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Peter J. Riga

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Reflections on the “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life”

by

Dr. Peter J. Riga

The author is a theologian and attorney residing in Houston, TX.

Of the twelve Catholic senators presently in the Senate, all of them have voted for legislation permitting, financing and facilitating abortion in American society. They have all declared themselves politically as “pro-choice” on abortion. Such a stance is also true of some Catholic House members who have also voted along these same lines. This is deeply troubling because these are educated men and women elected to public office and who are known to be Catholic, thus creating great scandal among both Catholics and non-Catholics in our society. The present “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life” issued by the Congregation of the Faith on January 16, 2003 was written to directly face this serious question and scandal of Catholic politicians.

Most of what this note says is common knowledge among educated Catholics. The Church has not and cannot have any political agenda; that there are a variety of ways to approach basic moral principles that are open for Catholics and Catholic politicians to pursue through political parties; that there is a true political autonomy in this regard which pursues its own way of bringing about the common good, freedom and social justice; that any confusion of the political and religious spheres leads to a destruction of religious freedom; that truth is one and that it must be pursued as the basis of freedom as well as any social and political policy; that morality refers to the requirements of human nature and the natural law which must be respected as law, etc.

The role of the Church is to give guidance of basic moral principles underlying the safeguarding the basic dignity of each person known as human rights: freedom of conscience, freedom, the right to marry and have

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a family, economic freedom, economic rights — among other human rights. Any human positive law which would basically contradict these rights would be a nullity and contrary to the moral law. What a Catholic politician cannot do is vote for laws that are inherently destructive of the moral rights of the human person including the unborn. These activities are perceived in American society as basic human rights and are today part of the culture. Once again, the Church has no competence about how practically to achieve these rights as the common good of society — this belongs exclusively to the political-secular order. Only when these secular laws contradict the moral order in disregarding human life or rights in some serious ways can the Church speak in condemnation.

This is particularly the case today in matters of abortion and euthanasia. One should say without hesitation that in this area there really is no “wiggle room” where some political discretion might be allowed as is the case with many other areas of law which touch upon moral matters. A positive law allowing or funding both of these activities is inherently wrong and can never be justified for any purpose whatsoever. We speak here of positive legislation which only permits an evil activity as the lesser of two evils (e.g., prostitution). Even in the positive area, says the Note, an elected official “...could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and a lessening of its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality” (par. 4 quoting EV par 73). Thus a Catholic politician could vote for parental notification of abortion, a waiting period before abortion, a detailed description of the procedure by the doctor, that abortion be performed in a licensed clinic by a licensed doctor, etc.

Unfortunately, Catholic legislators in Congress have gone beyond this, voting to uphold Roe and its funding in various situations. This is no longer to limit the nefarious consequences of a law they cannot control or revoke; but to positively promote and permit the evil itself. This, no Catholic politician or legislator can morally do or support because it contravenes a well-formed Catholic conscience which is guided by the moral-natural law as well as by the explicit and infallible teaching of the Catholic Church from which no Catholic may dissent.

I think that it is quite clear that the Catholic Church’s teaching on direct abortion and euthanasia is infallible doctrine through the universal ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church in union with the Bishop of Rome, from which no Catholic may dissent. John Paul II put it this way:

Therefore by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his successors and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral. This doctrine, based upon
the unwritten law which man, in the light of reason, finds in his own heart (cf. *Romans* 2:14-15), is reaffirmed by sacred scripture, transmitted by the tradition of the Church and taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium. (*EV* par. 53)

Nothing could be more clear and no well-formed Catholic conscience could contradict it or follow another course because it is now the very truth from God held by the Catholic Church. Any Catholic or Catholic legislator who would hold differently has an erroneous conscience and to that degree is not a Catholic. He or she should refrain from the reception of the sacred Eucharist because he or she is not in full communion with the Church of Christ (that is what “communion” means). Any legislator who votes affirmatively for abortion and/or euthanasia is traversing the natural law as well as the infallible doctrine of the Church as authoritatively held and taught by the universal ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church.

This is a hard saying but it must be said because it is the truth: “John Paul II, containing the constant teaching of the Church, has reiterated many times that those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a ‘grave and clear obligation to oppose any law that attacks human life. For them, as for every Catholic, it is impossible to promote such laws or to vote for them’. ” (*Note*, par. 4, quoting *EV*, par. 73). Again:

At the same time, the Church teaches that authentic freedom does not exist without truth. Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery. (*Note*, par. 7 quoting John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, par. 90)

This poses some daunting questions for Catholics and Catholic legislators. What the “Note” is really saying is not only do Catholics have to live up to their Catholic faith privately as well as publicly; they must suffer for that faith by perhaps even losing an election and their power base. That is what it means for a Catholic Christian to be counter-cultural in this world, even to the point of martyrdom (real or figurative) for the truth as was the case with St. Thomas More (cf. “Note” par. 1). He gave his life for what was at the time (1535) a non-defined teaching of the Church, i.e., the central position and infallibility of the Bishop of Rome. How much less excuse do Catholic politicians and legislators have today in the face of a clear, enunciated and infallible teaching of the Catholic Church on the matter of human life in abortion and euthanasia?

This “Doctrinal Note” is a timely reminder to Catholics and Catholic legislators just how serious this question is today and how deeply these evils have infected this society. Abortion is simply and culturally taken for granted in America today. And from this infection to other evils (e.g.
infanticide, stem cell and embryo research, capital punishment) which
further corrodes the moral foundation of this society. This society is not
just Catholic teaching but the doctrine of the moral law itself about human
nature. This teaching, in other words,

... is based on the ontological dignity of the human person and not on
a non-existent equality among religions... it is based rather on the
dignity of the human person, which demands that he not be subjected
to external limitations... the teaching on freedom of conscience and
on religious freedom does not therefore contradict the condemnation
of indifferentism and religious relativism by Catholic doctrine; on
the contrary, it is fully in accord with it” (Note” par. 8, quoting
various popes and the Catholic Catechism, par. 2108)

One cannot therefore invoke conscience or religious freedom to free
oneself from the obligation to follow objective moral law as infallibly
declared by the Catholic Church and derived from the natural law. Each
Catholic must carefully examine his or her conscience to decide whether
he or she is with the Church and the gospel— or not. There is no third
option open to him or her. “This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?”
(John 6:61). To which Christ answers simply, “Will you too go?”

What is our answer?