The Church’s Role in the Time of Referendum
Andrew Murray SM

A talk given to the priests and diocesan personnel of the Diocese of Bougainville on 10 September 2019.

I would like to begin by introducing myself. I am a Marist Father from Australia, and I am here in Bougainville to support my confreres here, in particular, by leading them in their annual retreat. This is my fourth visit to Bougainville since 2005, though I have visited the country of Papua New Guinea many times. For most of my life, I taught philosophy in the seminary in Sydney with a particular interest in political philosophy and have taught intensive courses in political philosophy at Bomana and at Holy Name Seminary, Solomon Islands.

I would also like to clarify the manner in which I am addressing you. You are priests and diocesan workers of the Diocese of Bougainville and as such you are all Christian ministers, ministers of the Gospel. You are also citizens who, in just a few months’ time, will have a say in the Referendum with a choice between independence and increased autonomy. I am addressing you today as ministers of the Word, not so much at this time as citizens. As citizens, you will have to make your own choices; as ministers of the Word, you will help the people maintain their Christian ways during this time.

The question that I have been asked to address with you today is, what is the church’s role in this time of Referendum?

I need to begin with a more general question that can be put in different ways. What is the relationship between the church and the state or between religion and politics? How should Christians relate to government authorities? Is it the government’s role to encourage human flourishing, or just to limit wrong-doing? In either case, what is the church’s role? Where does religion fit in the life of a political community? What is the relationship of religious authority to political authority? These are all forms of the same general question.

The answer may surprise you. There is no set answer for all places at all times. The relationship has to be worked out between the country, with reference to its constitution, and church, with its particular character, and in reference to the history of the relationship. I will give you an example. In the modern Western world, many countries declared themselves to be secular. They have allowed religious freedom but define themselves as non-religious. The different churches have taken different positions in relation to the state. Shocked by the Reformation and Enlightenment, the Catholic Church withdrew from political engagement, but then in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, Rerum Novarum, it initiated its wonderful social justice tradition. Events then also play a role. You are aware that in Australia we have suffered greatly from the sexual abuse crisis, both in the criminal actions of priests and religious and in the failures of those in authority to deal properly with them. This has greatly diminished the strength of the voice of the Catholic Church in public discussion and is leading to the limitation of freedoms it has previously enjoyed.
Let me turn to Papua New Guinea and Bougainville. The Preamble of the Papua New Guinea Constitution pledges ‘to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now’. The Preamble to the Constitution of Bougainville states: ‘WE THE PEOPLE OF BOUGAINVILLE under the sovereignty of God our Father believing and trusting in HIM do now, with His guidance and blessing, hail the dawn of a new era of our government for Bougainville to enable us with His help – (a) to uphold Christian and similar moral and spiritual principles ...’ It continues on with ten directives for the life of Bougainville. The implications of this are that in Bougainville as in PNG, the Church has a big role to play in articulating Christian principles and things such as peace, justice, harmony and respect.

There is a further dimension to this. PNG is still developing politically. That is, it is still learning how to be one democratic country. I would like to make a very important distinction that I get from the philosopher, Aristotle. We live three distinct kinds of lives: family life, which we may and in PNG often do live in small hamlets; clan life, which is often lived in villages; and political life, which is lived in a country by people who are different in many ways but who cooperate together to be able to live in better ways. Each of these lives is different, though they may be lived by one person at the same time, and we have to learn how live them. I know, for instance, that you have had a Family Life Centre in the diocese for many years. I also know that Bougainville has had many years learning to know how to live as a political community and that before the crisis, it was probably the best-functioning province in PNG. During the election period of 2017, I was up in the Highlands working with the priests of the Highlands dioceses. I observed very strong tribal life in the villages. The villages were well structured and the people knew what to do in their tribal communities. However, they clearly had little grasp of how to live in a democratic political community, even though they were extraordinarily clever in getting the best they could out of such a community. Here the Church has a significant role in teaching people across the country how to identify as one people and to work together as one country. It has a role in teaching them how to understand and to follow the practices of such a country. This role is identified in Section 4(iii) of the Pastoral Plan of your diocese.

When churches and governments interact with one another, there are necessarily sensitivities. There are good politicians and bad politicians. They are often motivated by such things as enjoyment of political contest (listen to question time in Parliament), passion for select issues and the stimulation and honour that comes from dealing with people of distinction and also with whole populations. Some have a profound grasp of what is good for the country. Ministers of religion have a lot of influence with the people and sometimes politicians are jealous of this. Some also can get annoyed when they or their ideas are opposed. Let me mention three short-comings of ministers of religion: they may have a limited view of the whole country and its relationships to other countries, organisations and conventions; they may lack understanding of political structures and processes; they may lack understanding of policies and the importance of consequences. I will also mention three strengths of ministers of religion: they have a close knowledge of their own people and of their concerns; they have a vision of what life might be like for the people; they have a prophetic sense of justice. All of these feed into the complexity of communication between religious leaders and political leaders.
To summarise quickly, let me propose a three-fold role for ministers of the Gospel in the political realm. (1) They educate people about living in the various communities to which they belong. (2) They develop and articulate understanding of the various goods that we are attempting to achieve in a political community, especially the higher goods such as moral virtue, intellectual development, harmony and peace. (This would be a full talk on its own.) (3) They stand for justice and speak up especially for those who are weakest.

I will now turn to the Referendum itself. The church has a role in preparing people for the Referendum. Do people understand the Referendum? Do they understand the two questions? Do they know how the ballot paper will work – how will they mark it? Are they assured of how to act as citizens, which means to vote freely according to their personal choice? Are they ready as citizens to work to preserve the country after the vote? Do they appreciate the difficulties that will flow, whatever the outcome, as the Bougainville Government and the National Government negotiate the future in the light of the Referendum? Here I will offer a note of caution. Each minister will have his or her own view and may speak about it with others, but it would be inappropriate to attempt to persuade others, especially from the pulpit, because as ministers we have to respect the just differences of opinion among people of the parish and diocese.

The diocese would also do well to prepare itself for the outcome of the Referendum now rather than simply waking up to the result the day after counting finishes. The first important figure will be the number of people who actually voted. What percentage of those who were enrolled, and importantly how does this percentage compare to the statistics for elections in previous years? This will be an indicator of the importance that people gave to the Referendum. The most important figures will, of course, be the votes themselves. What percentage of people voted for independence and what percentage of people voted for increased autonomy? Be ready for a surprise. Many Bougainvilleans with whom I have spoken feel certain about what the result will be, but people in New Caledonia received an enormous surprise in their Referendum in 2018. Most opinion polls suggested an overwhelming vote to stay in France, but the vote was only 52 – 48 percent for remaining. Similarly, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom has given us a good example about how not to do a Referendum. Be ready also to calm people’s emotions. These may be strong, and it will be important to bring together people from both sides of the vote.

A way of preparing for after the Referendum is scenario planning. Consider what will happen if the vote is 80/20 or 60/40 or 50/50 or 40/60 or 20/80? In each case, what is the National Government likely to do and what is the Autonomous Region of Bougainville Government likely to do, when they go to negotiate the future. In every case, how will people feel? What will be the church’s best role in each case? An exercise like this does not predict the future, but it does help you to be mentally prepared for whatever turns out at each of many steps into the future.

The day after the Referendum will be a new day. The people will have spoken. Will they have spoken clearly or mutely? What do you want in the short term and in the long term? How much detail of this can be worked out? What rectification will need to be made to the relationship with the PNG National Government? Will promised funding be available? Will there be the opportunity for direct overseas aid and expertise to assist in building the future?
You are living through this moment at a decided disadvantage because you are without an established bishop. I give you my deepest sympathy at the death of Bishop Bernard only a few weeks ago. Had you an established bishop, he would be able to speak for the diocese as its centre of unity. He would be known and understood. He would be able to stand behind his words because he would be known for who he is. In this situation, I say to the priests of the diocese, ‘maintain unity; do not become just a rabble’. To the Vicar General and the various authorities in the diocese, I say ‘speak to the broader good’. Call for peace and stability, for respect for one another and for just outcomes.

I will finish by referring to your Diocesan Prayer for the Referendum. I cannot read tok pisin well, but one of my Marist confreres helped me, and I understand that you are praying for peace, understanding and unity.