

Dublin, 14 June 2012

Remarks by John Bruton, former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland (1994/7), at The Eucharistic Congress, held in the RDS Dublin.

WE NEED THE HELP OF OTHERS

According to the Holy Father, anyone who

“In search of truth, trusts only his individual actions, and does not recognise the help of others, is deceiving himself”

In this light, I would like to look at what the Eucharist means in the modern world, what it might tell us about how we should live our lives, in families, in local communities, and about how we should engage in politics.

Secondly, I will argue that believing Christians have both a right, and an obligation, to bring their faith to bear in their engagement in politics and

Thirdly, I will ask what believing Christians can bring to politics that will serve the interests of everybody, believers and non believers alike.

IT ALL STARTS WITH THE EUCHARIST

For us, as Catholics, it all starts with the Eucharist that is the source of our belief and should be the motive for our engagement with others.

Catholic Christianity is Eucharistic Christianity. For the Catholic in the street, so to speak, it all starts with the Eucharist. That is the source of our belief, and should be the motivator of our engagement with others. The Second Vatican Council put it this way

“the Eucharist is the SOURCE and SUMMIT of Christian life. It casts light on how we are to live”

The very word “Communion” means a coming together of people.

The words said at the consecration in the Mass, “This is my body”, “This is my blood”, and the invitation to take and eat, to receive Christ into us, are found in St Paul’s First letter to the Corinthians in 1/ Chapter12. That is where we might go to understand the meaning of Communion.

These words, used in the consecration every day, are immediately preceded, in the letter of St Paul, by a reproof to the Corinthians about the way they had started to celebrate the Lord's Supper in Corinth.

The Lord's Supper, in Corinth as elsewhere, was as a common meal, to be eaten together by all the faithful. But divisions had grown up among the Christians of Corinth. Because of these divisions, some better off members of the community did not want to share their food with others. St Paul had learned that they went ahead and ate, without waiting for all-especially for the less well off- to arrive and take part.

St. Paul had no time for that.

Referring to the evidence of class distinctions among the faithful in Corinth in the way they celebrated the Lord's Supper, St Paul said

"Or have you no respect for the church of God, and would you humiliate those who have nothing?

Shall I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you"

St Paul thus reproved the faithful of Corinth for this lack of community and mutual respect, their lack of communion, in the way they celebrated the Eucharist.

Later in his letter to the Corinthians, just a paragraph or two after the words of the consecration, with which all Catholics-and all Eucharistic Christians- are so familiar, St Paul called on the Corinthians to examine their consciences.

He said:

"But let a person look carefully at himself and in that spirit eat the bread and drink the cup"

and later on he adds:

"If, however, we scrutinize ourselves, we should not be judged".

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

For Paul, the celebration of the Eucharist is a social act, not just an act of individualistic piety. It is also an occasion for putting things right in the way we live our own lives, and the way we treat others. This thought has been developed by modern theologians.

Monika Hellwig, a Professor of Theology in the Jesuit University at Georgetown in Washington DC has described the Eucharist as

"a celebration of divine hospitality in the world".

She saw the second Vatican Council as a turning point in the church's understanding of the Eucharist. There was a shift from a pre Vatican II emphasis on what she described as

“the cult of an unquestioned mystery, reinforced by the use of a sacred language (namely Latin)”

Before a passive congregation, to an additional emphasis on a vigorous quest for deeper understanding, through the active involvement of the congregation that we take for granted at Mass today.

There is an echo here of what Pope Benedict has written about evangelization, when he said that evangelization is not simply to preach a doctrine, but to proclaim it in ones words and actions.

The Holy Father added that we must come together with others for this, and that

“Spiritual individualism isolates the person”

Returning to the celebration of the Eucharist, the emphasis is, of course, centrally on the presence of Christ in the celebration, on the transubstantiation of the bread and wine on the altar into the body and blood of Christ, a belief that is central to our faith, and indeed a conviction that is so radical, that, if we truly accept it, it MUST change our lives.

COMMUNION WITH OTHER PEOPLE. AN APPROACH TO POLITICS

But, in addition to that, there is now Professor Hellwig says, a new emphasis on

“the outward looking expectation and explanation of our worship, and the effect it is supposed to have on our lives and actions”.

With the Second Vatican Council, there is a formalisation of something Christians had known from the beginning, but of which they had lost sight. The Eucharist, and Christianity, is all about the quality of our relationship with each other. Is it a relationship of trust and respect, or is it something else?

The absence of trust and respect in the relationship between Christian nations was forcibly rediscovered in the horrible first half of the twentieth century.

To formulate this in terms of the Eucharistic Congress-Eucharist is Communion with Christ AND with one another,

As we can see from reading the full text of his letter to the Corinthians, this emphasis on the impact that participation in the Eucharist has, on the way we come together with other people, was in forefront the mind of St Paul when he reminded the Corinthians of the words Jesus had used at the Last Supper, which are repeated every day at the consecration of the Mass.

That is where the link can be made between the Eucharist and politics and political institutions.

Politics is one of the ways by which Catholics, Christians and people of faith generally, come together with other people.

Is the relationship we forge with one another and with other people, through politics, one of justice and respect, or does it fall into some of the errors of disputatiousness and class division, that St Paul found among the faithful living in the city of Corinth?

Likewise, do we feel free to bring some of the sense of justice and mutual respect that we derive from sharing the Eucharist together, to bear in politics for the benefit of the wider community?

These are some of the questions I will talk about in this address.

SHOULD POLITICS AND FAITH BE KEPT SEPARATE?

First of all, it might be wise to address a word to those who argue that Christian belief should be kept out of politics, that politics should operate in a separate sphere from religious belief, which should neither influence, nor be influenced by, political institutions

The European Convention on Human Rights, guarantees to every European the right, in its words, to

“manifest his religion, with others in public or private, in teaching, practice, worship, and observance”.

The Convention does not confine religion to the private sphere. It confers a right to practise religion, but also a right to manifest religious belief in public.

A ban on Christian religious processions in public places, like the ban that applied in Germany under Bismarck would be illegal under the Convention.

I believe a “separationist “ view of keeping religion in the private sphere, and out of politics, is artificial. It misunderstands human nature. It also refuses to accept religious faith for what it is, something that informs every aspect of ones life.

First, Voters do not divide their minds up into compartments, one marked “religious”, another marked “political,” another “personal, and yet another marked” family” and so forth. Faith is not just one compartment of life.

What goes on in one part of their mind influences what goes on in the other.

Second, everyone agrees that ethical beliefs can, and should, influence the actions of political institutions. But, for many people it is impossible for them to separate their ethical beliefs from the religious source from which they spring.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs said that, in modern society, we need to be bilingual, we need to be able to speak the language of faith in our religious community, and the language of the common good in the wider world. And learning another language usually enriches our use of the one we already speak!

Third, Humans are social beings. They do not live atomised lives. They live in overlapping communities of families, of neighbourhoods, of workplaces, political parties, nations, sports clubs, and for many in the community of a church.

All of these communities, including churches, help form a society’s ethos. Religious education has shaped the ethos of Irish society in so many positive ways. Ones heritage of religious belief shapes ones ethos, even in ways one does not acknowledge. A shared ethos is part of the social capital of any state.

SHARED ETHOS...A BASIS FOR TRUST IN SOCIETY

Without a shared ethos, it is difficult for a society to function, or to be governed.

Common sense tells us that laws are obeyed not only out of fear of retribution, but also out of respect for the shared ethos, the ethos that forms a basis for trust in society, and which makes government, governance, and states possible.

A shared ethos is also important to the working of the economy

As the Pope puts it in the Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*

“Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfill its proper economic function. And today it is this trust that has ceased to exist, and the loss of trust is a great loss”

This is a very important insight. All markets depend on trust. Without trust, we would find ourselves spending so much on lawyers to check one another out, that trading with one another would become incredibly expensive.

But where does trust come from?

It comes from a shared ethos or belief system in a society, on the basis of which one can anticipate how people one has never met will behave. And where, for many people, does that shared ethos come from?

To a significant degree, it comes from their shared religious beliefs, from their religious heritage, from their religious education.

It is simple. Markets need ethics, and, for many people, ethics derive from religious belief.

There are, of course, clear distinctions of function between the roles the state performs, and the role churches perform. These must be respected even though the boundaries will shift slightly from time to time.

A SENSE OF PROPORTION IN POLITICS

That said, what is the “added value”, to use a piece of business jargon that Christian believers can bring to politics.

Here is how the participation of people of faith can enhance the quality of political discourse

Faith in eternal life, helps one to be humble in all things, including in ones contribution to politics, to accept that we do not know it all.

Because our faith tells us that there is a God, and are not alone in the universe, we should not be arrogant. Just as our religious life should be a ceaseless search to come closer to a truth we will never fully know, so should our political life be.

We should not act as if this generation, with all its technologies, has all the answers. Faith tells us that, no matter how hard we try, we are not going to create a heaven on earth, and that totalitarian or materialist philosophies that pretend to do so, are just plain wrong.

But Faith also tells us that there is such a thing as fundamental truth, for which we must seek, by the use of our reason, informed by the teachings of Jesus Christ passed down to us through our church.

Christianity does not offer a specific political programme.

“My Kingdom is not of this world” Christ said.

FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS, AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

But if we believe there are certain fundamental truths, then, in approaching political questions, we cannot claim that what is right or wrong, what is true or untrue, is to be determined solely by the political consensus in a society at a particular time.

Opinion polls are not the determinant of truth, nor, for that matter, is the “latest scientific research”. Opinion polls are just opinion polls, and research is essentially what it says it is, research.

Both can and will be superseded by other polls and other research. Meanwhile fundamental truths remain true.

Truth and right are not contingent. Majorities can be wrong, and often are.

As the then Cardinal Ratzinger put it in a chapter of his collected writings entitled “The Problem of the Threats to Human Life”

“In a world in which moral convictions lack a common reference to the truth, such convictions have the value of mere opinion”

In that, Christianity is in agreement with the approach of framers of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, who also held that there were certain fundamentals, that were antecedent to the opinion of the majority at any given time.

These fundamentals are formulated as enduring human rights.

CONSCIENCE

In approaching political questions, a Christian must be influenced by his or her conscience, as St Paul recommended we should be when participating in the Eucharist.

Our reason is a gift from God, and we must use it to examine our own lives, our faith and our failings, to examine our conscience, to use a very old fashioned phrase

Maybe a more frequent, formal, public, and private, examination of conscience by individuals and organisations would reduce the need for so many regulations and regulators.

As St Paul said to the Corinthians “if we scrutinize ourselves, we should not be judged”. I have, in some of the work I have been doing in business, come across some excellent work on how best to promote ethical behaviour in large business organisations. In a real sense, it is a systematic application of what St Paul recommended so long ago.

Our faith, and our conscience, also tells us we should respect God’s creation. We should leave the earth in a better condition than we found it. That should influence our politics.

Our faith tells us that God created each one of us as individuals, that we are not mere accidents of genetics, and that He cares for each of us, as individuals. Our life comes from Him, and it is not ours to manipulate, or to take away. That is not a belief we can simply leave aside when approaching politics. Just as basic human rights are not contingent on the vagaries of opinion, nor are questions about the value of a human life.

EVERY PERSON COUNTS

I think the whole concept of Human Rights really has a Christian root. Every person counts. If one believes God created each one of us as individuals, that makes it easy to understand why we should respecting the human rights of all other people, who, as Christians, we believe were also individually created by God. That is why every person counts.

A belief that we are each a creation of God for makes it reasonable to respect the right to Life from conception to natural death, and, equally importantly, to help eliminate easily curable diseases, like malaria, that cause children to die prematurely. Just because a human being has not yet been born, or lives out of our sight on another continent, does not mean that they have no call on us to vindicate their human rights. It is not a question of taking a moralistic position, but rather a question of what we do, and how we live our lives

Our faith tells us that there a life after our death, we do not simply pass away into nothingness. We have to give an account of ourselves.

Pope Benedict said: “Deeds without knowledge are blind, and knowledge without love is sterile”.

Science, and material progress, are only means to an end, no more. They are not why we are here on earth.

The GDP does not measure the success of a society.

The pursuit of knowledge is an expression of the creative gift God has given each one of us. But it is not an end in itself. We are not on earth, simply that we may know more. That is why it is right that scientific experimentation be limited by ethical considerations.

ANSWERS TO THE MOST DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Our faith helps us answer the really difficult questions, questions which, if left unanswered can, when we face some unexpected setback in our lives, lead to depression, nihilism and sometimes, as I say, even to despair.

Faith answers questions like

“Why are we here? “

“What is the meaning of my life?”

Inability to answer those questions leaves people with a great emptiness at the heart of their lives.

An ability among citizens to satisfactorily answer such profound questions of existence for themselves has a social value, even in purely secular terms, if it helps people to cope with crises in their lives.

CATHOLICISM AND NATIONALISM

Our faith, as Catholics, helps us in our relations with people of other nations.

The very word “Catholic” reminds us that our obligations are universal, to all humanity, not just to our own family or our own nation. That is what the word means. In literal terms, it is hard to reconcile Catholicism and Nationalism. They are opposites.

Pope Pius the eleventh reminded the world in 1922, even patriotism, must be “kept within the laws of Christ”.

And the laws of Christ forbid murder and theft, even when committed for supposedly patriotic motives.

FORGIVENESS

We must never think we know it all. Our faith also tells us that God sent His only Son to live, and die, on earth, so that our sins would be forgiven, and that we might live.

Our faith tells us that we should follow the example of Christ, and forgive others who have wronged us. Forgiveness is not something that comes naturally. In fact it almost goes against nature. But we do it, because we believe that Christ died, so that we in our turn may be forgiven, and because He told us to forgive.

We must deplore the sin, but we should not shun the sinner.

Vengeance does not cure the injury to victims. Sometimes it makes it worse.

Retribution is not Christ's way. No, that hard and unnatural thing, forgiveness, is Christ's way.

It would help Modern Ireland, with its record prison population, and its culture in relentless search for someone to blame, it would help it a great deal, if it could remind itself, of the true meaning of Christ's life, and of the meaning of His death, namely forgiveness, letting go, and rising again.

Penalties are necessary to ensure that laws are respected, and may involve terms of imprisonment, but these penalties should be calculated by reference to the need for deterrence and restitution, not as a form vengeance or catharsis for victims.

And once a penalty is paid, offenders should be forgiven.

I will back up this point by quoting from a recent article by Michael Gerson in the Washington Post on the death of former Watergate convict, Chuck Colson, who went on, after imprisonment for the obstruction of justice, to devote his life to Christianity and to the improvement of prison conditions

"Prison often figures large in conversion stories. Pride is the enemy of grace, and prison the enemy of pride. "How else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in?" wrote Oscar Wilde after leaving Reading gaol.

It is the central paradox of Christianity that fulfillment starts in emptiness, that streams emerge in the desert, that freedom can be found in a prison cell"

Gerson concluded

GLOBALISATION AND INEQUALITY

These are some of the insights that Christianity can bring to political life.

Christian belief is, I contend, as important to the living of a good life now, in the twenty first century in Ireland, as it ever were at any time in our country's long history.

It is also important to understanding how best to live in a globalised world.

In his Encyclical "Caritas in Veritate", speaking of the world economy, His Holiness said

"The principal new feature has been the explosion of worldwide interdependence, commonly known as globalisation"

He went on to say that, without the guidance of charity in truth, globalisation could cause unprecedented damage and cause new divisions in the human family. He is right.

Thanks in part to globalisation, modern western society is afflicted by growing inequality in incomes, reversing a period of relative equalisation following the Second World War.

Money and talent can now move freely than ever before across frontiers, and this reduces the possibility of individual states using progressive taxation to mitigate inequalities of income between people.

Remuneration policies within companies are also driven by the fear that “talent” will be stolen by competitors. This can lead to big differences between what people at the top of a company can earn, and what is earned by others, who are less well known and less likely to be headhunted by competitors.

To change this, will require a change in the ethic by which capitalism operates.

That is something than can be influenced for good by religiously inspired ethical principles, whether these principles are applied in Government, in company boardrooms, or among the investment community, or by individuals in their daily lives, as shoppers, voters, or as contributors to public debate.

No, Christians, and Catholics in particular, should not be afraid to bring their beliefs into the public square.

TRUST AND RESPECT

Drawing on their faith, they can help society to work out, and maintain, a strong ethos of mutual trust and respect,

trust and respect within religious communities,

between religious communities,

between people of faith and non believers,

trust and respect in business and economic relations, and

trust and respect between nations.

That is what we have to offer the twenty first century, and we should not be behind the door in putting it forward, with pride.