCH SOCIAL TEACHING SAYING ABOUT POLITICS?

Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection

“Promoting Faith and Justice”

What is the Church's Social Teaching Saying about Politics?

Introduction

The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person. ...The Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other. The more that both foster sounder cooperation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place, the more effective will their service be exercised for the good of all. ... It is a part of the Church's mission to pass moral judgments even in matters related to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires it. (Vatican II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," No. 76)

There is often a misunderstanding as to what politics really is. This can be seen in statements such as "politics is a dirty game". Is politics really just a game? Is politics dirty at all? What is the aim of politics? What has the state got to do with politics? Can politics really contribute to justice and full human development? These and many other questions come up immediately as we share with you what the Church's Social Teaching says on the issue of politics.

The word "politics" comes from the Greek word "polis" meaning "state" or "city", and what concerns the affairs of the state or city is referred to as "politikos." Politics therefore, is about social organization and relations that involve how a group of people make decisions. It concerns the manner in which authority and power are used in a group of people (what is sometimes referred to as governance). This usually involves formulation and application of policies for the good of people in that community or state. Politics is often practiced within a state or civil government, even though it can be observed in any human interactions like in the private sector, corporate sector, in religious institutions and even in academia. Politics should not be confused with political science, which is the academic study of politics. Political science tends to concentrate on theory and application of theory to practice.

Often, when we talk about politics in Zambia, what comes to mind is that "politics is a dirty game". Some parents have even urged their children not to go into politics or not to be political, citing politics as being for dishonest people who are full of self interest with little regard for the common good. Politics is again often associated with voting in an election. Elections often are preceded by campaigning to convince citizens that one is the best candidate either as president, Member of Parliament, or ward councilor. The way campaigns have been undertaken, where

candidates will use all sorts of means, tricks, and strategies to win an election, has contributed a lot to this understanding of politics as being dirty. Politics is not necessarily dirty. As one person once said: "Politics is not a dirty game, it's just that it has been played mostly by dirty people".

We would like to assert strongly that politics is more than just elections or mere campaigning to be elected. It is about how society organises itself; how those entrusted with authority and leadership exercise their authority to meet the needs of the people; how citizens exercise their freedom and power to elect persons into leadership positions and how they exercise their right to demand that the leaders fulfil the wishes of people. Succinctly put, politics is about social relations and governance of a society.

The purpose of this booklet is to stimulate reflection, prayer and action among Christian groups (e.g., Small Christian Communities, Youth Groups, Justice and Peace Groups, Bible Study Groups, Fellowship Groups, etc) on the subject of politics as viewed from the perspective of the Church's Social Teaching. The booklet is not intended to be a treatise on political theory, but a presentation of the Church's understanding of the purpose of politics.

The booklet is designed as a study guide consisting of four sessions that follow the "Pastoral Circle", which encourages us to:

- Begin with our own **experience** – "What is happening?"
- Move to a **social analysis** of why the situation exists – "Why is it happening?"
- Then do some **theological reflection** – "What does it mean to me?"
- Finally move to an appropriate **response** of action – "What can we do as a Christian community in such a situation?"

We encourage you to send your comments and suggestions on how we can improve our reflections on the Church's Social Teaching. We are also very interested in hearing about how you would have used this pamphlet to move towards action for social justice by enhancing the quality of politics and political participation in your community and country.

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Session One: Experience

Whenever we sit to discuss the issues of politics, what mostly comes to mind is the kind of leadership our politicians portray. Nowadays, politics of benefits are at play in this country. People vying for political offices only do so as a job opportunity. But what has to be understood is the fact that politics, like any other job, is a Calling. So, unless our civic leaders begin looking at politics from that angle, our politics will remain a 'dirty job'. Zambia yearns for the time when her civic leaders will strive to serve the people and not be served; leaders who will promote and protect human dignity, human rights and above all, the common good.

The following stories help us to reflect on the type of politics we have had, and what leads most people to refer to it as a 'dirty game'. Issues of the system of politics at play, the political gimmicks and lack of proper leadership qualities, are streamlined.

Story One

I was exposed to politics from a very young age in the 1980s. During that time, Kenneth Kaunda was the President of Zambia, then a one-party state. Multi-party politics had been allowed after independence until 1972, when a one-party state was instituted. This meant that no opposition parties were allowed, for, as we were told, there was only "one Zambia, one nation and one leader". In primary school, we would recite this mantra in the morning before going to class. Some of us even grew up thinking that "President" was synonymous to "Kaunda" such that we would even ask, "Who is the Kaunda of Malawi?" Kaunda's political ideology stressed humanism, the main idea being that all persons have a duty to promote human welfare. Though similar to communism in some respects, humanism was milder than communism.

Story Two

Mr Zulu is campaigning to become area member of Parliament for one of Zambia's most rural districts. During his campaign Mr Zulu promises to bring development to the area in the form of electricity, better roads, running water, banking services, to mention but a few. Mr Zulu is very charismatic and therefore the people in the district are easily convinced that he is the man to vote for if they want to see change in their community. On Election Day, Mr Zulu has a landslide victory and becomes the area member of Parliament. Mr. Zulu has been the area member of Parliament for over a year now but he has not delivered on any of his campaign promises. He rarely visits the district as he chooses to spend most of his time in Lusaka even when

Parliament is not in session. All the requests from the District Commissioner for Mr. Zulu to meet with the people he represents have gone unanswered.

Story Three

Mr Bwalya is an official at the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ). His main duty is to oversee the electoral process and ensure that elections are free and fair. But due to selfish interests, Mr Bwalya's integrity has been compromised over the years. Mr Bwalya has become a corrupt official who can be bribed to rig elections by politicians. He has been working at the ECZ for over 10 years now and he has successfully managed to rig several elections in favour of which ever politician was willing to pay him. He is more interested in enriching himself than ensuring that the voice of the people is heard through a just political system and elections that are free and fair.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. What other experiences do we have that are related to politics and leadership?
2. What leadership qualities do we see in our political leaders?
3. How are we going to ensure that we have leaders who are action-oriented?

Concluding Prayer

We pray for all the civic leaders in this country that they may learn to promote and defend the dignity and rights of the people they are leading, and that they become selfless in their work, seeking not to be served but to serve. May the power of Jesus the great leader overwhelm them and encourage them to be quality leaders. To the Lord we pray, Amen.

Session Two: Social Analysis

After looking at your experiences and those of others, we now move on to social analysis where we ask the important question: "Why are these experiences happening?"

The first factor to which we can attribute the problem of governance and leadership in our country is the perverse conception that people, particularly politicians, have on the purpose of politics. Politics in Zambia has long been driven by selfish desires. People usually go into politics in order to fulfil their selfish interests such as the acquisition of wealth and the enjoyment

of privileges and benefits that come with being in a position of power. The common perception of political life in Zambia is not that of service to the people but rather an opportunity for one to do as they please because they have power. Power itself is not viewed as a tool of service, but rather as a mantle that bestows to its holder the freedom to do as they please.

The second factor is that of a lack of political will among many political leaders to work for the development of their people, even if they might be aware of this role as leaders. Many of the political, economic and social problems that the country is experiencing can indeed be attributed to this lack of will and concern on the part of leaders for the development of the people they have been chosen to lead. This lack contributes to the problems of corruption, mis-management of national resources and inefficiency in governance. The country lacks leaders with “people at heart”.

Closely related to the above factor is the lack of a “spirit of constitutionalism” among political leaders. By a spirit of constitutionalism we mean the value for the concept of law and subscription to its supremacy. We commonly refer to this as the value for the rule of law, as embedded in the Constitution and Acts of Parliament. Leaders who value the law are guided by, respect, and abide by its dictates. Yet our experience many times has been that of subservison, where government officials tactically dodge the law when it proves an obstacle in realising their political ambitions. As such, it has been difficult for citizens to make those who abuse their political power accountable, hence the perpetuation of problems the country faces. As a country, we can have just laws, but as long as there is no will and no spirit of constitutionalism for our leaders to abide by them in fidelity, we will remain far from realising justice in our society.

Thus, due to the above reasons and many others, people in Zambia have generally lost faith in the country’s political system. Zambians have been on the receiving end of numerous promises during the election campaign period, promises that rarely come to fruition. Political debate is mostly not issue-based and is usually reduced to character-persecution and mudslinging among the different political parties. People rarely know each political party’s standpoint on key economic and social issues, which in turn makes it harder for them to choose the right leaders. All these issues have resulted in increased voter apathy in the country as people have come to believe that politicians are all the same and that therefore it does not really matter who is in power. This is disheartening because it is through their vote that people are able to steer the country in the direction that they want it to go.

Given the high levels of poverty in Zambia, people are looking for the kind of leadership that will be committed to addressing the key socio-economic challenges that Zambia is currently facing. Lack of credible political leadership only serves to ensure that the poor and the marginalised continue to suffer as they do not have anyone who is committed to championing their cause.

Zambian politics currently tends to focus on personality and self-interest; this is not what politics is about. Politics is about serving the needs of all people and bringing about development for all. Therefore, without proper political leadership, Zambia's development will continue to remain stagnate.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. Do we think that Christian values can guide good politics and leadership?
2. How often have we contributed to 'dirty politics' or condoned them?
3. What lessons can we learn from Jesus about Politicians and good leadership?

Concluding Prayer

One member of the group should give a concluding prayer to close the discussion.

Session Three: Theological Reflection

The Church's social teaching holds the view that Christians have a critical role to play in politics as taking part in the organisation of society is one of the key duties of Christian life. Major decisions about the organisation of society which have an impact on all individuals are made through the political arena and therefore Christians cannot afford to be excluded from this important forum. While many have come to view politics as being 'dirty' and 'immoral', the Church believes politics cannot be immoral because it is based upon man's inherently social nature.

If politics is viewed as being concern and work for the common good of one's society then this makes it a key area for Christians to be involved in. Politics is also regarded as an act of service to one's fellow-humans as a Christian is bound by their faith to love their neighbours and seek their well-being. "In this broader sense, politics is of interest to the Church and hence to her pastors who are ministers of unity, because the necessity of the Church's presence in the political arena flows from the very core of the Christian faith. It is a way of worshipping God, by consecrating the world itself to God" (Catholic Social Doctrine, 1996).

A Christian's involvement in the area of politics should be linked to faith so that their personal Christian values can be reflected in their political life. A Christian should not separate their values from their behaviour in the public sphere; in fact their political involvement should be driven by their faith. While most who are cynical may not believe this, there is a Christian way of doing politics. The Christian way of engaging in politics calls for politicians to be truthful and also to work towards the common good, especially by addressing the plight of the underprivileged in society. A Christian politician is obliged by his faith to be morally upright and honest in all his actions. The Christian politician has to unleash all his forces in the fight against corruption, bribery, graft, the temptation to remain in power at all costs and persecution of opposition parties. Therefore, Christians involved in politics should be an example to the community through their sense of responsibility and dedication to the common good.

Scripture

In Matthew 25:40 Jesus talks of the last social judgement, "I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me." Jesus also tells us in the famous story of the rich man and Lazarus that by not helping those in need, we participate in the sin of omission which can cost us the Kingdom of God. The only sin indicated in Luke 16:19 that the rich man committed was that he did not regard the poor Lazarus as

another human being who needed help. Looking at all these issues and many others, you realise that the calling of our faith as Christians demands involvements in issues of justice. A true Christian therefore should not differentiate the behaviour of his religious teaching and politics because it is the same person who is a member of the religion and needs food to survive.

The Church would be false to the tradition of the prophets who chided rulers who abused their subjects (for example Isaiah 1:10-17) if it does not denounce political injustice by leaders. The church would deny its fellowship with Christ who had a special care for the poor and oppressed (see Luke 4:12-21) if it did not contribute to the debate on budget priorities that affect the poor of Zambians.

In addition, while Jesus accepted political authorities, it was on condition that they should never attempt to make temporal power into something divine or absolute (Matthew 22:15-22). Jesus refused oppressive and despotic power (Mark 10: 42). Jesus himself did not want political messianism, he understood himself as the Son of God who came to serve and to give life (Mk 10:45). In Romans 13:5, Paul talks about submission to the legitimate authority. It supposes that this authority is at the service of God for the good of the people. When those in public authority fail to seek the common good, they abandon their proper purpose and they lose this legitimacy.

Papal Teaching

The Church teaches that Christians have a duty to take part in the organisation and life of political society. As social beings, people build their destiny within a series of particular groupings which demand for their completion and as a necessary condition for their development, a vaster society, one of a universal character, the political society. All particular activity must be placed within that wider society, thereby orienting it towards the common good. Political activity should be the projection of a plan of society which is consistent in its concrete means and in its inspiration, and of its differing social expressions.

It is not for the state or even for political parties, which would be closed unto themselves, to try to impose an ideology by means that would lead to a dictatorship over minds, the worst kind of all. It is for cultural and religious groupings, in the freedom of acceptance which they presume, to develop in the social body, disinterestedly and in their own ways, those ultimate convictions on the nature, origin and end of man and society (A Call to Action, Apostolic Letter, 1971).

The Teaching of the Zambian Catholic Bishops

In the Pastoral Letter of 1958, the Catholic Bishops of Northern Rhodesia made a very important observation, that the church has “the right and duty to teach and guide Christians not only in purely religious matters but also in social, economic and political affairs in so far as they are connected with the moral order” (Joint Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops, 2003). These words are inspired by the Scriptures. They form the basis for the Catholic Church’s concern and involvement in all aspects of human life: social, economic, political and cultural. This mandate comes from the Lord Jesus Christ himself who commanded his disciples to “go and preach the Good News to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

Good leadership and politics seek to achieve poverty reduction; good governance; improved citizen's access to public services; respect for human rights; respect of positive traditional values; effective and efficient government delivery of social services to the citizens; and promotion of socio-economic and political development.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. Do you think that the Church Social Teaching adequately addresses the issue of politics and good leadership?
2. Why are there rifts between the Civic and Religious leaders?
3. What do you think should be done to inculcate good leadership values in our leaders?

Concluding Prayer

One member of the group should give a concluding prayer to close the discussion.

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Booklet

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