



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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Mutual respect for the common good

THERE is some confusion regarding the relationship between religion and politics. In secular states, it is regularly argued that they are entirely separate and should be kept apart. However, such a separation is, in reality, artificial.

This is because whether from a religious viewpoint or a political perspective, the wellbeing of every person and all groups in society is most important. Our lives cannot be compartmentalised into different boxes. Indeed it is the sum total of how economic issues relate with social issues, how political issues impact on economic issues and vice versa, how religious and cultural issues interact with political issues that shape development of all persons and the whole person.

While religion and politics are clearly distinct, there is a relationship between the two, and it is important that this relationship is based on mutual respect, and puts the human person and people at the heart of development.

Politics refers to the ways individuals and groups participate in issues and decisions that affect all spheres of our lives - economic, civil, cultural, political, religious and social. It is not just partisan politics.

Religious values influence or ground our participation in these issues and decisions. We do this as individual Catholics every day. Sometimes we say it explicitly; at other times it is implicit in our actions. We speak for human dignity and dignity of human work for ourselves, migrant workers and others. We respond to refugee flows and victims and survivors of natural and other disasters. We may have been moved by our personal reflection on issues and events in the light of the Gospel. The basis of our response could also be the Catholic Social Teaching.

There are also occasions when we take a position or make a response collectively. For example, in recent months Caritas Singapore welcomed the discretion given to Singapore courts on the use of the death penalty and the law granting a weekly day off for foreign maids.

The active participation of Catholic institutions and organisations in political life is not a matter of preference. It is part and

Religion

Politics

A respectful relationship between religion and politics is needed so all may share the benefits of development

parcel of being present in the world. The Church should constitute a presence in the world, so too Catholics and Catholic institutions.

This is the message of the Second Vatican Council in the Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World, almost 50 years ago. It was relevant then and remains even more so today. Indeed, this document is the guide on how Catholic institutions should be present through a holistic response to injustices and concerns of humanity. More often than not, this involves being on the side of the poor and the marginalised in the world.

Only through constant and faithful works and actions on these issues and areas will the vision of the common good be achievable. The Second Vatican Council is very clear that, as individuals and as Catholic institutions, we work towards the common good.

Achieving the common good is becoming more and more complex.

about the relationship between religion and politics.

One very important lesson is that the Church shares a common interest with the political community. First of all, the Church is part of the human community. Secondly, the modern political community includes but is not limited to the State. Finally, the Second Vatican Council reminded us that the Church and the political community do have something in common. That something is the common commitment to the human person and to people, the same people.

In pursuing the common good, we need to foster greater cooperation between Catholic institutions and the political community. As Catholic institutions, we are representatives of our religious beliefs and values. Hence, we are expected to participate in discussions on our life in common and to influence the wider population.

When we speak up and participate, we are also challenged by the public forum. This is a good thing for us to be clearer, more reasonable and rational about our positions and our beliefs. Of course, in a pluralistic society, it does mean that we respect the views of others but also that we do not impose our religious tenets on other people.

Sounder, greater or stronger cooperation can only be achieved through, among other things, mutual respect between Catholic institutions and the political community.

Since the Second Vatican Council, our Catholic institutions have been learning how to strengthen cooperation with the political community on various issues and different levels for the common good.

Sometimes we succeed, other times we fail. Through it all, we come to understand the importance of mutual respect and what it involves - being open to one another, listening and striving to understand the points of view of other parties even though it may be different or entirely opposed to ours.

In this way Catholic institutions have increasingly learnt how to speak truly, to strive for justice and to act with love for the common good.

The common good is "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment..." (*Church in the Modern World 13*). It is far too easy to exclude and much harder to include every social group in our globalised world with an ever-expanding population and mounting economic, social and environmental problems. If at all, more individuals and social groups find themselves being pushed to the margins of society, deprived of the benefits of development.

The social order and development must work to the benefit of the human person and be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love (*Church in the Modern World 14*). Improving the social order includes active participation in the political life at every level of society.

A key challenge is that Catholic institutions must remain faithful to their charism. Unlike individual Catholics who may choose to participate in political life through joining political parties, Catholic institutions must remain autonomous and independent of possible pressure from political parties and political systems.

By the same token, the political community encompassing political parties and systems are also autonomous and independent from the Church and Catholic institutions. The age of the Holy Roman Empire is long gone and truly over. Since then, the Catholic Church has learnt many lessons