

Topic 17: The Church and the World

The Church is inseparably both human and divine. It lives and acts in the world, but its goal and strength are not here on earth but in heaven. The Church seeks only the salvation of mankind, but she is also concerned with temporal affairs. Each Christian faithful participates in the mission of the Church according to his or her condition and vocation, and the gifts received.

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The Church stands before the world as the community of Jesus' disciples. We believe that Christ is the Son of God made flesh, the human face of God, who continues to act together with the Holy Spirit in the Church's mission, following the divine plan of salvation.

The Church “is a divine society in origin, and supernatural in its aim and in the means that are directly ordered to this end. But in so far as it is made up of men, it is a human community (Leo XIII, *Satis cognitum*). It lives and acts in the world, but its goal and strength are not here but in heaven.”^[1]

All created beings bear the imprint of God, especially men and women, created in his image and likeness.

Moreover, in the Old Testament we see that God has established an order of realities that we call “sacred,” through signs that can be either certain persons (sacred ministers) or material realities (the temple and other objects set aside from common use for the service of God). Next to these “sacred realities,” ordained for divine worship, there is the sphere of created realities (including work, the family, culture and social, economic and political relationships, etc.) which we call “profane” or “secular.” But it is not the case that only the sacred is related to God and the profane is foreign to God.

With the Incarnation of the Son of God, profane tasks can be carried out in union with Him, by the action of the Holy Spirit, through faith and the sacraments. And so all these realities can also become, with no need to remove them from their ordinary use, a means of assisting the

redemption and a means of sanctification. We can call this “Christian secularity” (from *saeculum*: century or world). Christians love the world above all because it has been created by God. And we try to bring it to God, knowing that sin is also present in the world, but that God’s grace can heal and elevate it.

1. The Church in history

The Church, as a human and social community, is and lives in the world. The Church and the world are closely related, but not identified. The world is not a space foreign to God, but its meaning is not exhausted in the earthly, since it is called in Christ to a new way of existence, which Jesus calls the “Kingdom of God.” This kingdom is not a political reality, but a spiritual one. The world is not independent of God, as secularism claims in an attempt to relegate

religion to the realm of the private and irrelevant.

At the same time, the world has an autonomy from the Church as an ecclesiastical institution. Jesus said: “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Mt 22:21). There is no official Christian solution to all the world’s problems, but various specific solutions. And the Church does not identify itself with any particular historical order: with any ideology, or political, economic or social regime. This, as we have said, does not mean that earthly values are independent of God. In the Christian vision of the world, everything is God’s gift and the world is called to be a path for knowing and loving God; and, as a consequence, for loving one’s neighbour and furthering the unity of the human race.

The Church's mission is not a political project, nor does it aspire to "sacralise" the world. Rather it is a religious mission: it seeks only the salvation of humanity, a salvation that goes beyond earthly well-being and earthly justice. At the same time, the Church is also concerned with temporal matters, because each person is situated in a family, social, work and economic context, and because the message of the Gospel calls for the redemption of the whole of creation through the furthering of justice and peace, so that the Kingdom of God can be built up in history.

The Church reminds everyone of the provisional nature of temporal achievements. What we human beings accomplish needs to be improved, completed and ultimately transformed by God; thus it can become part of the new world that corresponds to the Kingdom.

For these reasons the Church, also institutionally, is concerned about social and temporal questions, not in their technical and contingent aspects, but insofar as they can hinder union with God and eternal life. The main obstacle to this is sin, and all sin is personal. The consequences of sin can become in society true “structures of sin” that prevent people from attaining the truth and the common good, and hinder the life of grace and love for God and neighbour. Therefore when the Church teaches her social doctrine, she does not depart from her own mission, but confronts it in the midst of the complexity of the present world and tries to mediate in the dialogue between cultures and religions.

2. Christian secularity and the mission of the Church

As we have pointed out, the Christian vision of the world, which the Church proclaims and teaches, is called Christian secularity or also the “secular dimension” of Christianity and of the Church. Christian secularity is rooted in the fact that the Son of God became man in a particular time and culture. The magisterium of the Church teaches that “all the members of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension but in different ways” (*Christifideles laici*, 15).

The Church’s mission is one and the same for all the baptised: the glory of God (that God may be known, acknowledged and loved) and the salvation of men and women through a personal encounter with Christ. This mission can also be called evangelisation, insofar as it

proclaims the message of salvation that Christ has brought us, the “good news” of salvation.

How this is carried out depends on one’s own vocation and mission.^[2] The laity exercise the threefold saving office of Christ and carry out the Church’s mission “from within”^[3]—secular realities, that is to say, in the “ordinary” way of relating to the world (and which they share with non-Christians). Religious life implies a specific way of witnessing to the transcendence of the Kingdom of God (expressed in the “profession” of the evangelical counsels), and which is necessary for the Church and the world.^[4] With regard to the sacred ministers, Vatican II says: “For the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in His Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body.”^[5] “They are by reason of their particular vocation

especially and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry.”^[6] This is their proper way of participating in the Church’s mission.

Thus each Christian faithful participates in the Church’s mission according to his or her condition and vocation, and the gifts received, among which are the sacraments and charisms. On this also depend the tasks which correspond to each of the faithful within the one mission of the Church.

All the Christian faithful, by virtue of their baptism, are qualified for various tasks within the Church’s evangelising mission.

These tasks can be divided into three areas:^[7] a) within the Church itself (apostolate and ordinary “pastoral care”); b) “outward” relations with other religions and with non-believers; c) the sphere of ecumenism (relations with non-

Catholic Christians, in order to strive for Christian unity). It is important to underline that in any of the tasks the faithful participate in, they do so in accord with their own vocation and mission.

There are ecclesial tasks in which any baptised person can participate and which can be situated in relation to faith (such as catechesis or the teaching of religion in schools), to worship (participation in the liturgy), to charity (such as caring for the needy) and to the life of the Church in general (such as participation in councils or synods to help in pastoral decision-making). The faithful may also collaborate with the pastors of the Church in tasks for which they are professionally qualified, e.g. in the economic, legal, etc. spheres, including certain tasks of governance.

Some of these tasks (which do not require the sacrament of Holy Orders) may be officially established and supervised by the Church as “instituted” (non-ordained) ministries. By participating in these tasks, the lay faithful are neither more lay nor less lay. At the same time, care must be taken that they perform them in accord with their own vocation and mission, so that they are not confused with the pastors of the Church.

3. Role of the laity: sanctifying the world from within

The lay faithful, by the grace of baptism and the charisms bestowed by the Holy Spirit, have received from God the specific vocation and mission to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.”^[8]—

Hence, the mission proper to the lay faithful consists in sanctifying the world “from within.”^[9] This is not simply because they spend most of their time in secular occupations and temporal matters, but because of their collaboration with grace, which unifies, vivifies and gives impetus to their Christian life right where they are, integrating it into God’s saving action. Indeed, they “are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society.”^[10]

In this way the lay faithful, by carrying out in God’s presence their professional, family and social duties, at the same time order the temporal world according to God. The Second Vatican Council clearly insisted on this point: “Christians are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are

forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.”^[11]

Referring to these teachings of the Second Vatican Council about the vocation and mission of the lay faithful, Saint Josemaría said shortly after the Council: “This brings with it a deeper awareness of the Church as a community made up of all the faithful, where all share in one and the same mission, which each should fulfil according to his personal circumstances. Lay people, moved by the Holy Spirit, are becoming ever more conscious of the fact that they are the Church, that they have a specific and sublime mission to which they feel committed because they have been called to it by God himself. And they know that this mission comes from the very fact of their being Christians and not necessarily from a mandate from the

hierarchy; although obviously they ought to fulfil it in a spirit of union with the hierarchy following the teaching authority of the Church.”^[12]

The vocation of sacred ministers and religious does not exempt them from sanctifying the world, but the way in which they do so is different.

Ordained ministers accomplish this in the exercise of their own ministry. And the members of religious life, through their particular eschatological witness.

As for the pastors of the Church here, they are responsible first of all for teaching the Church’s social doctrine; secondly, for the formation of the faithful and of their conscience in this area; finally, when necessary, they are responsible for moral judgment in exceptional situations of a social or political nature. The discernment of pastors involves advice to the faithful, not a mandate,

although this would be possible in exceptional circumstances.

Thus the hierarchy does not have a direct role in the organisation of society. Its task is to provide “moral and spiritual help,” together with the orientation of “moral principles” to guide the actions of lay people, which they will carry out “on their free initiative and without passively waiting for instructions and directives” from the pastors.^[13]

The Church accepts any social system in which human dignity is respected; and the faithful must accept the social Magisterium of the Church with an adherence of mind, will and works.^[14]

The whole mission of the Church has charity at its centre, that is, love for God and neighbour, especially those most in need. “A man or a society that does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to

alleviate them is still distant from the love in Christ's heart.”^[15]

4. Freedom and responsibility of the laity

Freedom and responsibility in the various social, political and cultural activities, within one's own Christian vocation, lead us to distinguish between secularity and secularism. By secularity we mean that the State is autonomous with respect to ecclesiastical laws, while secularism claims an autonomy of politics with respect to the moral order and the divine plan itself, and tends to enclose religion in the purely private sphere. Thus it violates the right to religious freedom and damages the social order.^[16]

A healthy secularity avoids two extremes: the imposition by the State of a morality that would decide what is good or bad in all areas (which

would be equivalent to a pseudo-religion); and its *a priori* rejection of the moral values that come from cultural or religious spheres that enjoy their own freedom and should not be managed by the political authorities.

It should also be stressed that it is misleading and unjust to ask the faithful to act in politics “as if God did not exist.” It is misleading, because all people act on the basis of their cultural convictions (religious, philosophical, political, etc.), whether or not these stem from religious faith; and thus these convictions influence the social behaviour of citizens. It is unjust, because both believers and non-believers apply their own doctrines, regardless of their origin. The only thing that can be required is that social and political activity is in keeping with human dignity and the common good.

Acting in politics in accord with one's faith, if it is consistent with the dignity of the human person, does not mean that politics is subject to religion; it means that politics is at the service of the person and must therefore respect moral requirements, which is the same as saying that it must respect and promote the dignity of every human being. In this sense, to carry out one's political commitments for a transcendent motive is perfectly in keeping with human nature and strengthens this commitment and produces better results.

Religion can and should be able to criticise a society's ethical values. Reciprocally, ethics can and should be able to criticise believers of any religion as to the appropriateness of their beliefs (or religious practices, or civic behaviour inspired by their religious faith) with regard to furthering human dignity and the

common good. Religion and ethics need to find a place for dialogue within social and civic life.

5. Church and State

Throughout history, Christians have understood their mission of evangelisation in the world in different ways. And also the relationship between the Church and State. For some centuries, the model followed in Christian countries was that of a Catholic confessional state, where the sacred power of kings was underwritten by the spirituality of the Church. This was a mutual collaboration that often harmed the freedom of the Church, which was in fact subjected to the temporal power of the king. The social and political changes that arose during the Enlightenment contributed to the separation of Church and State, with the Church recognising the

legitimacy of any government democratically elected by the people.

But complete separation is not the ideal. Rather, the relationship between Church and State (which differ in nature and purpose) should entail a distinction without separation, a union without confusion (cf. Mt 22:15-21). This relationship will be correct and fruitful if there are friendly and collaborative relations between the two, if the role of religion in personal and social life is recognised, and if the right to religious freedom is respected.

The Church has received from Christ the apostolic mandate: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19-20). By her teaching and apostolic activity, both on the universal level and on the level of

the particular Churches, whether Western or Eastern, the Church contributes to the right ordering of temporal things, so that they may help men and women to attain their ultimate end and not lead them astray.

The means which the Church as an institution uses to carry out her mission are first and foremost spiritual: the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments, prayer. She also needs to use material means, appropriate to the nature of her members, who are human persons (cf. Acts 4:32-37; 1 Tim 5:18); these means must always be in conformity with the Gospel. The Church also needs independence to carry out her mission in the world, but not a predominance of a political or economic nature.^[17]

The State, in turn, is an institution that stems from the human being's

social nature, and whose purpose is the temporal common good of civil society. This good is not only material but also spiritual, for the members of society are persons with body and soul. Social progress requires, besides material means, many other goods of a spiritual nature: peace, order, justice, freedom, security, etc. These goods can only be achieved through the exercise of social virtues, which the state should promote and protect (e.g. public morality).

The distinction between the religious and political spheres implies that the State does not have a “sacred” character and should not govern consciences. Moreover, the Church has no coercive political power. Since membership is voluntary from a civil point of view, its power is of a spiritual nature and does not impose a single political solution. In this way, the State and the Church are in conformity with their own roles, and

this promotes religious and social freedom.

Two important rights derive from this: the right to religious freedom, which consists in immunity from coercion by the State in religious matters; and the right of Catholics to freedom of action vis-à-vis the hierarchy in temporal matters: “The lay Christian faithful have the right to have recognized that freedom which all citizens have in the affairs of the earthly city. When using that same freedom, however, they are to take care that their actions are imbued with the spirit of the Gospel and are to heed the doctrine set forth by the magisterium of the Church. In matters of opinion, moreover, they are to avoid setting forth their own opinion as the doctrine of the Church.”^[18]

6. Religious freedom

The institutional distinction between Church and State does not imply – as has been said – their total separation, nor does it imply that the Church must reduce its action to the private and spiritual sphere. Certainly the Church “cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.”^[19] Hence the Church has the right and the duty “to teach her social doctrine, to exercise her role freely among men, and also to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it.”^[20]

An important aspect of the relationship between Church and State is the right to religious freedom. To ensure respect for this right is to ensure respect for the

entire social order. The right to social and civil freedom in religious matters, for all believers of any religion, is the source and synthesis of all human rights.

In many countries the constitution (or system of fundamental laws regulating the system of government) broadly guarantees religious freedom for all citizens and religious groups. In addition, if possible, the Church tries to establish agreements with the State, generally called Concordats, in which solutions to specific issues are agreed upon, such as the freedom of the Church and its entities to exercise their mission, agreements in educational or economic matters, holidays, etc.

Basic bibliography

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Saint John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, 30 December 1988, 36-44.

Recommended reading

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal note on some questions concerning the commitment and conduct of Catholics in political life*, 24 November 2002.

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 49-55; 60-71; 189-191; 238-243; 377-427.

Saint Josemaría, Homily, *Passionately Loving the World, in Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá*, 113-123.

^[1] Saint Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 22.

^[2] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 901-913.

^[3] Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 31.

^[4] With regard to the consecrated life, cf. *Catechism*, 914-933.

^[5] *Lumen Gentium*, 18.

^[6] *Ibid.*, 31.

^[7] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Ad Gentes*, 6.

^[8] *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

^[9] *Ibid.*

^[10] *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

^[11] *Ibid.*

^[12] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, 59.

^[13] Cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 7.

^[14] Cf. Lk 10:16; *Catechism*, 2032 and 2037.

^[15] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 167.

^[16] Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 572.

^[17] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2246; *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, 426.

^[18] Code of Canon Law, 227; cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 76.

^[19] *Deus caritas est*, 28.

^[20] *Gaudium et spes*, 76.

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