WHAT CAN THE CHURCH SAY?

ANDREW MURRAY

POLITICS AND RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA
WHAT CAN THE CHURCH SAY?
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What Can the Church Say?

Politics and Religion in Contemporary Australia

Andrew Murray sm
To those who are unable to speak for themselves.
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Parts of the book appeared in a public lecture, 'What Place Does the Church Have in Public Discussion?' – one of a series celebrating the golden jubilee of the erection of the Ecclesiastical Faculty at Catholic Institute of Sydney. Some ideas in the book were tested over a long period in articles in The Catholic Weekly.

Reference material has been kept to a minimum and is intended to show sources and to refer readers to documents that might interest them. The bibliography lists items for
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those readers of the book who would like to engage in further study of the issues.

Andrew Murray sm
Catholic Institute of Sydney
Introduction

The first years of the third millennium have seen politics and religion both enmeshed and in conflict. On the global scale, the rise of religious fundamentalism, both in Islam and in Christianity, clearly has some relationship to terrorism and to the responses to it. In Australia, there has been conflict between politicians and church leaders over issues, such as the treatment of asylum seekers, war in Iraq and the nature of terrorism.

The purpose of this book is to raise questions about the relationship between politics and religion and to ask how the church might engage in public discussion of issues that are called political. The treatment is philosophical rather than theological and will draw particularly on political philosophy and rhetoric. It is written from a Catholic point of view because that is the author's experience, though this is not intended to exclude other points of view.

The book is in four chapters. Chapter 1 will survey disputes in Australia so as to bring to light the questions that are at large. Chapter 2 will examine the relationship between politics and religion – both in absolute terms, as an essentially difficult relationship, and in terms of the kind of settlement between politics and religion that we live with, at the present time, in the West and in Australia. It will also look at some specifically Catholic issues. Chapter 3 will investigate the nature of the public domain and ask whether, and how, the church might act effectively in it; this will involve discussion of the nature of the media and of politics. Chapter 4 will conclude with a short analysis of
preaching in order to ask what the church is able to say in its own proper mode of discourse. The book will examine neither religious fundamentalism nor political ideology, though both are worthy of study.

The term 'church' is slippery; it can mean 'a community of believers' or 'an institution with authority structures' or 'the different Christian churches considered collectively'. I will use it in each of these senses, though context should make it clear which is meant. Similarly, I will use 'the church speaks' as shorthand for the number of ways in which the church is represented in public discussion - a published decision of a parish community; a statement by an episcopal conference; a paper by an expert of some kind; a public dispute on television, or in the press, involving a church leader; a public address; a speech given on a religious occasion, but generating public interest; a statement by an ecumenical body; a document, such as an encyclical, signed by the Pope. Again, the term 'church leader', while obviously including bishops in a primary way, will be used to include major superiors of religious congregations, priests, spokespersons of church agencies, and any of those who have a brief - either through appointment or expertise - to speak to some degree on behalf of the church.

Even though its analysis draws on wider experience, the book is directed primarily at the Australian situation. Some of the principles elicited may, therefore, find different application in other countries.

The Points for Discussion provided at the end of each chapter are intended to assist discussion groups to work on the issues raised in the book.
Chapter 1

The Contemporary Debate

A controversy that broke out during the second half of 2003 illustrates some of the issues involved, and the feelings aroused, when politics and religion are brought face to face in our society. The controversy was begun on 27 August by the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, in a lecture given under the auspices of the University of Adelaide Liberal Club and honouring Sir Thomas Playford, South Australia’s longest serving premier.¹ The media were invited to attend. In the lecture, Downer criticised church leaders, who ‘too often ... seek political causes or cheap headlines.’ Media commentators, politicians, public figures and church leaders joined the fray. Sir William Deane spoke to the issue, though without mentioning any persons’ names, in his launch of the 2003 Catholic Social Justice Statement, on 17 September. As late as February 2004, the Prime Minister, John Howard, referred back to Downer’s lecture in a warning to church leaders that they not favour one party or the other in an election year.² This controversy will alert us to some of the contemporary sensitivities and issues in the relations between politics and religion, and between church and state, in Australia and beyond.

Alexander Downer

Alexander Downer’s lecture, titled simply ‘At the Sir Thomas Playford Annual Lecture’, displays a significant degree of irritation - as well it might - having been delivered after a long period of national and international political turmoil which Downer had weathered as Australian Foreign Minister. This included events from the Tampa crisis in August 2001 till the declaration of the end
of major combat in the Iraq War in May 2003 – in particular, the Al Qaeda attack on the United States, the Bali bombing and the lead-up to the Iraq war (See Table 1 on pages 16-7). At the time of the lecture, he was supervising the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands. The foci of his irritation were statements by church leaders that he took to be critical of the decisions and actions of the Government, particularly in relation to the Iraq war and to terrorism.

Although he gives other examples, Downer’s strongest criticism is for the Primate of his own Anglican Church, Archbishop Peter Carnley, and the lecture both begins and ends with this criticism. Ten months before the lecture, and only a week after the Bali bombing, Downer had heard a report on the ABC Radio National program, AM, which said, ‘Well, the head of the nation’s Anglican Church says the Bali Bomb attack was an inevitable consequence of Australia’s close alliance with the United States … Dr Peter Carnley says terrorists were responding to Australia’s outspoken support for the United States and particularly its preparedness to take unilateral action against Iraq’.  

Downer discussed his own reaction to this and concluded that ‘it was a stark reminder of the tendency of some church leaders to ignore their primary pastoral obligations in favour of hogging the limelight on complex political issues’. We will return to this incident when we examine Carnley’s statements and, for now, limit ourselves to trying to elicit the general principles expressed in Downer’s lecture about the relationship between religion and politics.

Downer makes it clear that he is not against religion, and, in support, cites his own faith and that of ‘an unusually high proportion of federal politicians on all sides [who] are practising Christians’. He even allows the right for the churches to enter political debates, though cautioning that they have responsibilities ‘to the facts, to their congregations and to their faiths’. He is clear that the central role of the church lies ‘in providing spiritual comfort and moral
guidance to the community'. Nevertheless, he goes to some length to criticise senior clergy for 'uncertainty or disbelief in the central tenets of Christianity'. Just whom he means is not certain, but he specifically cites their lack of belief in the resurrection. He links scepticism among the clergy to the decline in church attendance and to the beginning of a post-Christian period.

In his lecture, Downer espouses two substantial positions - of use to our reflection - about the relationship between religion and politics or between church and state. The first has to do with the role of religion in binding society. While the natural bonds of family relationship are important for national cohesion, they are insufficient by themselves. He asks how, 'without consistent moral teaching and example from bodies like the churches ... can most Australians be expected to behave selflessly or consider the common good and abide by any kind of social contract?' The second has to do with the relationship of the Catholic Church to the nation as a whole. He notes that the Catholic Church has become less entangled with the Labor Party and that some thirty per cent of the front bench of the Howard Government are Catholics. This he sees as an 'integration of the Catholic Church into the broader body politic as represented in Parliament', and this, he felt, should have 'prevented some of its bishops from making intemperate denunciations of Australia’s participation in the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq'.

Downer has several further complaints. Firstly, he believes that clerics who have lost sight of the fundamentals of faith have sought other diversions, mostly social issues - 'environmental causes, feminist and gay agendas, and indigenous rights'. Secondly, he charges that clerics engage in overt partisan politicking and links this to the issuance of press releases 'at the drop of the hat', before even the churches themselves have made up their minds on the issues. Thirdly, he claims that the churches, particularly
<table>
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<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bush takes office in the United States</td>
<td>2001 January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tampa</em> crisis</td>
<td>26 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Qaeda attacks the United States</td>
<td>11 September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian federal election called</td>
<td>5 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Children overboard'</td>
<td>6 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States begins bombing in Afghanistan</td>
<td>7 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian federal election</td>
<td>10 November</td>
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<td>Bush labels Iraq as part of 'Axis of Evil'</td>
<td>2002 29 January</td>
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<td>Bush threatens, in the United Nations, to act against Iraq</td>
<td>12 September</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States Congress authorises attack in Iraq</td>
<td>11 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bali bombing</td>
<td>12 October</td>
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<td>Carnley's Synod Charge 2002</td>
<td>18 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carnley's media release</td>
<td>18 October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to Carnley on ABC's <em>AM</em></td>
<td>19 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carnley's letter to <em>The Australian</em></td>
<td>29 October</td>
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### Table 1. A selection of recent events in Australia, and beyond, which concern the relationship between religion and politics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>United States deployment to the Persian Gulf</td>
<td>21 December</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States war against Iraq begins</td>
<td>20 March 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pentagon declares fighting over</td>
<td>14 April</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States declares end to major combat</td>
<td>1 May</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solomons Intervention</td>
<td>24 July</td>
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<tr>
<td>Downer’s Playford Lecture</td>
<td>27 August</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deane’s Social Justice Statement launch</td>
<td>17 September</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carnley’s Synod Charge 2003</td>
<td>18 October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard warns churches about intervention</td>
<td>16 February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archbishops’ Statement on Labor policy</td>
<td>28 September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian federal election</td>
<td>9 October</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
the Catholic Church, which denounced Australia’s participation in the Iraq war, ‘neither confronted the difficult moral dilemmas, nor gave clear guidance’ at the time. Finally, he concludes with these words:

The greatest challenge today for leaders of all religions is to forego the opportunity to be amateur commentators on all manner of secular issues on which they inevitably lack expertise, and instead to find the spark of inspiration to give our lives greater moral and spiritual meaning.

It is worth noting that much of Downer’s criticism had to do, in one way or another, with the Iraq war, to which the churches were generally opposed. The Catholic Church certainly expressed views through the Pope, its bishops, its justice commissions and its scholars. Whether these were immoderately put can be examined in other studies, but a quick survey suggests that most statements were careful and reasoned. On the other hand, it has to be admitted that war is a moral issue – not the least because people are killed – and that the Catholic Church has a long tradition of serious thought about the morally justifiable grounds for going to war. If the churches do have a role to play in ensuring the moral integrity of the nation, it can also be asked whether the Government took careful notice of them when making its decision to wage war.

**Peter Carnley**

What, then, had Peter Carnley said that brought such a reaction from Alexander Downer? The report on *AM*, on Saturday 19 October 2002, referred to an address that Carnley had made to the Annual Perth Anglican Synod the night before, but was probably triggered by a press release from the Primate’s office earlier on the day of his address. The address was the ‘Synod Charge’, a formal report on the state of the diocese by the Archbishop to the Synod, during its commencement Eucharist. It is long – at
some 8700 words – and covers issues such as the centrality of the Eucharist, questions about church structures, developments in the diocese during the year, redevelopment of country and city parishes, the year of the child and, finally, terrorism and war. Although it deals with largely practical matters, its reasoning is deeply theological. The final section of 1127 words – which is of interest to us – deals with what was the most pressing public issue of the time. It begins with the Bali bombing a week before, and expresses horror, revulsion, sympathy and mourning, while offering prayer for all those affected.\(^9\) It continues as a thoughtful reflection on the whole issue, including the role of the world religions in the outbreak of terrorism. Although not all would agree with Carnley’s analysis, it cannot be condemned as outspoken or ill-advised.

The Archbishop’s press release works differently. It leads with the claim that ‘terrorists were responding to Australia’s outspoken support of the United States’ and deals with some of the more thoughtful things that Carnley was to say subsequently to the Synod – but only those things concerning the issue of terrorism. Nothing in the press release is said about the other matters in the Synod Charge or about the Synod itself or even about sympathy for the Bali victims, although another, earlier press release had done this. The claim from the later press release was picked up by Hamish Robertson on the ABC but the claim itself was a dramatic summary by the writer of the media release, rather than something that Carnley had strictly said. The rest of Robertson’s brief statement was, in turn, his own dramatic summary of the press release rather than what was precisely in the press release, let alone in Carnley’s address.

In his lecture, Downer quoted only Robertson’s introduction to the interview on AM, and his text is identical with that on the ABC website, except for an omission indicated by an ellipsis. In quoting this way, he ensured
that he did not quote anything that Carnley had actually said, but only a report that had been filtered through two media operatives. He ignored the interview with Carnley - on the same ABC webpage - in which Carnley rejected the notion that he was criticising the Howard Government’s support of American action. Finally, Downer’s omission left out the words ‘in his address to the Anglican Synod in Perth last night, Anglican Primate’ from Robertson’s report. By doing this, Downer hid from both his audience and the media the fact that Carnley’s real comments were to be found in a much more substantial, and readily available, piece of writing. It was, in fact, convenient for Downer, because it meant both that he did not have to deal with Carnley’s more serious discussion, and that he avoided alerting his opponents to the existence of evidence that would undermine his case. This kind of action may be common in political contests, but it neither meets the standards of serious discourse in the institution in which the lecture was given nor honours the person for whom the lecture was named.10

There are important lessons to be gleaned from this incident. Firstly, the press release did attempt to grab a headline and, at that, it succeeded only too well and in a way that caused considerable damage to the Archbishop. Questions have to be raised about whether churches, whose messages are generally complex and finely nuanced, can afford to seek the sensational headline. Secondly, unless they do catch journalists’ attention, churches know that they will largely be ignored in the public discussion of a mass society in which much interaction takes place in the media, who are always looking for an edge. Thirdly, Downer clearly wanted to do a hatchet job, and he took his chance. The substantive point of difference was over whether Australia’s close alliance with the United States affected Australia’s potential as a target for terrorism. Downer no doubt believed that this was not a point on which he could
give any ground and later he attacked his own federal police commissioner on the same issue. His stance was that of someone seeking political advantage – a stance which was radically different from that of Carnley, who was trying to articulate an understanding of a very complex political and religious situation.

Carnley did return to the issues in his address to the subsequent (2003) Synod – a little less than two months after Downer’s lecture – though without reference to the previous interchange with Downer. He discussed the idea of the separation of church and state, interpreting it as the doctrine that the state does not give preference to any particular religion, but denying that this implied that individual members of a church were in any way debarred from participating in the affairs of the state. He continued:

The Church must obviously avoid party-political alignments, but the articulation of moral truth in relation to public issues and concerns is a Christian obligation, even if it is bound to produce some irritation amongst politicians from time to time.

In the latter part of his address, he again examined the current world situation – this time in terms of developments in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Three short quotations will give us food for thought:

What has happened since the late 1970s is that world religions generally do not primarily seek to modernize themselves. Rather than being in quest of modernization of religion we are today in quest of religion-isation of modernity. It is very important to understand this in order to get a grip on what is happening in the world around us.

In common with all the Abrahamic religions today, we [grapple with public issues] conscious of the fact that the privatised view of religion of the Enlightenment experiment has failed, as religious people around the world
increasingly appeal to a raft of spiritual precepts and religiously grounded moral values to inform their contributions to public debate and their involvements in public affairs.

Also, as we well know, the most extreme, politically radicalized and fundamentalist manifestations within the three Abrahamic religions are tending to come into conflict as they each seek to shape community in accordance with their own religious identity at the expense of others.

Carnley’s office placed two short media releases on his website: ‘Religious leaders must participate in public debate - Carnley’ and ‘Carnley calls for active dialogue between faiths to thwart terrorism’. In a third media release, the complete text of his Synod Charge was made available immediately to the media and the public through the media page, rather than solely through the Synod page, as in the previous year.

**The 2004 Federal Election**

The year 2004 was an election year not only in Australia but also in Indonesia and in the United States. It was clear from the beginning that it was going to be a very long one. Australia’s interest in Indonesia was to strengthen its relationship with a government with which it could cooperate in combating terrorism, without generating conflict with Islam. In the United States, the Republican Party strengthened its relationship with Evangelical and Pentecostal religious groups, while Catholic Bishops battled with the Democratic Party contender over the issue of abortion. The American Presidential election, in particular, played heavily in the Australian media, and it seemed that it fed the Australian political imagination in various ways, even to the point of the imitation of strategies. The election saw the rise of the Family First Party, which is strongly aligned to Pentecostal Churches.
As early as 16 February 2004, the Prime Minister, John Howard, launched, what one journalist called, a 'pre-emptive strike' against church leaders, warning them not to favour political parties. In an interview with the Adelaide newspaper, The Advertiser, Howard said, 'I think church leaders should speak out on moral issues but there is a problem with that justification being actively translated into sounding very partisan.' Howard made a clear link with Downer's Playford Lecture by using Downer's depiction of Carnley's views on the Bali bombing as an example of what he believed to be inappropriate.

There were a number of interventions by church leaders during the election campaign. The most prominent, however, was a 'Joint Statement on the Australian Labor Party's Schools Policy, Great Australian Schools' by the Catholic and Anglican Archbishops of Sydney - Cardinal George Pell and Archbishop Peter Jensen; and of Melbourne - Archbishops Denis Hart and Peter Watson. The brief statement was issued on 28 September 2004 - just eleven days before the election - and was defended in the media by Brother Kelvin Canavan, the Executive Director of Schools in the Catholic Education Office, Sydney. The statement welcomed Labor's promise to provide more funding for non-government schools but criticised the policy for not making clear the criteria for the allocation of funds, for placing a cap on total funding for non-government schools, and for funding some schools at the expense of others. The statement concluded, 'We express our concern at the lack of clarity in Labor's proposal and the potentially divisive mechanism of redistributing funds within the non-government schools sector.' It was this claim - that the policy would create sectarian division between the Anglican and Catholic Churches by shifting funds from the mainly Anglican, wealthy private schools to the mainly Catholic, poorer schools - that created most discussion.
The statement generated furious media debate which lasted right up until the election. There was support for the statement within the Anglican Church from, for instance, the acting Bishop of Newcastle.\textsuperscript{16} Within the Catholic Church, however, the picture was different. The Chairman of the National Catholic Education Commission praised the Labor policy for its emphasis on needy students,\textsuperscript{17} and the Archbishop of Brisbane, John Bathersby, indicated that he thought it unfair to criticise the opposition policy without reference to the government policy because both were flawed. He enunciated the principle that ‘constructive criticism of policy is warranted provided it applies to all policies and is even-handed and fair’.\textsuperscript{18} Opinion writers had a lot to say, and Letters to the Editor in newspapers showed significant division in the community about the issue and about the place of religion in society.

Politicians took the intervention more calmly. The then Leader of the Labor Party, Mark Latham, seemed to shrug the statement off:

Oh, well, everyone’s entitled to their view in a democracy. I mean, I can remember George Pell giving support for the GST in the 1998 election campaign, so he’s a man of strong views. He puts them out at election time. Not everyone agrees. Obviously in this case I disagree.\textsuperscript{19}

John Howard defended the archbishops:

They’re just expressing a view on something they feel strongly about and that is their right in a democratic society. I don’t think there’s any suggestion of partisanship.\textsuperscript{20}

After the election, Howard praised ‘the courageous intervention of Catholic and Anglican leaders’ in an address to Liberal Party MPs in Canberra. He was reported to believe that Pell’s intervention ‘was particularly gutsy, given Labor’s traditional links with the Catholic Church’.\textsuperscript{21}
Frank Devine

Frank Devine is a retired journalist and newspaper editor, who still writes opinion pieces. His column, ‘Do-Gooder Priests Should Stay Out’, in *The Australian* on 12 December 2003, illustrates an attitude that is part of the phenomenon under investigation. A little over half the column responds to Frank Brennan SJ’s book, *Tampering with Asylum*, but the first part of the column is an attack on ‘the priest in politics’. Two short quotations will give the flavour:

Father Frank Brennan, SJ, has too many gongs for comfort. “Father” and “SJ” would have done me. They indicate useful steps taken on the road to personal sanctity and good work done in the cure of souls.

Consciously or not, the public priest invokes the prestige and power of his religious office when he involves himself in politics - unless he explicitly discards the biretta, so to speak. When he indulges in political campaigning in full Jesuit regalia, as Brennan does in his homily on the injustice, illegality and immorality of Australia’s treatment of boat people, I feel ambushed.

In the article, Devine shows that Brennan is, by both education and experience, more capable of dealing with issues in the book than is Devine himself, yet he clearly takes exception to being told about things he calls ‘political’ by a priest. He shows regard for what priests do in the areas of sanctity and the cure of souls, but would prefer that they deal solely with the religious sphere. His discomfort at being ‘ambushed’ however suggests that issues of authority, and of the manner of relating to priests, also come into play in the relationship between religion and politics.

William Deane

Sir William Deane, a former governor-general of Australia, launched the 2003 Social Justice Sunday Statement of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on 17 September
2003 – less than a month after Downer’s lecture. The Bishops Conference issues such a statement each year after it has been prepared for them by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. The 2003 Statement was titled ‘A Generous Heart in the Love of Christ: Challenging Racism in Australia Today’. Clearly it deals with a matter of high moral import, namely, the exclusion of people from the community in relation to some aspects of common life because they are different, but the matter is also one of great political moment. In an address that was short and tight, Deane devoted a paragraph to the question of whether church leaders might speak on politically controversial topics.

One cannot, of course, fail to be conscious of the fact that these days there seems to be a tendency to criticise the leaders of our Christian Churches for presuming to speak out on politically controversial matters such as our nation’s treatment of asylum seekers and the claims of the disadvantaged, including our indigenous peoples. With due respect, any such criticism is misconceived. It wrongly discounts the relevance of morality in our Australian democracy. It ignores the importance of the mission of both the Catholic and the Universal Christian Church in a community such as ours where more than a quarter of the population acknowledge their Catholicism and where more than two-thirds of the population assert their adherence to one or other of the Christian Denominations. It reflects a failure to understand the essential nature and function of the Christian Church and its mission in the modern world. In the discharge of that 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.  

Deane chooses his words carefully. What he defends is the right and obligation of church leaders to speak, not as controversialists, but on politically controversial matters
when ‘Christian principles and beliefs might provide relevant guidance’ in those matters. He locates his claim in the mission of the Christian church in the modern world. He both enables, and limits, the interaction of church leaders in political affairs.

**Conclusion**

The incidents and interactions outlined in this chapter are matter for further reflection, but it should already be clear that considerable sensitivities are likely to be ignited when religious and political leaders come into conflict. Two different kinds of authority are at work, and they are often not complementary. As well, different kinds of discourse belong to each. Politicians excel in the cut and thrust of debate that looks to immediate victory and in which issues are often partisan. Religious leaders are expected to be concerned with longer-term goals and heavenly ideals; and if they are theologians, their statements or writings are more amenable to sustained reflection than to quick responses. Opinions about both religion and politics generate strong feelings that readily escalate when the two topics come together.

**Points for Discussion**

1. Describe an event in which a clash between religious and political leaders has affected you.

2. Explore any reactions you had to the incidents recounted in this chapter.

3. Can you suggest any guidelines for how religious leaders might fairly engage in public discussion of political issues? What strategies might they use to act effectively when they do engage in public discussion?

4. How should politicians deal with religious matters and with religious leaders? When should they seek the advice of religious leaders?
5. How are disagreements complicated when they take place in the media? What strategies can you think of to avoid this?

6. Can you recall any political issues or events that necessarily had a religious dimension?

7. What particular aspects of Christian belief and teaching do you think should have some impact on public life?

8. What does it mean to say that churches should not engage in partisan politics? Is this a fair claim?
Chapter 2

Relating Politics and Religion

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship between religion and politics in Western societies, in Australia and in the experience of the Catholic Church. The first section will show that the relationship between political authority and religious authority is essentially problematic and difficult; the second will explore the kinds of settlements that have been reached between religion and politics in the Western world generally, and in Australia in particular; and the third will raise specifically Catholic questions by reflecting on a recent document of the Catholic Church on political life. The chapter is an exercise in political philosophy so that, although it is more difficult than the other chapters, it nevertheless underlies many of the claims that are made in them.

The Essential Problem

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 in Book 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.¹ He proposed that priests should be appointed not from among the vulgar (farmers and artisans) 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, deliberation and military action. 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.'² He further
claimed that part of the 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; 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 though with the advent of Christianity and with the knowledge of a God radically different from the gods of the Greeks. Aristotle's god was part of the world - occupying its outermost sphere - but it did not communicate with the world, except by way of final causality, that is, as an ultimate good to which the world aspires. Whether we consider the actual gods of the city or Aristotle's philosophical understanding of God, for the ancient Greeks, so long as the sacred was respected, there were no essential grounds for conflict between religion and politics. The God of Christians, on the other hand, is beyond the world yet revealed in the world through the act of creation and redemption. We discover, therefore, through the ministry of Jesus Christ, a revelation of matters central to life, which is, in fact, his revelation of the eternal God. The interpretation of this revelation lay with the church, and so problems of authority arose on at least two counts. Firstly, since the church could not afford to give precedence to political authorities in matters deemed to be part of
revelation, it quickly understood that it had an authority not subject to political authority. And, secondly, if even civil authority has its origin in God, questions arose about how such authority is transmitted. Is it transmitted through the church? Or is it transmitted directly to the civil authorities themselves?  

Christendom - which existed in Europe for around a thousand years from about 600 AD - can be viewed politically as a great experiment in the subjection of civil authority to religious authority. Its roots lay in the collapse of the Roman Empire and in the growing spiritual authority of the papacy, as Christianity spread across the continent; it showed 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 reinstituting 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 political authorities had to use, and the holiness expected of those 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 power, spiritual and temporal, in the hands of one man or in one court, led easily to levels of corruption in the church that can still be painful to acknowledge. On the other hand, civil rulers either fretted at the limitations under which they functioned or used military means to subdue the papacy. Eventually, the Reformation tore the church apart, and the kings of Europe 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 against both the church and 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, modernity 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. Moreover, 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. Later, the term 'civil society' was coined to cover those associations, such as churches or corporations or charities, that were larger than families and so, in a sense, political, but not part of the state. However, in not being part of the state, they were regarded as 'apolitical'.

The political forms wrought by modernity arose out of the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and they related to religion in various ways in different places. In France, the Revolution was vigorously hostile to the Catholic Church and attempted to subject it 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 the United States of America, a rigorous separation in law went hand in hand with a society that remained deeply religious; and religion continues to have significant influence over political matters there, albeit indirectly. In important ways, Australia is heir to all of these various arrangements, as well as to its own history. The apparently simple doctrine of the separation of church and state, then, can mean quite different things in different countries.

Returning 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
the 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, by contrast, when one tries to describe the life of a political community, one quickly finds oneself using terms that are more abstract. A society is a mass of people without a single unifying principle or even identity, unless it recognises itself as a nation. A state does have a unifying principle, but the scope of the state's power is less than the whole of the life of its citizenry, even if that power is great. A church is somehow separated from the whole, yet expected to bring unity and morality. People 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 somewhat unsettled.

In addition, it should be said that the tension between political authority and religious authority is, at least in the case of Christianity, an essential tension. In other words, it is not just the outcome of contingent events or incidental decisions and actions; it rests in the very existence of the two authorities themselves, as well as in the relationship between them. At different times and in different places, a variety of solutions or settlements establishing how people might live at peace and in relation to these two authorities have been worked out, and some have proved more successful than others. Since, however, the tension cannot be done away with, and since political institutions are open to change, settlements or arrangements change too, although they change slowly.

The Settlements with which We Live

In order to get some sense of the relationship between politics and religion in Australia today, one first has to
recognise that the structural tensions that are part of modernity's solution to the problem of politics and religion are still present. One suspects that church authorities are uncomfortable that their authority is often 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 or when organised bodies like the churches oppose them. Moreover, one has to acknowledge that the current situation is a consequence of political settlements made in response to conflict or crisis in Europe since the seventeenth century, and in Australia since the arrival of the First Fleet.

It has to be admitted though that much of the heat has gone out of the debate. One has to contrast only the kind of condemnation that Pope Pius X (1903–1914) was able to make of modern democratic forms with Pope John Paul II's appreciation, and exploration, of what this same modern movement has exposed in its proclamation of human rights that apply to every individual, irrespective of race, origin, family or religion.\(^8\) Similarly, both the public and governments have become more comfortable with the presence of the churches. Governments are directly involved with the churches in the provision of welfare, health and education; and churches themselves are accustomed to having standing in the community, even if many of them are experiencing decline in membership at the present time.

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 and Ronald Reagan. One 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 is going. The world is, in important respects, not the same after 11 September 2001 as it was before.

Nevertheless, if the church wishes to act seriously in public discussions, it needs to remain alert to both structural realities and the deep sensitivities of the times. For the kind of public world brought about by modernity is well established: it has affected not only social structures and institutions but also customs and feelings. In terms of structures and institutions, we have to examine what it is to be a state or to be secular or to be liberal, since the kind of state in which we live is often called a liberal democracy; but to examine customs and feelings, we have to investigate culture, the vehicle which carries the practices and learning of one generation to the next.

*Western Liberal Democracy*

The central features of the modern state are its territoriality, whereby it has defined and stable borders; its sovereignty as sole legitimate law-maker within these borders; and its right to use force - either to coerce its own citizens to obey its laws or to protect itself from agents outside its borders. The functions of the state are exercised by a government which, in a democracy, receives its legitimacy both by an expression of the will of the people - generally in some form of election - and by assuming certain agreed constitutional arrangements. Such a state is, in principle, extraordinarily powerful, especially when it has the tools of modern technology at its disposal. Further, when it is gripped by singular ideas - as happened under the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century - it is capable of reducing its citizens to forms of slavery. But even in its more liberal forms, the modern state, as sole legislator, wields extraordinary power.
Liberal democracy, under which we live in Australia, is a political form developed in Europe in response to differences in belief and custom among peoples living in the same territory. Essentially, it proposes, firstly, that states be limited in the extent of their powers over certain domains and, secondly, that states remain neutral about opinions on which citizens legitimately differ. The first part of this proposal allows for the formation of associations, such as corporations, clubs and churches, that are not political in the sense of being part of the state apparatus. Such associations are able to make rules that apply to their members so long as they wish to belong to them, and the state legislates or acts only when conflict injurious to individuals, or to the larger society, arises. The second part of this proposal most obviously affects differences in religious belief or moral conviction, though the specific points of neutrality have generally been established historically. Not all faiths may have been tolerated originally, but the logic of the arrangement has allowed them, progressively, to become so; and although the state has stayed silent on moral issues deemed to be outside the criminal law, nevertheless, the extent of criminal law has changed. Freedoms that are involved in both parts of this proposal, finally, are often expressed in terms of rights.

There is, at the present time, however, significant unease about the notion of the liberal state. While those who are called liberals are seen to take liberalism as prescriptive and to attempt to extend rights of equality to all groups and cultures, those who are called conservatives are seen to find secularism and moral neutrality threatening and to complain about the corruption of society. However, political theorists distinguish between thick and thin theories of liberalism. Thick theories, which view liberalism as an engine or positive force for the generation of new rights, do, indeed, seem at times to push the limits of human, cultural and moral appropriateness. Thin theories, on the
other hand, take the notion of the neutrality of the state in respect of beliefs seriously, so that the limitations put on the state are understood as procedural rules governing the kind of interventions that it can initiate in the lives of citizens rather than as prescriptions about how the society should function. The particular outcomes in law and practice, then, are prudential and a consequence of judgments made over a long period of time; and they are directed towards finding the best ways in which the state can limit conflict between parts of its population and also respect the freedom of citizens to act. It is this thin theory that is relevant to the current argument.

The prudential and historical nature of the limitations accepted by the state are important for understanding the delicate nature of the churches' position in relation to politics and the power of the state. Although the churches do have constitutional protections, they are minor compared to the overall operation of churches in society. In large part, the churches' continued freedom to organise religiously depends on restraint by the sole legislator, the government. Governments, in turn, are restrained by the need to maintain peace and to curry favour with church constituencies. Nevertheless, conflict or abuse can readily lead to changes in existing arrangements. The recent case of the response of the State of Massachusetts to the Archdiocese of Boston's handling of sexual abuse by priests shows how privileges can be eroded. The State sought, and after much legal argument received, substantial quantities of archdiocesan files, largely because the abuse was so bad that traditional sensibilities about separation of church and state ceased to carry weight.

Alternatively, responses to crises can improve the position of religious groups. For example, the vandalisation of mosques and intimidation of Muslims in Sydney after the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 clearly caught the attention of state and federal governments. They
made attempts to establish good relations with Muslim leaders and to ensure the rights of Muslims to have mosques and to enjoy using them securely.

*The Australian Settlement*

What these examples show is that change in the detail of the settlements between states and churches is slow but constant. It is, in other words, part of politics, which Michael Oakeshott defines as ‘the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community’.10 (See below for the full version of his definition.)

Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community. To suppose a collection of people without recognised traditions of behaviour, or one which enjoyed arrangements which intimated no direction for change and needed no attention [e.g. a society in which law was believed to be a divine gift], is to suppose a people incapable of politics. This activity, then, springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves. And the form it takes, because it can take no other, is the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them. The arrangements which constitute a society capable of political activity, whether they are customs or institutions or laws or diplomatic decisions, are at once coherent and incoherent; they compose a pattern and at the same time they intimate a sympathy for what does not fully appear. Political activity is the exploration of that sympathy; and consequently, relevant political reasoning will be the convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognizing it.11
For this reason, although the general tenets of liberal democracy apply to a large number of Western states, a full understanding of the relationship between church and state, or between religion and politics, in a particular place, requires detailed knowledge of the history and affairs of that same state.

European engagement in Australia began with a penal settlement in which neither convicts nor soldiers were particularly religious, and in which many were irreligious. Official chaplains, who also functioned as magistrates, were funded by the colony and were expected to enforce morality under difficult conditions. Thus began an association between religion and a conservative establishment—something that secularists, radicals and the less fortunate frequently opposed. Initially, the Anglican Church was intended to be an established church and remained ascendant until the second half of the nineteenth century, but the large numbers of Irish Catholics and non-Anglican Protestants made this unworkable. The Church Act of 1836 made provision for funds to support ministers of religion of different churches and so established the principle of equal treatment for the different denominations under the law. This assistance was withdrawn, however, without controversy, in 1862, in order to stop competition for benefits between the churches. It also freed the churches from the influence of the government over their affairs.12

At the time of federation, Section 116 of the Australian Constitution prohibited the Commonwealth from legislating in respect of religion.

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.13

This law can be read as defining the Commonwealth, that is, the state, as secular, but only in the sense of neutrality
towards the exercise of religion. It does not promote secularity in the sense of suggesting that people should not belong to a religion or denomination but, rather, it avoids conflict by refusing to become involved in religious practice.

A lot more could be said about Australian history, but the point is that some form of sectarianism has been part of life from the beginning of European engagement in Australia, and it has affected the development of Australian laws and customs. Despite early Catholic resentment of Anglican ascendancy, the first conflicts in Australia were between secularists and denominations rather than between the denominations themselves. More direct conflict between the churches, particularly between Protestants and Catholics, began in the 1840s and 1850s amidst campaigning for seats in the new legislature. By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants, increased by Irish-English competition, had settled in, and it would remain a significant part of Australian life for over a century. The twentieth century saw controversies about conscription, communism and education that all had sectarian dimensions.

This kind of division in a community is itself a political issue, even though the division is on religious grounds. If the heart of politics is, as Aristotle claims, the management of the interests of different parts of a community, the fact that serious conflict continued between such large sections of the community - that is, between about one-quarter of the community who were Catholic and over one-half who were Protestant - meant that governments were limited in the manner of arrangements that they could put in place. Religious division encouraged a form of secularity which was based less on principle, and more on the accommodation of the views of conflicting parties. On the other hand, the interests of religious groups, and their involvement in the social welfare of the broader
community, meant that church leaders often had dealings and close relationships with politicians and even with political parties.  

Australian religious division has long been a political issue, though, for two other reasons. Firstly, conflict — whatever its cause — affects the life of the community. Whatever the limitations of their brief, parliaments do pay attention to the broad issues of the welfare of communities, and, among more idealistic parliamentarians, the gaze can be intense. Secondly, politics itself has a dark side, and, in the scramble for votes and support, politicians have often exploited differences in the community. This has, at times, led politicians into sectarian religious debate, attacking one group in order to gain the support of the other. This raises the question — less often asked — of whether politicians should refrain from public involvement in religious issues to the same degree that they expect religious leaders to refrain from political debates.

In summary, the Australian settlement in the relation between state and church has been an untidy affair. Although it follows the tradition of Western liberal democracy, it also has its own peculiarities of time and place. Hostility between Christian denominations, or between Christians and secularists, has affected both the kinds of arrangements that are possible between church and state, and the opinions and feelings that surround them. The arguments that arise around state aid for religious schools, for instance, remain much the same as they were over a century ago — the equal right to education, the quality of public education, the claims of a secular state, and sensitivity about government interference in religious affairs. Nevertheless, governments and churches continue to work together in the provision of services. At times, church leaders and political parties get into close relationship but, at other times, the hostility is great. At all times, though, two different forms of authority are at work.
and prudent action demands awareness of the difficulties and sensitivities.

In recent decades, ecumenical initiatives have lessened the conflict between the churches. At the same time, however, other differences have emerged. An ever greater number of Australians declare themselves not to be members of any particular religion; and, with changing immigration patterns, other religions, such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, have established a greater presence. Further, while Jews have long been present in Australia, they have increased in number since the Second World War. It says something for the robustness of Australian society, and of its political structures, that it has been able to cope with these changes without too great a difficulty.

**The Culture of Liberal Democracy**

Turning now to an examination of the culture underlying our political forms, we can understand culture, in the present context, to be the learning and customs of a people or society that are carried from generation to generation. It is important to our purposes because its presuppositions affect the generation of the kinds of arrangements we have been discussing and also because it helps define the character of the people whom the church will be addressing when it speaks in the public domain. In what follows, an attempt will be made, first, to describe the culture of liberal democracy and, then, to describe the particularly Australian characteristics of such a culture.

At the heart of the culture of liberal democracy is the 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 a member of free associations, rather than as a member of a natural community. Five characteristics of the life of this individual can be noted; they are not exhaustive, but
they should give a flavour of this culture. Firstly, freedom or liberty is fundamental, but this is defined negatively as the absence of constraint on what the individual might do.\textsuperscript{16} 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. Such choice finds its political expression in the kind of democracy that allows voting by 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. And finally, 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. Such 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 seek to express their individuality by wearing the same fashions. While tolerance has eased the lot of many, including Catholics, unthinking tolerance can easily lead to relativism. Finally, it is odd that a society that has freed itself from other imperatives has, in fact, taken the accumulation of money to be its goal, so that life often seems to be directed by commerce and economics.

Australian culture has certain general features that set it apart from other liberal democracies; they belong to its origins, history and geography. The culture has been long understood as egalitarian, phlegmatic, secular and averse
to moralising. However, it also has its dark sides – a tendency to be inarticulate, hesitancy to become involved with the arts, and a latent racism that surfaces under pressure. Recent decades have seen significant efforts under the name of multiculturalism to learn how to live with immigrants who are not of Anglo-Celtic origin. On the religious front, secularism has always been part of our nation, and, while many Australians have strong faith, they are not given to vigorous religious expression. In recent times, much of the sectarian bitterness that has marked most of our history has disappeared as we have come to value ecumenism. At the same time, nevertheless, we have had to begin to learn how to live with people of non-Christian religions.

Catholics and Political Life: The Doctrinal Note

On 24 November 2002, the Solemnity of Christ the King, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document titled, ‘Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life’. It is not clear what specific events occasioned the note, though the document indicates that the Congregation had received an opinion from the Pontifical Council for the Laity prompting it to act. Such a note from a congregation of the Holy See is low in the order of authoritative documents in the Catholic Church, though the historical role of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in safeguarding doctrine and order tends to give its pronouncements greater weight. In any case, both the content of the document and the act of its publication are relevant to the topic under investigation. The content of the document can be analysed in terms of its underlying doctrine, its particular teaching and its practical implications.

The underlying doctrine of the document, which constitutes the foundations of a social and political theory, is expressed in terms of the human person, the common
good and the natural moral law. The human person is an individually existing, rational animal and so valued in its own right as thoughtful, relational and intrinsically directed towards God. The common good is the good of a whole community, including individual goods, though these are incapable of being separated from the whole. Natural moral law consists of the fundamental rules of human action, discovered by reason, in the structure of a universe that has been created by God. These are rich notions and show the strength of the Catholic heritage. In particular, their use enables vivid articulation of the dignity of the human person, as well as firm support for the integrity of human communities.

These doctrines have not, however, been accepted in much of the political thinking of modernity. As was seen earlier, in place of a rich notion of the person, modernity posits the individual, an atomic locus of action and right. It has also largely abandoned a sense of the common good and replaced it with encouragement for all individuals to seek their own goods, leaving to the state the role of moderating conflicts when they arise. In part, this abandonment is attributable to difficulties related to the size and complexity of modern states – which have gone far beyond natural, or even homogeneous, communities – and is connected with the adoption of democratic, rather than monarchical, forms of authority. Natural law has been replaced in public thinking by morality based on contracts between individuals. This presents both a difficulty and an opportunity. The difficulty is that Catholic teaching is less likely to be understood by those not educated in it, so that the Catholic Church’s ability to persuade is limited. The opportunity is for those in the Catholic tradition to use its resources to enrich the thinking of modern people, particularly where the compromises of modernity have shown themselves to be problematic. This has been done, for instance, by the Second Vatican Council in its teaching...
on religious freedom, which it based not on the need to keep the peace in a pluralist society, but on the intrinsic dignity of the person seeking God.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, John Paul II has deepened the understanding of democracy.\textsuperscript{19} Change brought by enriching people's thinking will be slow, and will need to be accompanied with understanding and prudence, but it is not unreasonable to be optimistic about the human desire to find the truth and to correct wrongs.\textsuperscript{20}

The \textit{particular teaching} of the document is that 'no Catholic can appeal to the principle of pluralism or to the autonomy of lay involvement in political life to support policies affecting the common good which compromise or undermine fundamental ethical requirements'.\textsuperscript{21} Put more directly, this means that a Catholic politician, or even a citizen voting for a representative, is obliged to refrain from supporting policies or laws that contravene Catholic moral teaching. The instruction is expressed negatively, though the previous number speaks of 'a grave and clear obligation to oppose any law that attacks human life'. At first sight, this teaching is unremarkable and fairly obvious, because individual conscience itself beckons action in conformity with moral law, but the argumentation gives a clue to the attendant difficulties. In rejecting the appeal to 'the principle of lay autonomy', the document acknowledges objections against the Church's intruding into the political realm. Its counterargument is that these matters are not matters of faith but, rather, of morals, and so are accessible to reason and are not matters of revelation alone. In rejecting the appeal to 'the principle of pluralism', the document enters into the question of how democratic societies achieve moral cohesion.

The document does not define the principle of pluralism, but it clearly relates to the condition found in democracies in which groups of citizens have different moral views. The criticism put by the document is that 'as a result, citizens claim complete autonomy with regard to their moral
choices, and lawmakers maintain that they are respecting this freedom of choice by enacting laws which ignore the principles of natural ethics and yield to ephemeral cultural and moral trends, as if every possible outlook on life were of equal value. Thus the document links pluralism with cultural and moral relativism. It is certainly true that the present time has been rife with moral relativism, even if the situation seems to be changing as societies and religions worldwide swing more towards dogmatism and fundamentalism. It may also be true that societies that prize their freedom lean towards relativism. Nevertheless, the claims call for closer examination.

An earlier section in this chapter showed that modern democracies have solved some of the problems relating to differences among citizens by remaining neutral about moral beliefs outside the criminal law. The distinction between what is immoral and what is criminal, though, is not a tidy one. Lying, for instance, is immoral, but becomes illegal only in certain circumstances, such as lying in a court or lying so as to assure an unfair financial transaction. The extent of the state’s concern tends to be worked out in response to difficulties and abuses. Nevertheless, the fact that legislatures remain neutral does not mean that lawmakers and judges will not criticise liars severely. The questions are, therefore, whether this kind of legislative neutrality in non-criminal moral matters necessarily leads to moral relativism, and, on a more positive note, how can such democracies maintain some measure of moral standards.

It has already been seen that governments at the beginning of the European presence in Australia, and also recently, have called on churches to instil good moral behaviour in their members and, therefore, in citizens. This works well when churches form strong communities so that moral behaviour is transmitted as custom or ethos. In recent decades, this has not been enough, and other solutions have
been tried. Institutional ethics committees have become more common, and law has mandated some committees, such as in medical and research institutions. More is heard about business ethics, medical ethics and professional standards, often in response to either abuses or to the necessity of dealing with more complex situations. In a sense, therefore, the argument of the Doctrinal Note may not constitute an essential criticism of democracy, even though it does identify what is at times an unfortunate trend towards relativism.

The practical implications of the document are both general and specific. At the general level, it exhorts Catholics in political life to draw on the full social and moral teaching of the Church in exercising their duties. At this level, it does not distinguish between faith and morals, so that the model proposed is of persons whose political and religious, public and personal, lives are fully integrated. In Australian experience, we do find admirable examples of people who have not only lived in this way, but who have also acted prudently in the public domain. At the specific level, the document prohibits Catholic lawmakers from voting for laws that are contrary to 'fundamental and inalienable ethical demands'. It is clear from the document that it is concerned primarily with those issues to do with the beginning, and end, of life. In a list of issues, it cites abortion, euthanasia, the rights of the embryo, and the protection of the family. It then adds the protection of minors, freedom from modern forms of slavery, and the right to religious freedom and economic opportunity. Finally, it mentions peace - though as something difficult to attain, rather than as a fundamental ethical demand.

One final question has to do with the process of publication of the Doctrinal Note. Materially, it was simply the production of another document which was posted on a website and distributed widely in printed form, but it was also a human act and, therefore, a moral act, though it
was generated by a committee and promulgated by an institution. Moral acts are typically evaluated in terms of their formal object, circumstances and end. They can also be examined in terms of the effectiveness of the means chosen to meet a particular end and in terms of the actual consequences. In this particular case, it has to be asked whether publication itself was a political act, either in a general way or in response to a particular situation.

The document, and even commentary on it, is somewhat opaque to these questions. One senses that it is concerned with very particular circumstances, yet it is addressed to all ‘the Bishops of the Catholic Church and, in a particular way, to Catholic politicians and all lay members of the faithful called to participate in the political life of democratic societies’, and it speaks in universal terms. It claims to have been occasioned by the suggestion of another curial body, but the actual concerns of that body are not stated. It therefore runs the risk of seeming to be justified as ‘something that seemed to be a good idea at the time’. Though nominally intended as teaching, it slides between instruction and direction, or between education and command. Actually, the document caused enormous controversy in the United States where the Democratic Presidential candidate in the 2004 election, John Kerry, was a Catholic. He had said that, although he was personally opposed to abortion he believed ‘that the Constitution protects [women’s] right to choose and to make their own decisions in consultation with their doctor, their conscience, and their God’. A small number of bishops said publicly that he could not receive Communion in their dioceses and many Catholics were confused about whether they could vote for him or not.

The distortions of political, religious and moral divisions in the United States are beyond the scope of this essay, but both Catholic authorities in Rome and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have attempted to resolve
and defuse the issues. Cardinal Ratzinger has said that Catholics may vote for pro-abortion candidates, provided that they vote in that way for reasons other than their stance on abortion. Most bishops indicated a desire to keep the Eucharist out of political debate. On 18 June 2004, the Bishops Conference published ‘Catholics in Political Life’, a statement which remained absolutely clear about Catholic moral teaching but also prudently attempted to defuse the ‘polarizing tendencies of election-year politics’. What the controversy relating to the document shows is just how easily religion and politics can become enmeshed and the types of passions that are then aroused.

On balance, it does appear that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith does have a case to answer. While the Congregation’s role is undoubtedly to teach doctrine and the specific teaching of the Doctrinal Note is more fully summarised in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as the Note itself says, the question remains: Why did the Congregation publish this material in this way, at this time? Was it attempting to address a particular situation in the guise of a universal statement? Whatever it was doing, judged now, was it successful? Were the American issues central to its original intent, or did they just flare up incidentally? Did the Congregation start a debate for which there are no easy answers? If the Congregation did intend to enter into debate about legislation around abortion and other issues to do with the beginning and end of life, was this the best way to do it?

**Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, two distinctions made by Aristotle are helpful. The first is between *despotic* rule and *political* rule; this is the fundamental distinction of the *Politics*. The second is between the best *possible* regime and the best *practicable* regime. Despotic rule is the rule of master over
slave or, in more contemporary language, the rule of master over servant. It can be malign, but it can also be benign – insofar as a prudent master can assiduously look to the good of the whole. What is essential to despotic rule, though, is that the servant does not take part in deliberation about what to do, but simply acts on the orders of a master. Under political rule, by contrast, there are no servants, though all citizens need to know both how to rule and how to be ruled; each participates in deliberation about ends and means and so realises his or her full human potential.

Analysis of the best possible regime allows for fine distinctions and clear definitions concerning political structures and functions, so it is useful to political science. But, as the existence of the best possible regime depends on the consistent availability of exceptionally fine people, it is rarely attainable. The best practicable regime, on the other hand, recognises that a political entity is made up of parts of a population, each of which has different needs and interests that need to be balanced. The essential parts are the rich and the poor, who are always present, and then the particular groups, like farmers, whose functions are proper to the life of the whole. There are, however, all sorts of accidental divisions of parts, or differences that can be found among people, and these, too, have to be balanced. Religion is one source of such division.

Modern democracy, at its best, can be viewed as an attempt to avoid despotism and also to balance the interests of the parts of a society. The art of the politician, therefore, is to achieve the best possible outcome in the face of many possibilities and many competing interests. On the other hand, modern democracies have grown out of revolutions and so have histories that have involved the rejection of things that might have been held precious and also the making of mistakes along the way. Correction comes by means of slow adjustment, but also in response to events and demands.
Religion is an essential activity of the human spirit, but it also fosters institutions that have their own authority structures. Where, as we have seen, a religion claims access to divine authority, an essential conflict arises with political authorities. Modern democracies have attempted to work out this problem—often harshly so, from the point of view of the churches—but their attempts have been limited (and continue to be limited) by the conflicts between the churches following the Reformation. Catholic sensibility calls for a richer understanding of human personhood and life than is commonly accepted in the general community. The church cannot assume agreement but it, too, is party to the discussions and can seek to act persuasively and effectively. It nevertheless carries the burdens of its own wrong turns and history.

**Points for Discussion**

1. What do you see as the main causes of difficulty in the relationships between governments and churches, or between politics and religion? In what ways have you seen this played out in Australia?

2. Are you comfortable with the kind of liberal democracy in which we live? What do you feel are its advantages? What are its disadvantages?

3. Why do we consider human rights to be important? Are there limits to what rights we might claim? What rights are most important?

4. What would it mean to say that Australia is a ‘Christian country’? How would you describe the religious identity of Australia today? Can you compare it with an experience of life in another country?

5. What moral issues in Australian life today concern you the most? Who should deal with these—churches, governments, schools, families? Can you suggest any
helpful strategies? Are there any issues that seem to be beyond resolution, and, if so, why?

6. In what ways have the churches' difficulties in dealing with sexual abuse by clergy affected their credibility in public discussion?
Chapter 3

Acting in the Public Domain

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the church, through its leaders, might engage effectively in public discussion. The first half of the chapter examines, in three sections: the nature of the public domain; the senses in which it is inevitably political; and the role of the media in public discussion. Present in each of these sections is the question of what they might mean for the church. The second half of the chapter focuses on the church’s possibilities for action in the public domain, again in three sections: the right of the church to speak publicly; the limitations posed by the nature of the public domain; and the means that might be used to ensure effective communication. The chapter concludes with the proposal of a model for how a church leader might engage the public domain.

The Public Domain

It is not easy to define the public domain. In the simplest sense, it is simply that area of life in which any of those who, even by chance, hear what is said have some grounds for thinking that they might be either active, or passive, participants in the conversation. It contrasts, therefore, with the private domain and with conversations that might take place in a home or a club with membership rules, or in a family or tribes with stable customs and patterns of action. There is, however, a richer sense of the public domain, namely, space in which human beings come together as free agents capable of speech and interact with one another in ways that go beyond the ordinary and the routine. It is this kind of space – where ideas can be tested, and actions
can be performed - that show people's calibre and lift them above the level of mere animals. But while it is not unstructured - as would be the case in a mere crowd - it is nevertheless open to an unpredictable thought or action which may, in turn, cause people to reshape their perceptions about the things under consideration.\(^2\)

There are several reasons why the church would want to act in this space. In the first instance, it is by nature missionary, and it is in the public domain that the church will most readily find people to whom it might speak. It is also part of the church's mission, secondly, to make the world a better place. In eschatological terms, the church yearns ultimately to be co-extensive with the whole of creation, and there is a sense of urgency to see this brought about. But there are also difficulties: there is good reason to reflect, for example, on Saint Paul's experience before the Council of the Areopagus in Athens, recounted in *Acts* 17: 16-34.\(^3\) (See facing page.) In this passage, we read that Paul moves from the synagogue to the market place and, from there, he is invited to the Areopagus by Council members. Their question to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?' recognises that parts of his teaching might not be available to a non-believing public. Nevertheless, Paul speaks openly about the gospel. In response, some laugh, but a few believe.

The public domain, in the first (simpler) sense used above, is composed, at least potentially, of a whole country, even though much of the population may not be fully engaged in the second (richer) sense, except in areas that affect them directly. This brings up two issues. Firstly, the public domain is inevitably political in the sense that its structure is political, and in the sense that those who call themselves politicians believe they have some responsibility to watch over it. Secondly, modern countries are so large that no-one can simply stand on a hill to make
a speech to the whole population. Rather, what is said in public discussion is mediated by what are called the media. In light of this state of affairs, then, there is a need to investigate the relevant characteristics of both politics and the media.

Saint Paul before the Athenians

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him - though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and
more and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts of the Apostles 17: 16-34)

Two Sides of Politics

The Western tradition understands, and responds to, politics and politicians ambivalently. On the one hand, politics is revered as something at the pinnacle of human activity, and a life ‘in politics’ is lived where things are happening and where good things can be done. The politician’s life is one of achieving consensus among people of differing opinions and interests, and of careful attendance to the details of the life of a community. On the other hand, politics is also thought of as a vicious activity in which people wheel and deal in order to satisfy their own interests, and the interests of their allies. There is plenty of room for manipulation, and the political scene is thought to be substantially devoid of ethics. There is not much in it that would inspire anyone to higher things.

The vicious kind of politics has been best described by Machiavelli in his little book, The Prince (c.1516), where he paints a picture of a successful ruler as one who can bend
to the circumstances and take advantage of any situation. Such a person has 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.' When Machiavelli wrote, however, his inventions were not new: they had been articulated, for instance, by Aristotle in the Politics (in Book V, chapter 11). But while, for Aristotle, such techniques are the means by which a tyrant maintains power, Machiavelli proposes that they should be used by anyone who wants to rule and, further, that they could be used irrespective of any moral considerations, and simply for the sake of gaining and consolidating power.

It is probably not too controversial to say that much of the practice of politics in Australia, at the moment, 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 1970s which has seen politicians do 'whatever it takes'. Whereas prior to that time, a politician caught in skulduggery would have admitted a fault and, for instance, resigned from a ministry, now a politician will simply 'tough it out' or deny the obvious. Coupled with this is the belief that politics in a parliamentary democracy consists largely in attacking the other side, rather than in debating substantial issues in Parliament and in public.

Two issues arise for the church concerning its participation in the public domain. Firstly, if the church is to be 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 leaders have to be careful how they engage in discussions and become tough enough to handle attacks when they come. They will often be at a
disadvantage, because, although they will sometimes be wrong in what they assert, their standard of truth, for the most part, will be higher than that of politicians and they will be held accountable for what they say for far longer than politicians will be. Secondly, if the church does have a role in looking to the moral calibre of the community — as even politicians are saying — the very behaviour of politicians is itself something in which the church will have an interest. This, of course, is very dangerous ground.

The other, more positive side of the political tradition has also been articulated by Aristotle. This is the tradition that 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 is the place where these abilities are exercised. It ought to be both exhilarating and enriching. What is best for human beings is a particular 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 and towns, 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 about how to act. 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.

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 different possibilities. Such judgments — which are of a practical nature — can only take the form of determining what is better (or best): this course of action, or that? This 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 debates about every political decision, the church can keep before people a rich understanding of what constitutes ultimate concerns.

The Media

The media comprise a vigorous and necessary institution in a liberal democracy in which citizens are free to hold, and to express, widely differing beliefs, and in which political consensus is reached through argument and influence. The media are not an official organ of the state nor of any other agency but, rather, an instrument of society. That this is a somewhat uncomfortable position is shown by the difficulties that we encounter around the question of media ownership. Today, the media necessarily make up a huge commercial operation, and so they have to be owned by someone. Yet how much control over a public good can reasonably be given to private interests? On the other hand, government ownership of the media is also problematic, as tussles over the ABC have shown.

The media have two central roles. First, they are the means by which events and opinions of public interest are transmitted in order to enable citizens to make judgments about the matters that affect them. In this role, they are somewhat transparent and endeavour to convey information as accurately as possible. Secondly, they are self-reflective and recognise that members of society, particularly those in power, will try to use them for their own ends. In this role, they are energetic in scrutinising what is said by public figures, in disclosing hidden interests, in unmasking those who wish to appear other than they are, and so on. As journalists themselves understand, in their own code of ethics, ‘disclosure, timely recollection and sceptical questioning by journalists helps us keep our rulers in check and our own complacencies unsettled’.
So long as editorial policy is not dictated by owners of newspapers, or radio or television stations, these basic forms of media correspond to the public domain. Claims can be made, and opinions put, in a forum in which everybody is able to contest what has been said. Of course, not everybody who wants to be heard is listened to, but editors do make efforts to include those views that have merit in one way or another. On the other hand, whatever is said is open to being confuted, either by journalists or by other members of the public. It is, however, a forum in which things move quickly. Deadlines arrive at least daily, and media interest moves on to the next major event, often before a running issue has been resolved. Reports are written quickly, so that the treatment of serious issues often seems superficial to those who know more about the matters under consideration.

It is essential to the nature of the media that they live on excitement. Superficially, this can be explained by the need to ‘sell papers’. Fundamentally, however, it is of the nature of the public domain that free human speech and action will generate interest because of the always-present possibility that important things will change. What the daily media provide is more than necessary information that might be delivered in other ways. It is a field of human action. However, it is important to distinguish between surprise and entertainment. Surprise is the natural reaction to the unexpected and is both proper to human events and part of human attention structures. Entertainment, however, is generated by artifice and directed towards amusement and diversion. The drift in news presentation and public affairs commentary from being a medium of surprise, to being a provider of entertainment, is akin to a slide into that ancient enemy of philosophy - sophistry - according to which the fun of argument is more important than finding the truth. Entertainment is easier to produce and generates ready profits, but serious questions surround
the integrity of media organisations that substitute entertainment for serious journalism.

The media have their own particular dysfunctionality. The speed at which news is gathered and disseminated and the desire to 'get the scoop' on a story make for mistakes, and for failure to take all relevant information into account. When journalists focus singularly on the function of unmasking deception, rather than on their primary task of transmitting speech and action, their reporting becomes skewed, and, if their attitude is resoundingly negative, they can be seen to be denigrating all public actors and demeaning public life. Although the media are to some extent self-correcting - because journalists will criticise one another for inaccuracies - reliance on this mechanism rather than on careful scrutiny of sources leads easily to untruthful reporting. All these factors, for the purposes of this discussion, underlie reasons for dealing carefully with the public media.

There are, of course, new forms of media driven by the development of electronic and digital technologies that we are still learning to understand and use. Does the posting of a document on the internet engage the public media? Or is such an act more akin to the publication of a book or a journal? While a posting can be done in ways that provoke the attention of the public media, especially if it is accompanied with media releases, engagement is enhanced by interactivity and increased accessibility. Thus, if the site of publication provides means for ongoing interaction between parties who wish to contribute to a discussion, such an internet posting can be regarded as engaging the public media, but if not, the act is more akin to publication. On the other hand, the increased accessibility of documents on the web (compared to, for example, the print media) and the ease of finding them by means of search engines, have created a significantly new situation.
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 the 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 that is often felt to be problematic. Many in society believe that they do not fall under such authority and they also find it difficult to deal with an authority that is neither democratic nor representative.

Three general kinds of objection are raised about the church's speaking in the public domain. The first, and most 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 practise religion, it has no place for religion in its affairs. The second has to do with claims about the church's speaking badly and in ways which leaves people unable to relate to it - failure to recognise people's concerns, failure to argue well or to consider all the issues, the maintenance of a holier-than-thou attitude. However, the third kind of objection is more superficial - rejection by people of views contrary to their own, or general irritation with all religion. We will deal with the first objection now and leave the second for later, in connection with a discussion of persuasion (see pp. 69 ff.).

The arguments against the first objection - that the state has no place for religion in its affairs - rest largely on the grounds that the state needs institutions like the churches. Firstly, the modern state - 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 rather than free agents
tends to concentrate power to itself in ways that lead towards absolutism; and this, in the twentieth century, erupted in some 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 of this mission, especially insofar as it affects them. In other words, the church needs to work by persuasion, rather than by authority. It is one voice among many, and 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 the churches. It is hard to imagine what might replace it.

Finally, the church has an attitude that serves as a corrective for 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, nevertheless, it is a radically different one from the one it had in Christendom.
It does not have public authority, and, in a culture like ours, the presumption by the church of authority is likely to incite adverse reactions. It does nevertheless have weight, which it gains from its intellectual tradition, its moral standing and the allegiance of its members.

**What Limitations Might the Public Arena Impose on the Church?**

Although the church wishes to act in the public domain and, as has been argued, has a right to do so, the nature of the public domain – and, indeed, the nature of the church and its mission – imposes limitations on how the church might be able to act effectively in that domain and, more particularly, on how it might respond to issues that can in any way be termed political. Some points can be made under three headings: superficiality in the media, cutthroat politics, and indeterminate publication.

Things happen quickly in the public media as journalists jostle for the best story and rush to meet deadlines. The media runs on excitement, and its attention can quickly shift as another event or issue comes to the surface. Although there is potential for the church, by engaging the media, to reach many more people than it might through speaking only to its own congregations, or through its own publications, if it chooses to engage the media it is going to have to live in the accompanying environment. Three questions arise. Firstly, how much of what the church has to say is amenable to this kind of discussion? The riches of a two thousand year tradition rooted in revelation are unlikely to be exposed adequately in a short article. On the other hand, there may be ways in which media exposure might draw attention to more substantial sources of that tradition, such as major incidents in the life of Jesus. Secondly, to engage in the public domain, in turn, brings justifiable scrutiny from other players in that domain. Are church leaders able to stand that scrutiny, or do they expect
information to flow in only one direction? Thirdly, can the church properly indulge in the kind of tricks that are used to get media attention? As was shown in chapter 1, media releases that pander to the controversial can distract from what is serious and also backfire.

The cutthroat nature of politics, especially in its Machiavellian phase, makes it tough ground for church leaders, who are educated to have different sensibilities from politicians. Yet the church is likely to have significant contributions to make in the more positive, or classical, side of politics. It is unfortunate that, for example, in the incidents that we reviewed in chapter 1, Alexander Downer read Peter Carnley’s press releases rather than his Synod address, which contained profound thought on shifts in religion in the world and on the consequences for peace and stability. In attempting to determine where church leaders may venture and where they may not, the distinction between what is partisan, in the sense of party-political, and what is not, is often used. It has merit but fails, insofar as particular abuses which the church might challenge are generally committed by one party or another, and more usually by a particular government. While it is true that church leaders should not promote one party over another for its own sake, often they will be in conflict with a particular party simply on the basis of its policies. It is rare that one can make any meaningful statement in politics without offending one party or another. Perhaps the distinction between Machiavellian manoeuvring, on the one hand, and sustained examination of the deeper issues proper to political discussion, on the other, would be a more useful means of drawing a line. An alternative distinction between policy – which can readily be contested – and details of its implementation, can also be used. However, when the church’s legitimate interests are at stake, its leaders may have to brave the cut and thrust of the political arena.
Events in North America suggest that the question of what does, or does not, constitute party-political activity by churches may become more pressing. During the 2004 United States presidential election, Christian fundamentalist churches, particularly in the south of the country, became vigorously active in electoral campaigning. The Bush administration seems to have taken little exception to this, but then the political advantage was mostly their way. On the other hand, it is reported that, during the 2004 Canadian election, Canadian Revue Agency officials summoned legal representatives of church groups and told them that, if they engaged in partisan political activity during the election, they would risk losing their tax-exempt status. It is claimed that the Agency defined being partisan as 'addressing issues on which the competing political parties have opposing views'. However, two issues arise here. Firstly, if the report is true, the tactics of the government were extremely brutal, and the attempt to silence the churches should have become an election issue itself. Secondly, the politics of any pre-election period is very strange and does, no doubt, call for restraint on the part of the churches, whose goals are necessarily longer term.

Finally, something needs to be said about publication itself. The church has largely accepted the belief of modernity that publication is good, at least in terms of doctrine, if not in terms of the details of its own internal affairs. Yet it has not always thought in this way. Thomas Aquinas argues that certain doctrines ought not to be published in writing unless this can be done in language whose obscurity conceals what is being said. This is for two reasons: firstly, in order that non-believers be unable to deride what is sacred; secondly, in order that those believers who are unable to understand the more difficult aspects of the faith are not deprived of their simple belief. Such thoughts are far from modern consciousness, yet what Thomas says – and what Plato says, earlier, in the *Phaedrus*,
reproduced below – point perhaps to sensitivities that have been lost. Should, for example, the Eucharist become a major issue in a political campaign? Should debates about the Trinity, or the resurrection, be waged in the public press and become matter for late-night television comedy skits?

Socrates: You know, Phaedrus, that’s the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn’t know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.

Can the Church Speak Persuasively in the Public Domain?

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 turn in search of principles that will assist the church in its action.

In The Art of Rhetoric (Book II, chapter 1), Aristotle points out that people believe others 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. And those who dislike us, or are our enemies, will mislead us in order to harm us. These are the hard lessons of life. Viewed positively, though, 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 along these lines. But while the judgments about knowledge, virtue and goodwill are made primarily in the categories of the society to which the hearers belong, in the case of the church, 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 Aristotle’s analysis to explore how a member of the church might speak persuasively in the public domain. But questions have to be asked in the person of the hearer, and they are best put negatively. So, then: Who may be regarded as an ignorant person? Who, a bad person? And who, an enemy?

An ignorant person will be one who does not know what they are 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 the argument depends on articles of belief that are not held by the 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 all their findings, and so we need to tread a careful path. At the same time, we have to show a sound knowledge of the breadth and depth 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 towards 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 others' freedom. Rather, if we wish to guide or direct such people in 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 all persons as being made in the image of God. At the same time, we need to show that we live at peace within 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 do it. It is not however impossible, especially when we are motivated by a desire to be effective in what we do. Accordingly, the panel below suggests questions which we may usefully ask when preparing, or receiving, an address – whether in writing or in speech.

Principles of Rhetoric:  
Ten Fundamental Questions

The persuasive power of any speech or written work may be developed or tested – in their preparation or delivery – by asking the following questions:

1. What is the *occasion* of the speech? How does this affect what has to be said and the manner of saying it? What opportunities does it offer? What kind of an edge does it bring to the situation? In what sense am I ‘on the line’? What really is at issue? What is the state of the question?

2. Who are the members of my *audience*? What do I know about them? Whom do I address here? Can I appeal to their interests? What emotional factors can I bring to bear? To what differences do I need to be sensitive? Is this audience likely to be friendly, hostile or neutral towards what I wish to say?

3. What is my *purpose*? What is my speech’s function? What are its intended effects? Why am I troubling to say something in the first place?

4. What are my strategies of *argument*? Do my resources of persuasion exhaust the possibilities? What further kinds of argument—logical proof, factual evidence, examples, personal appeals, analogies—would be useful and appropriate?

5. What is to be my implied *character*? What kind of person is believable in these circumstances? To what degree can I authentically be that person? What kinds of ethos do I
project? Is what I am proposing authentic – true, just, ethical?

6. What is my design? How shall I arrange my speech? What is an appropriate structure for the speech?

7. What are my stylistic resources? What graces and subtleties of language shall I use? What figurative language shall I employ for vividness and concreteness? How can I amplify the more important points? What kind of language is appropriate to the circumstances, the audience and myself as speaker?

8. Have I achieved cohesion? Have I made the connections among the parts clear to my listeners?

9. What manner of delivery (spoken) or presentation (written) is appropriate?

10. What kind of a speech is it – deliberative, forensic or display? Do the arguments and style fit the kind?¹²

Finding Models

The matters raised in this chapter and, indeed, in chapter 2, are complex, and it is reasonable to ask how a person might attend to them all at the same time, especially when most people who might speak for the church work under pressure and daily face many conflicting demands. In addition, the opportunity to speak publicly often arises in such a way that it is accompanied with its own severe pressures, whether they arise from conflict or tragedy or misunderstanding. The necessary skills for speaking persuasively in the public domain can, of course, be learnt by experience and by teaching, and their application profits from both natural capacity and practice or habituation. Even chance plays a significant role in every life. One way of seeing all these elements working together, however, is to find models – in other words, people who have done exceptionally well. This is one of the roles of biographical writing.
It is reasonable to suggest that Sir William Deane in his role as Governor-General (1996 - 2001) is an excellent model for how a church leader might act in the public domain in Australia at the present time. Deane's appointment made him a very public figure as Head of State and yet placed him under severe restrictions about what he might say, due to the constitutional relationship between the Governor-General and the Government. Yet, in a very short time he managed to capture the hearts of many Australians and to fulfil the roles of both civil and religious leader. From the Catholic point of view, we saw Catholic social teaching in action and in a way that inspired many. How did he do it?

At the beginning of his term, Deane said in an interview that the only power he would have would be the power of persuasion. In one sense, however, this is not true, because the Governor-General has significant constitutional powers; but seen in relation to what he took to be his public role - 'to present the nation to itself' - it makes a great deal of sense. Deane understood the binary nature of authority, which can be defined as power legitimated. Legitimation comes in two ways: through some form of law or investiture, and through the human response to a person's speech and action. Deane saw that, even though the office gave him both brief and opportunity to act in the public domain, his success would depend not on the authority that he gained from office, but on his effectiveness in reaching the hearts and minds of all Australians.

Deane was not without his political detractors, though - particularly those in the Howard Government who were irritated by his involvement in Aboriginal reconciliation and by his advocacy for the dispossessed in our society. Nevertheless, he carefully kept out of political debates about public policy and dealt evenly with persons of all political persuasions. The thing that most endeared him to Australians - and ensured that they listened to him - was his presence following important and particularly difficult
moments: Port Arthur, Childers, Thredbo and the canyon in Switzerland. His words were usually simple but exquisitely timed and appropriate to what the nation was feeling. He understood symbols, such as when he took sprigs of wattle to Switzerland after the canyoning disaster; and he generally saw that prayer accompanied his addresses on these occasions. Deane managed to combine the quiet unassuming manner that Australians prefer in their leaders with the ability always to be present and active when needed.

Conclusion

By attempting to engage the public domain, church leaders enter a space that is very different from that of their churches. It is harsher and less predictable, and runs according to different rules. There is, nevertheless, good reason for the church to have a voice in the public domain because it believes that it has a mission to the whole world, and because it has things to say that will improve the lot of men and women, even in a world that is not fully Christian. Church leaders need to learn, therefore, how to act effectively in a world that is different from their churches and that does not understand them in the same way that those in their churches might.

Points for Discussion

1. What lessons can we draw from the account of Saint Paul’s visit to Athens in Acts 17: 16-34?

2. What differences of character would you expect to find between church leaders and politicians? How do these differences relate to what they do?

3. Can you think of instances in which the church has been fairly or unfairly treated in the media? How is it treated, on average? How might it improve the way it is treated?
4. Describe some of the most effective public interventions by church leaders that you can remember. Describe some of the ineffective interventions. Why did they succeed or fail? What were the differences?

5. In what areas of contemporary Australian life would you like to see the churches influence public opinion and government policy? How might this be done?

6. What do Australians look for in leaders generally, and in church leaders in particular? What qualities would you like to see in your next bishop or parish priest?
What Can the Preacher Say?

This chapter will conclude our investigation from chapter 2, concerning the relationship between religion and politics; and from chapter 3, concerning the question of what the church can say in public discussion. It will first examine what might be said within the confines of a church by distinguishing the essential parts of the Christian homily, and by asking what might be appropriately said in that context. It will then broaden its focus to consider speech by church leaders in the public domain. The reason for proceeding in this way is that the homily is both the mode of speech most appropriate to ministers of the gospel, and the mode of speech most determined by who they are and the context in which they function. Whereas chapter 3 started from the point of view of the public domain itself, this chapter begins from the nature of ecclesial discourse. The principles proper to this mode of speech will shed some light on discourse which is more public.

The Essential Parts of the Christian Homily

The General Instruction on the Roman Missal, which outlines norms for the celebration of liturgy in the Catholic Church, says that the homily 'should be an exposition of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or from the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners'. This gives us a clue to the two essential parts of any homily. First, a homily should 'develop some point of the readings'. This can be called 'the articulation of the gospel'. Secondly, 'the homilist should keep in mind ... the needs of the particular
community'. This can be called 'engagement with the concerns of the congregation'. In addition, mindful of the context in which words are being spoken, namely the celebration of the Eucharist, a preacher is necessarily bound to speak with some dignity and in tune with the sacred moment.

Articulation of the gospel in a Sunday homily is a task different from many other acts of speech, because the preacher is not charged with generating a new and original thought but, rather, with discerning what God is saying through the Scriptures and in the context of the present moment. In one sense, the preacher is let off the hook because it is God's word that is active, but, in another sense, a real challenge exists to come to terms with what God might be saying. Preparation involves both study and prayer. Ordinarily, 'gospel' means the readings and prayers of the liturgy of the day, but there are also other resources to be considered, namely those of the church's tradition and of all the learning on which the church has drawn in developing that tradition. Hence, on occasions, such as great feasts, a homily may draw more deeply on theological sources; and at times of particular need, it can draw on all of the human arts and sciences that are in tune with the gospel.

The imperative to engage with the concerns of the congregation recognises that the preacher must 'connect with real life'. The gospel is not merely an historical text but, rather, a living word that offers something for each particular life and for each particular community. Using the term 'concern' rather than 'need' recognises that people pay attention when things are said about what concerns them and that, in a democratic world, people believe that they should exercise their own judgment about what they need. For the preacher to assume a knowledge of people's needs without first listening can appear patronising, though this does not at all limit preaching to merely what people
want. Concerns that are forgotten can be raised, and problems that are denied can be brought to light. That the concerns are those of a particular community means that the preacher must know the congregation well - and that homilies meant for one community may not be suitable for another.

A homily, then, is composed of two parts - one articulating the gospel; the other, the concerns of the congregation. To say that they are essential parts means that neither should be lacking. A simply structured homily might spend equal time on each, though each would necessarily inform the other. Which part comes first can change with time and circumstances, and in homilies of a more complex structure, the two can be interwoven. Circumstances of the moment may also lead to an apparent imbalance. If the community's concerns were singularly heightened due to an event, such as a large scale accident or natural disaster, it might be appropriate to spend more time on their concerns than on the readings of the day. If the community were calm and settled, and the readings particularly rich, there might be room for a sustained reflection on the gospel that largely assumed the concerns of the community. What is essential for any homily, though, is that the word of God be opened up in such a way that it touches the lives of those in the community.

There are three obvious ways in which homilies fail. Firstly, preachers sometimes get lost in their own concerns, rather than attending to those of the community. Such preachers have not got beyond themselves, their own interests and opinions, or the latest thing that has happened to them. Secondly, preachers sometimes articulate the gospel - either from the readings, or from some other Christian source - but do it without any reference to the concerns of the community. Homilies based on a church document or a mere exegesis of the gospel text, without reference to the community's concerns, would fail in this
way. Thirdly, preachers sometimes get lost in the concerns of the community but fail to bring the light of the gospel to them. A funeral homily, for instance, that concentrated only on loss and grief or only on the life of the deceased, without at least gently directing the community towards the hope of the resurrection, would fail in this way.

Each of these failures shows up the need for adequate preparation of a homily. It is necessary to study the Scriptures and to engage with the concerns of the community; the two come together through prayer and reflection. The most consistent difficulty for a preacher is to know what to say; this is an impossible question to face the night before a homily is due. However, habits of advanced preparation and thought and a genuine knowledge and love of a community, usually ensure that by the time of final preparation a preacher is eager to speak. Finding the right words can, of course, be very difficult, if the preacher is a visitor who does not know the community.

The Homily and Matters of Political Moment

Might, then, a homily include material of the kind that is called ‘political’? The answer is surely Yes – if the homily meets the current concerns of the particular community and if the gospel is able to shed light on those concerns. It is, in fact, difficult to imagine how a preacher could fail to mention events such as those covered in chapter 1 – the terrorist attacks in the United States, the Bali bombing, the Iraq war – at the times when they were most affecting people in the community. The kind of treatment, though, would depend on the ability of the preacher and on the sensibilities of the community, and could range from a brief mention, and a call to prayer, to a more sustained reflection. In line with the dignity of the moment, the voice of the preacher, however, would need to remain the voice of one ministering the gospel, rather than of one engaged in political debate.
My Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent 2003, reproduced below, is an example of a homily that did enter into discussion of political matters. In a number of ways, it is an extreme example. It was not delivered to a normal parish community but, rather, in a special Mass for a group of about fifty people, all of whom were seriously engaged in issues of social justice – and in work for reconciliation with Aboriginal Peoples, in particular – just seventeen days after the commencement of the war in Iraq. On the day, it was well received, and people spoke afterwards of their relief that what was most troubling them at the moment had been addressed – and in terms that enabled them to think about the future. Was this homily appropriate for the liturgical setting, albeit under exceptional circumstances? Was it fair that someone speaking in a sense for the church would speak about matters of high political import in this way?

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent 2003

I wish to begin today by considering the situation in which we find ourselves, namely, the situation of being newly involved in a war. We are involved in it whenever we listen to or watch the news on radio or television and whenever we read the newspaper. We are involved in it, because our country, the Commonwealth of Australia, has sent troops to fight in that war.

I assume in speaking that I am among people for whom justice is a pre-eminent interest and that their interest is not just in some abstract sense of justice. Rather, I expect that people in this church know that justice is often not found in the halls of power or even in the institutions of justice but that it must be fought for in places where the marginalised and the dispossessed are found.

What, then, can we say about this war, which is all around us and in which we have somehow been implicated by the actions of our government? I wish to say three things.
Firstly, as the Holy Father said in a speech on January 13, '[War] is always a defeat for humanity.' To be human is to have the resources of mind and spirit to act in ways and to develop institutions that enable us to live in peace and solidarity with one another and in this shrunken modern world to do so between nations. Merely to enter war is to acknowledge failure in respect of what we can do and what we can be.

Secondly, I have argued elsewhere that this war is immoral, and I hold this very strongly. Granted that human affairs do come apart in ways that make force and violence seem useful tools, strict criteria have to be met, if the use of such force is to be moral. In this case, the act of entering into war by the coalition failed on almost every criterion. We often disagree about moral judgments, but in this case I find myself in agreement with most religious leaders and even with people like ex-President Jimmy Carter.

Thirdly, the war appears to be illegal. Again, people disagree about questions of law, and they can be finally tested only in the relevant courts. What is extraordinary in this war is that while the governments involved seem to get positive answers from their own lawyers, most independent expert and academic advice insists that the war is illegal.

Each of these conditions - defeat or failure, immorality, illegality - remains irrespective of the outcome of the war. They would not have been taken away by a short sharp war without many casualties and a glorious liberation of the people of Iraq. In fact, however, they are being compounded daily by death and destruction wrought by remote military technicians and by gun-happy ground forces.

It is a dark dismal picture, and it is reasonable that we should feel depressed and angry about it all. We cannot put it away from ourselves because the pictures are daily or hourly there before us and because our own government
is implicated. We should not ignore it, but we can attempt to console one another and to come to terms with the situation in which we find ourselves. I will make four responses.

Firstly, for this community, all of whom are united in the search for Aboriginal reconciliation, it should be no surprise that a government that turned its back on reconciliation and refused to acknowledge that past governments had acted wrongly towards Aboriginal Peoples might now act with similar injustice, both in its treatment of asylum seekers and in its readiness to wage unjustified war.

Secondly, this situation does call us to action. We have means of political response and we have prayer. I will leave you to explore the means of political response, but I suggest that we turn our prayer today towards the rectification of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Thirdly, in Plato’s wonderful ‘Allegory of the Cave’, in which the philosopher comes to be by being led out of the darkness of the cave to see the light, Plato insists that he must return to life in the cave because most life takes place in the shadows. We have lived through some decades in which the light has seemed available to us. Now we are being led by the masters of shadows, and in the darkness we must remember the light.

Fourthly, in the context of the prayers and readings of our Mass today, this is the world for which Christ died. It was to a world like this that the Son of Man was sent, to be lifted up on a cross so that he might draw us all to himself (John 12: 20–33). Perhaps when we participate in the remembrance and re-enactment of this event at Easter, the present situation of our lives will say to us that Christ’s reconciling action is more needed than ever.

It is worth asking whether this homily might have been given appropriately at a Sunday Mass in an ordinary parish. There are good arguments against this. Not all parishioners
would be as concerned about the war as was the congregation described above. Some parishioners might well support Australia's action in going to war. A number of people could feel very strongly one way or the other. Perhaps, the homily is too weighted in favour of current concern rather than the Scripture readings of the day, which ought to provide spiritual nourishment for everybody. Nevertheless, it is also worth asking whether the homily might have been adapted for an ordinary Sunday congregation. The church, after all, does have a rich tradition of teaching on the morality of war, and the Pope and the Australian bishops had taken strong positions on the morality of this particular war. Such tradition and positions could, then, be presented not as arguments in a debate, but as an explanation of what the church teaches. Most important would be the suggestion of responses to the situation - prayer and reflection on the paschal mystery.

There are, of course, other ways of dealing with matters of major current public concern. The particular subject matter for my Homily for the Marriage of Murray and Jackie, reproduced opposite, was determined as much by world events as it was by things particular to the marriage itself. Jackie and Murray had carefully chosen a day that they thought would be a good day for a wedding, little knowing that on 11 September 2001 - twelve days before their scheduled wedding - Al Qaeda would crash aircraft into commercial and military buildings in the United States. Could this event - which cast gloom over the whole world - have been ignored, even in a wedding homily? Surely not, because, for the preacher to fail to deal with what was most pressing on people's minds at the time, would have left it hanging in the air as a distraction that would trivialise whatever else might be said, and even the wedding itself. Nevertheless, the Christian tradition is rich in resources, and, with a little imagination, it can be brought to bear even gently on almost any situation.
Homily for the Marriage of Murray and Jackie

As we gather to celebrate the marriage of Murray and Jackie, we cannot but be aware of the clouds that are gathering around us - clouds of war in response to the terrorism unleashed in the United States under two weeks ago. In this context, I want to propose to you that we think about the marriage of Jackie and Murray as an act of hope and as an act that should give hope to us all.

Hope is a kind of desire, but it is a special kind. We do not hope for frivolous things. Writing in the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas defined the special nature of hope on the basis of the kinds of things that we hope for. He suggested that the things for which we hope have four distinct characteristics.

We hope only for good things. Perhaps this goes without saying, and the opposite of hope in this sense is fear of evil. We hope only for things that are in the future. We take joy in things that are present. We hope only for things that are arduous or difficult to achieve. It does not make sense to hope for trifles. Finally, we hope only for things that are possible. In this sense, the opposite of hope is despair.

I have not asked Murray and Jackie what their hopes are in terms of this kind of analysis. In fact, they can speak for themselves later, and there are many things that they might say. At the basis of them all, however, will be a hope something like this: to be able to live a life together so that at the end of life they will be better persons than if they had lived alone and will have made the world a better place.

Today we see not the fulfilment of this hope but the promise; we participate in a beginning, not in an ending. In a few moments, Jackie and Murray will articulate that promise in the vows they make to one another. We will all be witnesses as by so doing they confer the sacrament of marriage on one another.
The life they are entering offers much to hope for. They hope for something that is good - human excellence and the happiness that will flow from it both for themselves and for their children. They hope for something in the future - what they are to become is yet to be achieved and will be measured towards the end of their lives. They hope for something that will be difficult. Human beings, although they need one another, do not live together easily. Achievement will demand self-denial and accommodation of one another’s needs and aspirations in differing circumstances. We know of failure in marriage, and we also know, in the absence of failure, of lack of success. Finally, they hope for something that is possible. There are many good examples of such a life lived well around them, and I am happy to attest that they have begun well by attending marriage preparation courses and by talking carefully with one another.

What we are witnessing today is not only an act of hope; it is a sign of hope for us all.

Hope falls differently to different ages. Young children do not hope. They are full of desires and wishes, for which they expect ready satisfaction from parents, aunts and uncles and grandparents. Young adults are full of hope, and their eyes are set on the future. In midlife, hopes are worked out, and life is often arduous. With maturity, comes enjoyment of those things that have been achieved. In old age, hope is for others, except for that final hope, the hope for divine things and for eternal life, the hope where all hopes lead.

There are many things indicated in this marriage for us all to hope for. We hope that we might all lead good lives. We hope that human beings might be able to live together. We hope that our Christian community might be vigorous and harmonious. In fact, in his Letter to the Ephesians (5: 31-32), Saint Paul suggested that the fact that people can live well together in marriage is a sign that the church can be a community based on love. We hope that the world might be at peace. We hope that each of us will one day be with God in eternal life.
There is one final hope that I want to mention today. When Jackie and Murray bring children into the world, those children will see the world afresh, and they will live to make it good. As each of us has journeyed through life, we have learnt things and formed habits that enable us to act easily and well, but even that learning and those habits cut us off from being able to adapt easily to new situations and new circumstances. When children come into the world, they take the world as they find it and work their lives out from there. That is how human life renews itself.

What Can the Preacher Say in the Public Domain?

When a church leader speaks in the public domain, he or she is inevitably thought of as a preacher. While this does carry negative connotations in our society, and so indicates a need for care about how things are said, it can also be taken in a positive way. The preacher is someone who, starting from the word of God, has something serious to say about the issues that concern us. This is where a bishop is different from both a politician, who is engaged in the short-term political fights of the moment, and a Christian citizen, who lives and acts in private and public roles according to his or her faith. To be called 'the preacher' in this way is both an invitation to speak and a limitation on how one might speak. The invitation is to bring the light of the gospel to the issues of major concern in the society in a way that is more direct than the ways that an ordinary Christian citizen may be able to do. It is a long-term project. The limitations have to do with staying in that role and avoiding the difficulties that it presents.

The Catholic Church's most successful intervention in the public domain, in the long term, has been the articulation of its social justice teaching. Beginning with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, and affirmed by the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the*
Church in the Modern World, this tradition has sought to identify the kinds of injustice that have led to human suffering and misery, and it has sought to propose the rectification of that injustice on the grounds of the dignity of the human person, and on those of the importance of human community. Although there are exceptions, this tradition has not tended to engage politically, either in the sense of proposing constitutional solutions, or in the sense of indicating political means. Rather, taking the tradition as a social doctrine, the Catholic Church has projected an idea of the good of human life, both personally and communally, and invited all who would listen to find the means with which to realise their full human potential. The advantage of this teaching is that it does speak to the concerns of modern women and men, who, even if they disagree with some of its conclusions, cannot fail to recognise it as a serious contribution to discussion about difficult problems.

However, apart from Catholic teaching on social justice, other areas of Catholic thinking are less amenable to exposure in the public domain. For, apart from the very public identification with the person and life of Jesus Christ, matters of faith and of religious practice more properly belong to believers, and their public broadcast risks invitation to defile the sacred. Many expect that the Church will give significant leadership in the moral life, yet that has become a very difficult area. On the one hand, secular society suffers from the lack of congruity between conflicting moral theories and the insistence that every person find their own way. On the other hand, to the degree that the church is perceived to have let its attention become fixed on issues surrounding sexuality – while, at the same time, it has failed to deal well with child sexual abuse by members of the clergy – it has lost much of its credibility. It is hard to know the way out of this dilemma, but it may be that only the knowledge of exemplary lives, and the sight of an institution that can be constantly compassionate and
that can renew itself, will again enliven interest in what the church has to say in this area – let alone others.

Most church leaders have at best an ambivalent attitude to the media, and are commonly averse to dealing with it at all – often because they have had their fingers burnt. There are other ways to enter into public discussion, such as through publication in print, or on a website of documents first directed to a smaller audience. If, however, church leaders are to deal with the media, they have to do so openly and truthfully. It is foolish to believe that one can use the media for one’s own purposes without coming under its scrutiny, even with the use of public relations advice. Further, there is little use in publishing a press release and then refusing an interview. Nevertheless, journalists are a mixed crowd, and it is important to know who among them deal fairly with issues and who do not do so.

Church leaders who do engage in discussion of issues in the public domain will, from time to time, come into conflict with politicians. This is not necessarily a bad thing, though church leaders are better out of the cut and thrust of daily manoeuvring; and they lose credibility as religious leaders if they become known for colluding with the interests of any one party. The issues which were raised in chapter 1 – war, treatment of asylum seekers, terrorism – are surely issues on which churches should have significant and informative views. Although politicians will inevitably dispute views that do not support their policies, it is fair to argue that they should seek the advice of churches on such issues – the first two as serious moral issues, and the third as an issue of public urgency which is inextricably connected with religion. Still, the world of politics is harsh, and church leaders are often not skilled enough or tough enough to engage in it.

The churches, along with other institutions of civil society, like trade unions and sporting associations, do stand
both in relation to, and in opposition to, governments. There is much that such civic institutions and governments do together, but in political systems in which power can be centralised and concentrated in the ways seen in twentieth century totalitarianism, the institutions of civil society provide important checks on the use of power. When events make times difficult, this can lead to a stand-off. The government alone has the sole power of legislating and so could affect negatively the functioning of the churches, yet a government has to survive an election every few years and this would be difficult if it acted too harshly. There is, therefore, always going to be debate between religious leaders and politicians; and there is every reason to encourage religious leaders to enter these debates courageously, truthfully and cleverly.

Conclusion

We saw earlier, in chapter 3, that church leaders who wish to venture into public discussion of political issues need to learn how to act effectively in that environment. Yet when they do so venture, they remain people of the church. Their message necessarily continues to be one of articulating the gospel as it speaks to the concerns of those to whom the church wishes to speak. A church leader should, therefore, never attempt to take the role of a politician but remain a preacher. Nevertheless, the scope of what may be said will be determined not by a narrow view of what is religious, and what is not, but by the actual concerns of the people addressed and by the power of the gospel to inform those concerns.

Points for Discussion

1. Recall some of the best sermons or homilies that you have heard. What made them so good?

2. Recall some of the worst sermons or homilies that you have heard. What made them so bad?
3. What would you like to say to your own preacher about the way he or she preaches?

4. How would you like church leaders to 'come across' when they speak on political issues in the public domain?

5. Recall a situation in which you disagreed with some of the positions stated in an address by a church person. How did the speaker cope with the possibility that some listeners might disagree? How did you cope with what was said?

6. Can you suggest areas of public discussion in which you would like church leaders to speak up more often and more strongly?

7. What kinds of education and training do you think church leaders need, if they are to perform well in the public domain?

8. What insights have you drawn from reading this book? What questions still concern you?
Epilogue:

What Can the Church Say?

The church does have something to say in the public domain. Its mission is to take the message of Jesus Christ to all people. It is also serious in its reflection on human life and destiny, and, because of this, it can speak meaningfully even to those without religious faith. As an institution, it stands in relation to governments as a significant provider of services and as one ready to speak out for the dispossessed.

The church needs care, however, in the manner in which it speaks in the public domain. Church leaders will be acknowledged as authorities within their own institutions - which are respected organisations of civil society - but they will not necessarily be regarded as having authority outside those institutions. Public interventions call for persuasion rather than command, and a great deal of imagination is needed in choosing how to speak effectively. Care needs to be taken about what issues are to be raised and when to do so. What is said should be an articulation of the gospel, rather than raw political opinion. Hence, while churches must necessarily, at times, take positions that one political party or another rejects, nonetheless, they should never be partisan in the sense of promoting one party over another for its own sake. Election periods in particular call for extra sensitivity.

There are, however, areas that church leaders should avoid. The cut and thrust, and the manner, of daily political contest and wrangling are likely to demean the gospel, and, in addition, those who are well formed in Christian ministry are unlikely to be suited to that environment.
But granted all this, there will be times when the church must speak out, even in the face of significant opposition. At such times its leaders need to speak clearly and unapologetically and to make themselves available in the forums in which debate takes place. This will necessarily entail their learning how to work with the public media.

The relationship between politics and religion is essentially difficult: there will generally be a lack of ease in situations upon which both come to bear, and occasionally conflict will break out. Nevertheless, over a long period, accommodations have been made, and, even though they are of a prudential nature and subject to change, they have enabled settlements that allow both politicians and church leaders to act with confidence. There is good reason both to respect and to maintain the balance found in these settlements, because breaking them leads to confusion and conflict. Moreover, disrupting them could easily set off a series of changes that would result in the imposition of much worse arrangements.


Notes

Chapter 1


3 As quoted in the lecture; see also ABC Online, AM – Saturday, 19 October 2002, www.abc.net.au.

4 Measured, though clearly opposed, statements were made by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council and by various bishops and prominent Catholics. Bishop Pat Power in Canberra was more active, as was Melbourne’s Catholic Commission for Justice Development and Peace. One can search www.cathnews.com for details.

5 See Bruce Duncan, War on Iraq: Is it Just?, Catholic Social Justice Series no. 47 (Sydney: ACSJC, 2003). The lasting virtue of this little work is that it carefully summarised the arguments both for going to war and for avoiding war, at the time of the commencement of the war.


9 Downer’s criticism was: ‘Here was the head of my own church, reported by the ABC as rushing to judgement and blaming the Australian Government for bombing incidents in which so many of our people were killed or terribly injured. ... There was no concentration on comforting the victims and their families, no binding up of the broken-hearted while a shocked nation mourned.’

10 Downer does modify his comments with the sentence, ‘Whether this report was fair or not, it struck me hard.’ Later in the lecture he quotes from the Primate’s press release of 18 October, but takes it as coming after, not before, the radio interview. There, he also refers to Carnley as
having to backtrack, which may refer to Carnley’s letter to *The Australian* on 29 October 2002. This was also published as a press release linked to the Synod Charge - www.perth.anglican.org/archbishop/media_2002/pressrelease_021030.htm. Clearly, Downer is confused about the exact nature of Carnley’s statements and has not been well served by his researchers. This brings out the imbalance of the dialogue. At the time of the controversy, Downer was performing as a politician in a running, and sometimes furious, debate. Carnley was writing and delivering scholarly and reflective thought on the contemporary issue, but signalled this to the media in a provocative way. Ten months later, Downer gave what was made to appear as a serious lecture in a prestigious academic institution, but he was still functioning largely as a politician on the run.


The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference election statement, ‘Having Confidence in Democracy: Building a Better Australia’, www.catholic.org.au, was a statement of general principle and raised little comment. Bishop Kevin Manning’s pastoral letter, ‘Your Vote is Important’, *Outlook*, September 2004, was a much more pointed call to Catholics in the Parramatta Diocese to vote with their consciences rather than simply to seek their own economic interests. This was a cleverly written letter that did enter into difficult issues of the day while refraining from encouraging votes for one party or another. It was reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 7 September 2004. In his ‘Presidential Address’ to the 2004 Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Perth on 2 October 2004, Archbishop Peter Carnley addressed the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia and the aftermath of the war in Iraq as issues needing serious thought by Christians (www.perth.anglican.org/synod%5F2004/). He was roundly attacked by an editorial in *The Australian* on 6 October 2004, which repeated Downer’s Playford criticisms without taking into serious consideration what Carnley had actually said.


20 ‘Church not taking sides says Howard’ The Sydney Morning Herald, 2 October 2004.


Chapter 2


3 Aristotle, The Politics, IV, 15; VI, 8.

4 Saint Paul’s statement in Romans 13: 1–2, ‘there is no authority except from God’, is often seen as justifying religious claims. It ought to be noted, however, that Paul was arguing for the legitimacy of civil authority and exhorting Christians to be obedient to that authority. His claims were consistent with Jesus’ exhortation in Matthew 22: 21 to ‘give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s’.

5 This meaning is generally attributed to Hegel. See Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan, Concise Dictionary of Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), s.v. ‘Civil Society’. Note that Catholic Church documents often use the term ‘civil society’ in distinction to ‘ecclesial society’, that is, to refer to secular political entities, which includes states. This usage is anachronistic.


7 In fact, much of the same analysis will apply both to Judaism and to Islam. These faiths, together with Christianity, are sometimes called the Abrahamic religions. It has become more common to associate them as the ‘monotheistic religions’.


17 The document is available from the Vatican website: www.vatican.va/roman_curies/congregations/cfaith/documents/.


19 John Paul II, *Centisimus Annus*, ch. 5.


21 *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, n. 5.

22 *Doctrinal Note*, n. 2.


Chapter 3


2 There are lots of spaces in modern life that are *not* public in this sense, e.g., life in a corporation or in a bureaucracy. Arendt laments this as a loss of possibilities for human action. Even governments, when they become engaged in managing the economy, often cease to be political in the best sense. John Howard's statement, 'People should not play politics with the economy', has deeper meanings than he intended.

3 There is some disagreement in the commentary tradition about whether 'Aeropagus' meant the Hill of Ares or the Council that took its name from the place. More recent commentary places Paul before the Council. For a detailed exposition of the text, see Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids MI: 1998), 513–35.


5 See Jim Jose, 'From Principled Bastardry to Whatever It Takes: A Return to the Heart of Darkness?', a paper presented to the Legitimation and the State Mini-Conference, School of Social Science, University of New England, 9-10 February, 2004, publication forthcoming.


7 The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a Federal Election Statement, 'Have Faith in our Democracy: Building a Better Australia', on 1 June 2004. www.catholic.org.au/. The bishops assiduously avoid any statement that might be seen as partisan. The document is an interesting statement of principles and issues but is unlikely to draw a great deal of attention.


9 The report was in *Catholic World News*, www.cwnnews.com, on 12 August 2004. It was also claimed that the warning was specifically over the issue of same-sex 'marriage'. It does, of course, need further investigation, and, if it is true, one would expect very strong protest from the churches.


Chapter 4


3 I have developed this in more detail in ‘The Rhetorical Form of a Christian Funeral Oration’, *The Australasian Catholic Record* vol. 71, no. 3 (July 1994): 352-9.


5 *Summa Theologiae* I-II q. 40.
The first years of the third millennium have seen politics and religion both enmeshed and in conflict. On the global scale, the rise of religious fundamentalism both in Islam and in Christianity clearly has some relationship to terrorism and to the political responses to it. In Australia, there has been conflict between politicians and church leaders over issues such as the treatment of asylum seekers, war in Iraq and the nature of terrorism. The purpose of this book is to raise questions about the relationship of politics and religion and to ask how the church might engage in public discussion of issues that are called political. The treatment is philosophical rather than theological and draws particularly on political philosophy and rhetoric. The book’s claim is that the church ought at times engage in debate about political issues but that it ought to do so wisely and carefully.

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