

CTK Mission Principle: Responsible Citizenship

We the people of Christ the King Catholic Church are called by God our Father to be surrendered to the Lord Jesus, in the power of His Holy Spirit, in the heart of His Church.

Responsible Citizenship

We commit to the Church's vision for responsible citizenship, since "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." (Pope Paul VI, *Justice in the World*, #6.)

The Church sees the call to being responsible citizens as an essential component of the Catholic worldview. Though some have denied this, the Church has always seen this two fold responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and to transform society for the betterment of all. This is particularly well articulated in Blessed John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra*: "

Hence, though the Church's first care must be for souls, how she can sanctify them and make them share in the gifts of heaven, she concerns herself too with the exigencies of man's daily life, with his livelihood and education, and his general, temporal welfare and prosperity. In all this she is but giving effect to those principles which Christ Himself established in the Church He founded. When He said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," "I am the light of the world," it was doubtless man's eternal salvation that was uppermost in His mind, but He showed His concern for the material welfare of His people when, seeing the hungry crowd of His followers, He was moved to exclaim: "I have compassion on the multitude." (#3-4)

On a more local level, the American bishops echo this perspective in their document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. In it, the bishops of the United States taught:

We are members of a community of faith with a long tradition of teaching and action on human life, and dignity, marriage and family, justice and peace, care for creation, and the common good. As Americans, we are also blessed with religious liberty which safeguards our right to bring our principles and moral convictions into the public arena. These Constitutional freedoms need to be both exercised and protected, as some seek to mute the voices or limit the freedoms of religious believers and religious institutions. Catholics have the same rights and duties as others to participate fully in public life. (Intro.)

The American bishops, in no uncertain terms, state our responsibility in this:

The Church's obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith. It is a basic part of the mission we have received from Jesus Christ, who offers a vision of life revealed to us in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. To echo the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: Christ, the Word made flesh, in showing us the Father's love, also shows us what it truly means to be human (see *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). (p. 3)

However, lest we should think that this obligation is simply for the Bishops, or other clergy, the statement reminds us, citing the *Catechism*:

In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. This obligation is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, "It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life" (nos. 1913-1915).

(p. 4)

Therefore a focus on justice is appropriate. Actually, this perspective begins as an Old Testament theme, indicated by the call to justice, highlighted especially in the prophetic books. For example, on the Sunday we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, it forms a crucial component of the first reading from Isaiah. The passage is a Messianic prophecy describing the Lord Jesus. In it, He Himself is described as the One Who "shall bring forth justice to the nations" and the One Who is called "for the victory of justice." (Isaiah 42:1,6) This description of the Lord Jesus is part of that pervasive justice theme that describes Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel: "for Yahweh your God is God of gods and Lord of lords...He it is who sees justice done...." The consequence of this attribute of God is that His people are to have that same characteristic: "Love the stranger then, for you were once strangers in Egypt." (Deuteronomy 18:17-19) The ultimate expression of this responsibility for justice is the Last Judgment parable in Matthew 25, which concludes with the ominous warning: "In truth I tell you, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to Me." (Matthew 25:45).

There is obviously a significant overlap with this dimension of our Mission Statement concerning Works of Mercy. But responsible citizenship is more oriented toward systemic issues. It is also more justice oriented than mercy oriented. Giving assistance to the needy is not simply an act of mercy, an act of charity, it is an act of justice. This is particularly demonstrated in the encyclical of Pope Paul VI: *Populorum Progressio*, in which, by way of introducing the Church's position, he states:

True to the teaching and example of her divine Founder, who cited the preaching of the Gospel to the poor as a sign of His mission, (12) the Church has never failed to foster the human progress of the nations to which she brings faith in Christ. (#12)

He takes this a step further in terms of the rights of all to the fruits of the earth:

Now if the earth truly was created to provide man with the necessities of life and the tools for his own progress, it follows that every man has the right to glean what he needs from the earth. The recent Council reiterated this truth: "God intended the earth and everything in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should flow fairly to all." (#22).

This has serious ramifications in terms of property and rights:

"He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?"...As St. Ambrose put it: "You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his... You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone..." These words indicate that the right to private property is not absolute and

unconditional. No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life. (#23)

This concept is not foreign to our American democracy, in fact it is implied in the very *Declaration of Independence* itself. The *Declaration* speaks of rights that are inherent for each person because they are endowments of the Creator to all human beings: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” A necessary corollary of the right to life is the right to those things which are essential to life, e.g. food, shelter, and clothing. This corollary is formally articulated by Blessed John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*:

But first We must speak of man's rights. Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services. (#11)

The very purpose of government is to secure these rights for all. The responsible citizen is then tasked with doing what is within their power to see to it that these rights are established and maintained by the government in the service of the rights of all, that true justice might be present for all. It is clear that true justice being present for all is not the current state of affairs. The Second Vatican Council recognized these current disparities:

Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. (*Gaudium et Spes*, #4)

How to respond to this need is articulated by the Council:

Coming down to practical and particularly urgent consequences, this Council lays stress on reverence for man; everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary to living it with dignity, so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus. In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception. (#27)

This must guide our action as responsible citizens—individually, as families, as a parish. In the American bishops' document cited above, the Bishops list six areas in particular in which there is urgent need for Catholics to be actively involved in their duties as citizens:

- Continuing destruction of unborn children through abortion and other threats to the lives and dignity of others who are vulnerable, sick, or unwanted;
- Renewed efforts to force Catholic ministries—in health care, education, and social services—to violate their consciences or stop serving those in need;
- Intensifying efforts to redefine marriage and enact measures which undermine marriage as the permanent, faithful, and fruitful union of one man and one woman and a fundamental moral and social institution essential to the common good;
- An economic crisis which has devastated lives and livelihoods, increasing

- national and global unemployment, poverty, and hunger; increasing deficits and debt and the duty to respond in ways which protect those who are poor and vulnerable as well as future generations;
- The failure to repair a broken immigration system with comprehensive measures that promote true respect for law, protect the human rights and dignity of immigrants and refugees, recognize their contributions to our nation, keep families together, and advance the common good;
 - Wars, terror, and violence which raise serious moral questions on the use of force and its human and moral costs in a dangerous world, particularly the absence of justice, stice, security, and peace in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East.

The Bishops offer an additional comment, however, that demonstrates that certain of these issues have a natural priority:

There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called “intrinsically evil” actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia (p. 6) ...The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed. (p. 9)

The Bishops also note a crucial distinction in terms of the binding or non-binding nature of what they specifically teach:

The judgments and recommendations that we make as bishops on specific issues do not carry the same moral authority as statements of universal moral teachings. Nevertheless, the Church’s guidance on these matters is an essential resource for Catholics as they determine whether their own moral judgments are consistent with the Gospel and with Catholic teaching. (pp. 10-11)

This is a crucial distinction. [comment on this with respect to different issues, eg immigration, economics, war, eg Iraq, etc.]

What does the Church offer us in terms of dealing with these issues? The American Bishops cite two things in particular. First, a well-formed conscience. What is conscience? The *Catechism* states:

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his

conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law. (#1778)

Second, guidance on the virtue of prudence, which the *Catechism* defines as enabling us “to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (*Catechism*, #1806). In addition, the Church’s teaching on the common good provide a context for the application of these two:

1906 By common good is to be understood "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."²⁶ The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority. It consists of three essential elements:

1907 First, the common good presupposes respect for the person as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfill his vocation. In particular, the common good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as "the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard . . . privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion."²⁷

1908 Second, the common good requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.²⁸

1909 Finally, the common good requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order. It presupposes that authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the security of society and its members. It is the basis of the right to legitimate personal and collective defence.

This last comment about the common good and defense raises a particular issue that also should be addressed, the question of war and military participation.

“If you want peace, work for justice.” This famous line was given by Paul VI in his message for Day of Peace in 1972.

Certainly, war has not been rooted out of human affairs. As long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted. State authorities and others who share public

responsibility have the duty to conduct such grave matters soberly and to protect the welfare of the people entrusted to their care. But it is one thing to undertake military action for the just defense of the people, and something else again to seek the subjugation of other nations. Nor, by the same token, does the mere fact that war has unhappily begun mean that all is fair between the warring parties.

Those too who devote themselves to the military service of their country should regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples. As long as they fulfill this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace.

GS #79

In closing, cite Am bishops:

The teaching of Vatican Council II in the Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*) reminds us of the blessings that result from our taking our role seriously as responsible citizens. It states: “society itself may enjoy the benefits of justice and peace, which result from [people’s] faithfulness to God and his holy will” (no. 6). The work for justice

requires that the mind and the heart of Catholics be educated and formed to know and practice the whole faith.

5. This statement highlights the role of the Church in the formation of conscience, and the corresponding moral responsibility of each Catholic to hear, receive, and act upon the Church’s teaching in the lifelong task of forming his or her own conscience. With this foundation, Catholics are better able to evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and candidates’ promises and actions in light of the Gospel and the moral and social teaching of the Church in order to help build a better world.

Reflection Questions:

For the individual: What can I do to better be a responsible citizen?

For the family: How can we as a family be more responsible citizens?

For the parish: How can we as a parish be more effective in our support of responsible citizenship?