

Catholic Institute of Sydney – Jubilee Lecture

What Place Does the Church Have in Public Discussion?

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This lecture was delivered at Catholic Institute of Sydney on 12 May 2004, as the first in a series of three lectures on the theme, 'What can religious faith contribute to life in contemporary Australia?'. Subsequent speakers were Rev Mark Raper SJ, AM and Cardinal George Pell. The lectures celebrated the 50th anniversary of Catholic Institute of Sydney becoming an ecclesiastical faculty.

Introduction

Thank you, Gerard, and thank you all for coming tonight. I am very happy to be with you to try to think out some of the issues that concern us as Christians and as Australians.

The general title of the series, 'What can religious faith contribute to life in contemporary Australia?', is very broad. In attempting to narrow it down, I turned to my own disciplines and experience, particularly to my disciplines of political philosophy and rhetoric and to a period in which I wrote regularly in *The Catholic Weekly*. I also looked forward to the other speakers, both of whom are practitioners and public figures – one an advocate for justice, the other a bishop – and who are faced with having to bring Catholic teaching into the public domain on issues that are often controversial.

The specific topic that I have chosen to speak on tonight is, 'What place does the Church have in public discussion?'. I hope to draw out a number of political and rhetorical principles that will enlighten us as to how the church might be effective when it attempts to enter public discussion. My thesis is that the church has both the right as part of society and the obligation in view of its mission to enter into public discussion but that it has to do so carefully and with great awareness of the realities and sensitivities that surround it.

The topic is, I believe, relevant. People often say to me, 'Why doesn't the church say something about such and such?' It is often said with the hint that I am somehow the church and so I should get busy and fix all the things that trouble our society. I generally feel inadequate to the task.

On the other hand, when the church does enter into public debates, there are often very strong reactions against it. Think of the letters to the editor, when a Catholic writes as a Catholic on the opinion page of

a newspaper. Or, think about the bruising that Alexander Downer gave to Dr Peter Carnley for what was a serious theological reflection on terrorism after the Bali bombing. We find these reactions among Catholics as well. Frank Devine wrote a piece about Frank Brennan's book, *Tampering with Asylum*, in *The Australian* (12/12/03), in which he said in effect that he admired priests when they encouraged piety but could not stand them entering debates on issues he called political, even if, as he had to admit in this case, the priest was more competent to deal with the issue than he was.

And so my topic is, What place does the church have in public discussion? I will deal with it in five parts, and you have the headings on the handout that you have received:

What place has religion in political society?

The context in which we live

Life in the public domain

Can the church speak persuasively in the public domain?

About what might the church speak?

This is very much work in progress, and so I will be grateful for suggestions about how I might proceed to tease the questions out further.

What Place Has Religion in Political Society?

Of the things enumerated there remains the stock of priests. The arrangement of these too is evident. No farmer or vulgar person is to be appointed priest, for it is proper for the gods to be honoured by citizens. Since the political element is divided into two parts – these being the armed element and the deliberative element – and since it is

proper that those worn out with age should both render worship to the gods and find rest for themselves, it is to these that priesthoods are to be assigned. (Aristotle, Politics VII, 9. Lord., 211)

When Aristotle dealt in his *Politics* with the place of religion in the city, he seems to have regarded the issue as fairly uncontroversial. In his account of the best regime (*Politics* VII), he listed priestcraft or the superintendence of the divine as one of the things that could not be left out of a self-sufficient city. (VII, 8) He proposed that priests should be appointed not from among the vulgar but from among citizens, because of the dignity of the role. Yet he recognised a difficulty in the match between the priesthood and the two main functions of citizens, namely, military action and deliberation. He concluded that 'since it is proper that those worn out by age should both render worship to the gods and find rest for themselves, it is to these that priesthoods are to be assigned.' (VII, 9 - 1329a33) He further claimed that territory of the city should be set aside for the support of service to the gods.

For Aristotle, then, religion is very much part of the city. Its activities are carried on by members of the city, for the city and at the behest of the city. He gives them some distance from the city by regarding them not as political officials but as superintendents appointed by the city to the care of something precious to it (IV, 15; VI, 8), but there is no sense of a separate structure of authority, even if there is great respect for the sacred. No doubt there were conflicts, disagreements and confusions in day-to-day affairs, but the general picture is of a substantial unity of civic life and religious life. Even the archaeological evidence bears this out. Shrines were places of worship, but they were also centres of the arts and of sport, so that much of the part of life that could be called leisure took place in the sacred precincts.

Things changed with the advent of Christianity and with the knowledge of a God radically different from those of the Greeks. Aristotle's god was part of the world, the outermost sphere, but non-communicative with the world except by way of final causality. Whether we consider the actual gods of the city or Aristotle's philosophical understanding of God, so long as the sacred was respected there were no essential grounds for conflicts between religion and politics. The Christian God, on the other hand, was both beyond the world and communicative with it by revelation founded on creation, and redemption. We find, therefore, both an authority of absolute proportion and a revelation of matters central to life and carried in a religious tradition. The interpretation of this revelation obviously lay with the priests, and

so problems of authority arose. In the first place, the priests could not afford to give precedence to political authorities in matters deemed to be part of revelation. And so, the Christian Church quickly understood that it had an authority not subject to political authority. In the second place, if even civil authority has its origin in God, how is this transmitted? Is it transmitted through the Church, or is it to be transmitted directly to the civil authorities themselves?

Christendom can be viewed politically as a great experiment in the subjection of civil authority to religious authority, which existed for about a thousand years from about 600 AD. Its roots lay in the collapse of the Roman Empire and in the growing spiritual authority of the papacy, as Christianity spread across Europe. It is shown in the authority assumed by the Pope to anoint emperors. Christendom had much success in lifting Europe out of the dark ages, in reuniting it, in reinstating learning and in improving the lives of the people who lived there. It could function well, if power was truly delegated and if the various players performed well. Underneath it all, however, there always remained a tension between the sometimes violent coercion necessary to political authorities and the holiness expected of one who spoke for the one true God.

In the end, the political forms of Christendom remained successful neither for the Church nor for civic life. The concentration of such power, spiritual and temporal, in the hands of one man or of one court led easily to levels of corruption in the Church that we are still loathe to admit. On the other side, civil rulers either fretted at the limitations under which they functioned or used military means to subdue the papacy. By the end of the period, the Reformation had torn the Church apart, and the kings of Europe had tried to assume the kind of absolute power they had seen in the papacy by proclaiming the doctrine of the divine right of kings.

In its political dimensions, modernity was a reaction both against the Church and against the absolute power of kings. As such it defined itself as both secular and democratic. As secular, it excised the Church from the political realm, so that the notion of the separation of Church and State took a political form. As democratic, it rejected all authority other than that of the will of the citizens. In so doing, it limited even the state, because not even the state could have opinions that were not those willed and expressed by the people or the nation. In so doing, it found it necessary to speak of a new entity, namely, society, which was somewhat larger in scope than either the state or the church.

The political forms wrought by modernity arose out of the revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the relationship to religion was different in different places. In France, the Revolution was vigorously hostile to the Catholic Church and attempted to subject the church to the nation. In England, a compromise was worked out between a monarchy that had lost much of its function and an established church that preserved the nation and avoided extremes. In America, a rigorous separation in law went hand in hand with a society that remained deeply religious and in which religion continues to have significant influence over political matters, albeit indirectly. (Manent, 97 – 115.) In important ways, we in Australia are heirs to all of these, so that the apparently simple doctrine of the separation of Church and State can become quite complex and, at times, even incoherent.

I want now to return to Aristotle. When he described the life of a political community, he was able to speak about concrete entities. The basic entity was the *polis*, the city-state, or what would today be called a 'country'. It was composed of all citizens living in a certain territory and took the form of the regime or constitution under which the people lived. Religion could be fitted in quite neatly as one of the essential activities of the city.

Today, when we try to do the same, we quickly find ourselves using terms that are more abstract. A society is a mass of people without form and even without identity, unless it recognises itself as a nation. A state has a form but is of limited extent, so that while the state is capable of applying great force, the scope of its application is strictly limited. A church is somehow separated from the whole, yet expected to bring unity and morality. We even talk of 'an economy' as if it existed in its own right rather than as the activity of some agent. It is not surprising if the abstractions found in these kinds of arrangements leave us unsettled.

The Context in Which We Live

The structural tensions that are part of modernity's solution to the problem of politics and religion are still with us. One suspects that Church authorities are often uncomfortable that their authority is not recognised. After all, a universal message about human life and destiny, which is founded on revelation, is something that should be able to affect how human affairs unfold. Conversely, governments, which exercise the power of the state, also show frustration at times when they come up against the limitations of their authority, such as when fundamental human rights stand in the way of something they wish to do. Society itself can be unsettled. Are there only individuals, who necessarily scramble for whatever opportunities are

available to them, or are there communities in which responsibilities and opportunities are shared? And if there are, what gives them unity – nationhood, family ties, religion?

On the other hand, much of the heat has gone out of the debate. One only has to compare the kind of condemnation that Pope Pius X was able to make of modern democracy and its institutions in *Vehementer Nos* with the encouragement of the present Pope to appreciate and explore what this modern movement has exposed in its proclamation of human rights that apply to every individual irrespective of race, origin, family, religion or gender in *Centesimus Annus*. Similarly, both the public and governments have become more comfortable with the presence of churches. At present in Australia, governments are even involved somewhat directly with the churches in the provision of welfare, health and education. Churches themselves are long used to having standing in the community, even if they are experiencing decline at present.

It might even seem that issues other than deep structural concerns are more important in directing how affairs unfold. The qualities of particular religious and political leaders can seem more significant. Think, for instance, of the impact of leaders like John XXIII, John Paul II, John F Kennedy, Ronald Reagan. We can wonder how the events surrounding terrorism and the Middle East that currently engross the world might have played out had there been other leaders in place. As well, events themselves can alter the direction in which public life might seem to be going. The world is in important respects not the same after 11 September 2001, as it was before.

Nevertheless, if the church wishes to play seriously in public discussions, it needs to remain alert to the structural realities and to the deep sensitivities of the times. The kind of public world brought about by modernity is well established. It has affected not only institutions but also customs and feelings. It is not uncommon in my experience to hear the same person attack the notion of unbridled freedom yet recoil reactively from any move to limit his or her own freedom. We might call this culture, and for us in Australia it is the culture of liberal democracy, derived in the first place from England.

The culture of liberal democracy is worthy of long discussion in itself, but let me attempt a brief description. At its heart is a notion of the human being as an individual rather than as a member of a family or of a village or of a region or even of a church. Such an individual does join with others but as members of free associations rather than as members of natural communities. (See Oakeshott, 16 –28) Let me note five characteristics of this individual. They are not exhaustive, and you may

choose others, but they should give a flavour of this culture. Firstly, freedom or liberty is fundamental but is defined negatively as the absence of constraint on what the individual might do. Constraints are accepted, for instance, to actions that might harm others, but they have to be justified. Secondly, choice is important both in the sense of different possibilities being available and in the sense of the prerogative of the individual to make the choice. This choice finds its political expression in the kind of democracy that allows voting to all citizens and in which a citizen is defined in the broadest possible way. Thirdly, tolerance is a necessary virtue in a society in which individuals are allowed to be different. Fourthly, in order for people to live this life, education must be universal. Fifthly, such a person expects to have a voice on the basis of both citizenship and education.

There are, of course, weaknesses that go with this culture. To begin with, its notion of the human being as an atomic individual is somewhat truncated. Human beings do not simply appear from nowhere, and rationality itself is an invitation to relationship with other rational agents. The truncation supports claims for liberty, but it also brings its own difficulties. The individual often suffers from loneliness, loss of direction and anxiety. Granted choice, individuals look for leaders who will remove the burden of making that choice. It is strange, for instance, that so many of us seek to express our individuality by wearing the same fashions. While tolerance has eased the lot of many, including Catholics, unthinking tolerance can easily lead to relativism. This society of ours, which has freed itself from other imperatives, has, in fact, taken the accumulation of money to be its goal.

The point of this discussion is that this is the context in which the church will be speaking when it decides to operate in the public domain. There is, therefore, no point in the church merely lamenting that such a culture exists, for even Catholics have first learnt to live in this kind of world. Rather, the church needs to find the appropriate ways in which to speak to a people who are like this. For instance, the church is likely to have more impact if it offers thoughtful analysis of the current concerns of the people it addresses than if it simply repeats what are heard as stale doctrinal formulations. On the other hand, the weaknesses of the culture provide a ready opportunity, if the church can find the means to expand horizons and to deal compassionately with people who are often at a loss.

Life in the Public Domain

It is not easy to define what we mean by the public domain, but for our purposes, let it simply be that

area of life in which any of those who pass by are able to hear what is said and to have some grounds for thinking that they might be participants. It contrasts, therefore, with private discussions that might take place in a home or a church or club with membership rules. I will describe the public domain in terms of politics, because that is where conflicts mostly arise. Time prevents me from examining the public space more broadly. In particular, I should investigate the media from the point of view of its role as the medium in which many public discussions take place and from the point of view of its self-reflective role whereby it scrutinises and unmasks those who attempt to use it for their own purposes. Nevertheless, that is matter for another lecture.

The Character of Politics

Our western tradition carries with it deep ambivalence in its understanding of and responses to politics and politicians. On the one hand, politics is thought of as a vicious activity in which people wheel and deal in order to satisfy their own interests. There is plenty of room for manipulation and the scene is devoid of ethics. There is not much in it that would inspire anyone. On the other hand, politics is also revered as something at the pinnacle of human activity, and a life 'in politics' is lived where things are happening and where really good things can be done. The life of the politician is one both of working for consensus among people and of careful attendance to the details of the life of a community.

The negative kind of politics was best described by Machiavelli in his little book, *The Prince* (c1516), where he painted a picture of a successful ruler, who could bend to the circumstances and take advantage of any situation. Such a person had to be without scruple and easily able to manipulate appearances. In Machiavelli's words, 'He should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless, and devout. And indeed he should be so. But his disposition should be such that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how.' (Chap 18; George, 57.) Machiavelli's inventions were not new and had, for instance, been articulated by Aristotle in the *Politics* (V, 11). What was new with Machiavelli was the proposal that these techniques should be used by anyone who wished to rule. For Aristotle they were the means by which a tyrant maintained power. Thus, Machiavelli's twist was to propose that this technology of power could be used irrespective of any moral considerations and simply for the sake of gaining and consolidating power.

It is probably not too controversial at the moment to say that much of the practice of politics in Australia at the present time is machiavellian. It

has likely been this way for some time, but sociologists are now claiming that there has been a shift in values since the mid-seventies, which has enabled politicians to do 'whatever it takes'. Whereas prior to that time, a politician caught in skulduggery would have admitted his fault and resigned from a ministry, now he will simply 'tough it out' or deny the obvious. Coupled with this is the belief that politics in a parliamentary democracy consists largely of attacking the other side rather than of debating substantial issues in parliament.

I have two concerns with this. Firstly, it is painful to be aware of just how poor political life is at the present time. What might be done about it? If the church does have a role in fostering morality, should it say something? On the other, could it really afford to become involved? I suspect that it had best stay out. Secondly, if the church is to become engaged in public discussion in areas that are politically controversial, those who speak are going to find themselves in a very brutal environment. Politicians attack those who speak against them, and their tactics are often not clean. This means that church people have to be careful about how they engage in discussion and to become tough enough to handle attacks when they come.

I will turn now to the other side of the political tradition, that side first articulated by Plato (*Laws*) and Aristotle. This positive side of the tradition looks to what is best *in* and what is best *for* the human beings, namely, the citizens, who make up the political entity. What is best *in* them is their ability to reason and to deliberate, and political life becomes the place where these abilities are exercised. It ought to be both exhilarating and enriching. For the population at large, the fundamental distinction is between despotic rule and political rule. Despotic rule is the rule of a master over a servant or a slave. It can be quite benign, but it assumes that the servant is incapable of grasping ends and of deliberating about means to achieve those ends. The master, therefore, deliberates and commands, while the servant obeys and labours. Political rule, on the other hand, takes into account the ability of all citizens to deliberate about means and attempts through complex structures to encourage the use of that ability. Modernity has attempted to abolish despotism through radical democracy, but the history of the twentieth century, at least, suggests that the desire for control of others is so great that despotism is as much an issue in the modern world as it was in the ancient.

What is best *for* human beings is some kind of life. We do not form ourselves into larger communities just for the sake of life itself, that is, for the sake of survival. Rather we form communities that go beyond families and villages for the sake of a life

that is better. Achieving what is best is not easy, because the future is unpredictable and people have their own opinions. The practice of politics is the art of reaching decisions, which can be owned by the whole community and which bring about this better life. It happens at all sorts of levels from the mundane daily responses to minor situations to reactions to major crises. It also happens as communities work out the constitutional arrangements by which they live.

Aristotle is, of course, working with a sense of the good, and modernity has rejected the notion of a general good, preferring instead to facilitate choice so that people can determine their own goods. Nevertheless, when politicians grapple with daily questions, they make decisions by judging between alternatives. The judgements, which are of a practical nature, can only take the form of an assessment of the question of what is best, this course of action or that? This, it seems to me, presents an opportunity to the church, which in its tradition is able to think about questions of the general good, both spiritual and temporal. Without having to enter into the details of every political decision, it can keep before people a rich understanding of what are ultimate concerns.

May the Church Speak in the Public Domain?

This may be a good moment to confront the question of whether the church has a right to enter into public discussion. At one level it might seem that the question is trivial, because in a liberal society everyone can speak and this applies to members of church as well. When we use the phrase, 'the church speaks', however, we are not speaking just of individuals in society. It is true that an individual speaks, but if the individual is a church leader of some kind, he or she carries the authority of an office. It is that authority, which is often felt to be problematic. While, on the one hand, many in society look to someone who has authority to speak for the church, on the other hand, they believe that they do not fall under that authority and they also find it difficult to comprehend an authority that is neither democratic nor representative.

Three general kinds of objection are raised about the church speaking in the public domain. The more serious is that it has no right to do so because we live in a secular state which, although it allows and protects the rights of individuals to practice religion, has no place for religion in its affairs. The second kind of objection has to do with claims about the church speaking badly and in ways that leave people unable to relate to it – failure to recognise people's concerns, failure to argue well or to consider all the issues, maintenance of a holier

than thou attitude. The third kind of objection is more superficial – rejection by people of views contrary to their own or general irritation with all religion. I will address the second kind of objection in due course and deal with the first now, largely on the grounds that the state needs institutions like the churches.

Firstly, the modern state itself, in which rule is not held by a class of people but in which the state itself is sovereign and politicians are a kind of official, tends to concentrate power to itself in ways that tend towards absolutism and that in this century have erupted in places into totalitarianism. While constitutional mechanisms offer some protections, society needs other groups that can stand against the state in defence of human freedom and action. The churches are important among these groups.

Secondly, it is of the nature of a church itself to have a mission, and part of that mission is to change the world for the better by revealing the presence of God. It is not consistent to allow a church to exist yet to deny its mission. On the other hand, the church should not thereby believe that others accept the validity this mission, especially insofar as it affects them. In other words, the church needs to work by persuasion rather than by authority. It can have a voice in the public, but it will be judged as it is heard.

Thirdly, the government of a modern state is not usually able to look to the moral good of the society it governs because of the narrowness of the definition of its own powers. The church fulfils a useful role in society by teaching about the moral life and has done so throughout the modern period. It can be effective as long as significant numbers of people belong to churches. It is hard to imagine what might replace it.

Finally, the church has an attitude that is corrective of some of the fundamental flaws in modern life. In recent years we have called it “the option for the poor”. It is not a glorification of poverty, but rather the determination to ensure that the needs of the people least able to speak for themselves are heard. Modern society needs a voice such as this lest the least powerful of its members sink into oblivion.

The upshot of these arguments is that the church does have a role in public discussion but one without the kind of public authority that it had in Christendom. It does, nevertheless, have weight, which it gains from its intellectual tradition, from its moral standing and from the allegiance of its members.

Can the Church Speak Persuasively in the Public Domain?

There are three causes of the speakers' themselves being persuasive; for that is the number of the sources of proof other than demonstration. They are common sense, virtue and goodwill. For men lie about what they are urging or claiming through either all or some of the following: they either have the wrong opinions through stupidity, or, while having the correct opinions, through perversity they fail to say what they think; or they have common sense and integrity but are not well-disposed, whence they might not give the best advice, though they know it; and there are no other causes besides. (Aristotle, Rhetoric II, 1. Lawson-Tancred, . 141.)

If the church is to speak in the public domain and if it is serious about its presence there, it will want to speak effectively, that is, persuasively. Rhetoric is the art of finding the persuasive means available in any given situation, and so it is to rhetoric that we now turn in search of principles that will assist the church in its action.

Once we move in this more practical direction, another issue emerges. What do we mean when we say ‘the church speaks’. Even the term ‘church’ is itself somewhat analogous with meaning ranging from ‘a community of believers’ to ‘an institution with authority structures’ to ‘the different Christian churches considered collectively’. Taking this further, conceived as either an institution or as a community, the church can be said to have beliefs and practices and laws, but it cannot speak, rather persons and groups of persons in the church speak, and they speak on its behalf. This can happen in many ways – a published decision of a parish community, a statement by the Bishop’s conference, a paper by an expert of some kind, a public dispute on television or in the press involving a church figure, a public address, a ceremonial speech on a religious occasion that generates public interest, a document such as an encyclical signed by the Pope. In each case, there will be subtle differences, which will need to be taken into account. For now, however, we can simply investigate general principles that can be applied in each case.

I will turn again to Aristotle and his work, *The Art of Rhetoric* (II, 1). There he points out that people believe other people not only on the basis of the arguments they present but also on the basis of the kind of character that they display. He draws his argument from the psychology of human experience. What does life teach about who will deceive us and therefore lead us into making false moves? The answer is threefold. Those who are

stupid or *ignorant* will mislead us because they have wrong opinions. Those who are perverse or *bad* will mislead us because of their wickedness. Those who dislike us or are our *enemies* will mislead us in order to harm us. These are the hard lessons of life. Inverted they mean that we generally believe someone whom we judge to be knowledgeable, virtuous and of goodwill.

When people speak on behalf of the church with the intention of persuading people in society at large, those who hear them will assess their credibility in just this way. The judgement will be made primarily in the categories of the society to which the hearers belong, but in the case of the church and the secular world a secondary judgment will also be made in relation to how the speaker measures up to the principles of the church itself. We can use this analysis to explore how a member of the church might speak persuasively in the public domain. They are questions that we have to ask in the person of the hearer, and they are best put negatively. Who is an ignorant person? Who is a bad person? Who is an enemy?

An *ignorant* person will be one who does not know what he is speaking about either absolutely or in relation to the kind of reasoning that people in our society respect. We can pass over the case of someone who simply has bold opinions and makes unfounded assertions. How else might we fail? We can fail by using reasoning that means nothing to those to whom we speak. A theological argument, for instance, might be completely irrelevant to a particular audience, especially if it depends on articles of belief that are not held by that audience. We can also fail by neglecting the kinds of argument that are deemed fundamental by our audience. To disregard science when it has such a fundamental role in our culture creates problems of credibility. This shows up the seriousness of the issue. The relationships between philosophy, theology and science are nowhere near settled, nor are their findings, and so we need to tread a careful path. At the same time, we have to show a sound knowledge of the depth and width of our own tradition.

A *bad* person is a person who does not play by the rules or a person who lacks the virtues that belong to the public space. How might we fail in this way? We could, for instance, claim and act out of an authority that we do not have. Such a situation could easily arise if we had authority in the church and attempted to act with that same authority in public. Alternatively, in our society, if we are intolerant or dismissive of other persons, we will be rejected. Again, if we fail to listen to people who believe they have the right to speak, we will be dismissed. At the same, we have to measure up to our own standards of goodness, and these are very high.

An *enemy* is someone who destroys life, not necessarily absolutely speaking, but in some respect. In our society, to attack fundamental liberties, to assume that they are unimportant or to ignore them is to attack the life of those in the society. It may well be that not everyone can use their freedom well, but that does not mean that we can simply dismiss it. Rather, if we wish to guide or direct such people of our times, we must do it in ways that leave their freedom intact. More broadly put, in order to be heard we need to show that we respect the general rights of others. In the language of the church we need to show that we respect the persons to whom we speak. At the same time, we need show that we live at peace with our own church and that we live out of what is central to our belief rather than out of narrow agendas.

To be able to step outside our own tribal concerns and to view our own performances through the eyes of others is not easy for many of us. Natural leaders may do it instinctively, but most of us have to be educated to it. It is not, however, impossible especially when we are motivated by a desire to be effective in what we do.

About what might the Church Speak?

In this final section, I want simply to flag a number of areas in which the church might speak in the public domain. They are really for further thought and discussion, and I suspect that the speakers who follow me in this series will be more capable of spelling out the details. So, what I offer is a list with a few observations.

About what, then, might the Church speak?

Faith and Holiness

At the heart of Christian life is what we hold in faith and the holiness of life that follows when we act according to our belief. It might seem advantageous to broadcast this in the public domain in the hope of drawing others to it. On the other hand, we can take note of the admonition of St Thomas, who cautioned against placing things that are sacred within the reach of those who might defile or dishonour them. (*In de Trinitate* 2, 4. Still opportunities arise, for instance, when we might explain the meaning of Easter or Christmas or some significant event.

Moral Teaching

Society certainly does expect the churches to play a role in forming the moral character of its people. It is also an area in which the media will readily pick up public discussion. A note of caution, however, is in order due to the wide range of moral theories with which our society works. It is only too easy to

end up at cross-purposes with well meaning people. There is a need to choose carefully which debates we get into, and to persuade those who hear us that we are offering means to a better life.

Catholic Social Teaching

In my view, Catholic social teaching has been one of the church's outstanding successes. Beginning with Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, the Popes have successively pointed to ills in society without for the most part entering politics by way of either proposing the structural changes that would cure the ills or by engaging in immediate political activity with governments. There have been only nine or so social encyclicals in over a hundred years, yet this strategy has enabled the church to influence society to a considerable extent without inflaming the sensitivities of modern peoples.

Matters of Common Interest

The church is involved with the state in a number of areas such as education, health and welfare. They will remain areas of significant public discussion.

Topics Worthy of Serious Theological Reflection

There are many issues that engage the people of our times, to which serious theological reflection can lend light – religion and science, fundamentalism and politics, human dignity, and so on. Are there ways in which we can contribute to these discussions?

Significant Justice Issues

From time to time, but quite frequently in recent times, debates of great moment break out on difficult topics– Aboriginal reconciliation, war in Iraq, the treatment of asylum seekers. How can the church engage effectively in these debates? Can it afford to be silent, for instance, about the morality of long-term detention of children in desert camps?

Political Contests

Occasionally, people speaking on behalf of the church speak in a way that would seem to promote one side of the political divide over the other. This is not the same as disagreeing with a policy or action of the government, but must be taken as direct intervention in what we call party politics. It is hard to see that this is ever justified, though there are famous examples of such intervention.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that what I have tried to do is to spell out some of the central political and

rhetorical principles that underlie any attempts by the church to speak effectively in the public domain. I have suggested that the tension between religion and politics lies in the nature of things rather than merely in some inadequacy of our present arrangements. The church does have a place in public discussion, but when we speak on its behalf we need to recognise the sensitivities of the time and to show that we respect the persons we address. The principles do have to be applied to different speakers in different situations and in relation to different topics. That is not always easy and often has to be done quickly and on the spur of the moment. However, these principles can be learnt in ways that enable us to be effective when opportunities arise.

Let me finish with the words of Sir William Deane:

In the discharge of [the Church's mission], our Church leaders are not only entitled to be heard in relation to matters, however politically controversial, in respect of which Christian principles and beliefs might provide relevant guidance. They have a clear obligation to themselves, to their calling, to their communities and to our nation, to ensure that their views are known and understood. (Sir William Deane, Launch of Social Justice Sunday, 2003. The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.)

Thank you.

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