

The Church's social mission

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In a recent interview to do with the abortion debate, Minister Pat Rabbit intimated that it would be inappropriate for the Catholic Church to involve itself in the political machinery of the State. He was roundly criticised for this by different sections of Irish society. Many argued — on the grounds of social science — that making political representation and lobbying on behalf of social concerns are perfectly appropriate actions by the Catholic Church.

Vatican II ensured that the social mission of the Church is at very heart of its identity. It re-examined the relationship between the religious and social mission of the Church. These two dimensions do not exist independently of one another. Rather, they are constitutive and indispensable to each other; a clear distinction cannot be made between them.

Creative tension

We need to allow for a complex intersection – one that is in constant motion with creative tension. Theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza offers a helpful analogy. If we are asked to define what it means to be human, we might say that our rationality is what makes us different from animals. But that answer would not be sufficient on its own.

We would need to add something about our emotions and the fact that we are embodied. In this way, we inevitably show how there is some overlap between what it means to be human and what it means to be animal.

The same is true for the social mission of the Church. The religious dimension does not stand alone; it crisscrosses with economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of life. Attempts at exclusive descriptions inevitably lead to distortions.

A core document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, explains that the Church enters public or social ministry to protect the transcendent dignity of the human person. This text marked a decisive shift locating the defence of the human person at the centre of Catholic ecclesiology. It moved the social ministry of the Church from the margins to the centre.

Chapter Four of *Gaudium et Spes* offers a number of principles about the Church's relationship to society:

The ministry of the Church is religious in nature and it has no political charism or ambition;

The religious mission is to seek the reign of God, this is its purpose and the Church serves this aim;

The religious mission touches all parts of life; there is no part removed from God's reigning power;

Finally, there are economic (resources), political (power), social (relationships) and cultural (meaning) consequences to the Gospel – the Church seeks to fulfil its religious mission by asking its members to uphold human dignity, promote human rights, contribute to the unity of the human family and help people make meaning in their lives (Paragraph 40-42).

Religious freedom

Dignitatis Humanae, Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom recast the Church-State relationship, ensuring that such principles are realisable. Since the 17th Century, the Catholic Church believed it should be accorded special status in society by the State and that the coercive power of the State should be used to promote Catholic faith.

However, Dignitatis Humanae replaced this belief with three principles. The first accepted the reality of religious pluralism in society and that religious freedom is a human right and should be protected by civil law. The second accepts the secular nature of the State – that it is not divinely constituted nor so ordered. Rather, it has its own constitution and is limited by the law on the use of force.

The third concerns the freedom of the Church to be itself, without particular favour from the State. This last principle creates a challenge for the Church, in that, without any favouritism from the State, it is only as good as its witness. In other words, the Church needs to practice what it preaches.

This separation or differentiation of the Church from the State does not mean a separation of the Church from society. The State is part of society, an essential part but only one among many.

Dignitatis Humanae has helped depoliticise the Church-State relationship and Gaudium et Spes is responsible for putting the social mission of the Church at the centre of its identity. Taken together, their legacy has been, as theologian Bryan Hehir puts it “to plunge the Church more deeply into the political arena precisely because the protection of human dignity and the promotion of human rights in fact happen in a political context.”

Although this can sound very unreligious and very political, we must remember the context.

The Church is focused on improving the dignity of the person, on building up solidarity among the human community, and on caring for creation.

It has this purpose because by its nature it is to continue to make present in history God's salvation in Jesus Christ. The Church is a sacrament of Jesus Christ, containing His presence and mission in the world. In its social mission, the Church seeks to make present, in every dimension of life, the love of God for all.

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