



## **From A Bishop's Journal (622)**

### **Our Political Commitments**

**I**n the past few months, due to elections in the United States and important debates in Canada, positions have been taken on a number of ethical problems closely bound to the faith of politicians. We only need to think of situations where the deepest values are questioned: abortion, euthanasia, marriage. Some people call for the separation of Church and State, and to the secularity of our society, but Christians must not turn away from these fields of commitment.

#### **Respect**

It seems to me that the main attitude we should have regarding people in politics is one of deep respect. Even if we cannot always endorse the programmes they advocate, we must admit that they need a good amount of courage, in trying to respond to the social challenges of today, for the common good. They need tenacity and strength in their attempts to improve a situation when we know the resistance encountered when attempts are made to bring about change. Besides, politicians are usually members of a particular party with its own values, rules, and objectives. And political action is conditioned by the public function: politicians come and go, but the public servants remain. Politicians therefore have major challenges to pick up, without forgetting public opinion and the multitude of local, regional, national and international government agencies to go through. Courage, humility, determination, and boldness must accompany politicians who want to do something for the people. I have always had respect for every political candidate, every elected person, every person in the political sphere, and I have assured them of my daily prayer.

#### **Mutual Respect**

However, there is one thing that I wish: that this respect be mutual! This is a key element of every election and re-election. Ever since I started voting I have noticed that the women and men who respected their electors had a precious ally for their re-election, even if they were in the opposition. On the other hand, I have seen others who, through their incoherent legislation, arrogant attitude, and dishonest dealings deeply affected the people who did not recognise in them any basic respect, and who remembered this on voting day. For example, when we dare state that a priest or a bishop may

not express his convictions like any other citizen, we attack their fundamental freedom of expression. The priest and the bishop must express their opinion wisely and prudently, but he does not have to keep to himself the deep convictions he has. The laws which our politicians are called upon to vote must also respect the convictions held by our fellow citizens. While respecting the rights of minorities, one must also admit those of the majority, especially regarding families and the neediest of our citizens.

### **Respect of Human Nature**

In an extraordinary address to the Italian parliament on November 14, 2002, Pope John Paul II stated: “The challenges encountered by a democratic state require from all people of good will, independently of each one’s political opinion, generous cooperation in solidarity, in order to promote the common good of the nation. Besides, such cooperation cannot be separated from a reference to the basic ethical values inscribed in the very nature of man. On that point, in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* I warned against the risk of an alliance between democracy and ethical relativism which takes away from the civil arena every certain moral reference, and deprives it more radically of the acceptance of the truth. In fact, if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political action, ideas and convictions can be easily exploited for power. A democracy without values is easily transformed into a declared or underhanded totalitarianism, as history shows.” The stormy debates in the House of Commons and the Senate, these past several years, regarding unemployment, the death sentence, euthanasia, human reproduction, and marriage are at the very heart of basic ethical values: we could practically measure the convictions of our politicians.

### **Respect of the Constitution**

At election time it is important to closely look at the Constitution which is now ours, in Canada, and look also at our rights and freedoms, our fundamental liberties and rights, our judicial guarantees, and the right to equality: these are as many elements on which we can pass judgement regarding the action or inaction of those engaged in politics. If we are ill at ease when areas of competence are not observed at the national or provincial level, there is cause to ask whether the first words of the 1982 Constitution always reflect our politicians’ convictions: “Considering that Canada is founded on principles which recognise the supremacy of God and the primacy of law...” In what measure does the “supremacy of God” remain a major reference point, in parliamentary debates?

### **Respect for Convictions of Faith**

Exactly forty years today the Fathers of Vatican Council II promulgated the pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World. This document is worth revisiting, especially the section on socio-political commitment: “The Council exhorts Christians, as citizens of both cities, to perform their duties faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. It is a mistake to think that, because we have no lasting city, but seek the city which is to come, we are entitled to evade our earthly responsibilities; this is

to forget that because of our faith we are all the more bound to fulfil these responsibilities according to each one's vocation. But it is no less mistaken to think that we may immerse ourselves in earthly activities as if these latter were utterly foreign to religion, and religion were nothing more than the fulfilment of acts of worship and the observance of a few moral obligations. One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and their day-to-day conduct."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Austin Flannery, O.P., Gen. Ed., *Vatical Council II Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations... in Inclusive Language*. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996, p. 211.