

The Defense of Life as a Condition for the Legitimacy of Democracy

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Abstract

While it undoubtedly has many flaws, the democratic environment provides us with the best hope for the defense and protection of human life and dignity. Despite the physical presence of democracy in many countries in our world today, the Church has to remain vigilant so as to ensure that the basic rights of all citizens are protected and that an environment exists where democratic structures and principles are nurtured and withheld. This is particularly urgent in the many developing nations of the world where democratic principles are still somewhat new and the tendency of other principles based on greed and primordial sentiments such as ethnicity and religious affiliations too often dominate the political landscape. The Church must reclaim its Teaching Authority in season and out of season, welcome or unwelcome, while also decoding and distilling the prophecies of the millions of citizens who inhabit no thrones or kingdoms and whose voice is often ignored. This paper identifies some key areas in which the Church can and must intervene to ensure that democracy places the human person at the centre of its principles and practices.

Introduction

In Elie Wiesel's little book, *Night* (2006), we are introduced to a neighbour of the Wiesels, a certain Mrs. Schachter who had often frequented their home. We are introduced to her in the course of the deportation of the Jewish community in the neighbourhood of the Wiesels. Unfortunately, unlike other families, her husband and two sons had been mistakenly transported by an earlier vehicle, leaving her and her ten-year-old son behind. Families were usually deported together, at least until they got to the concentration camps. Mr. Wiesel recalls that the lady kept asking

why she had been separated from her family and had exhibited the worst symptoms of depression. On the third day of their arduous journey, the silence of the night was suddenly pierced by her shouts of *Fire! I see a Fire, I see a Fire!* The hapless crowd was startled and, according to Mr. Wiesel, when everyone turned to look at her, she stood there like a *withered tree in a field of wheat*. She continued howling: *Look! Look at this fire! This terrible fire! Have mercy on me!* No one knew where they were being taken to, no one saw any fire anywhere in sight. Frustrated and unable to calm her down, her fellow passenger rained heavy blows on her head and body and then distanced themselves from her. The only one who stuck with her in innocence was her ten-year-old son who obviously had no choice, though he himself had seen no fire in sight. All day she remained mute, absent, and alone. Then again, she began the shouts: *The fire, over there!* This time, she was pointing at somewhere in the distance. Mr. Wiesel stated that the heat, the thirst and the stench were nothing compared to the screams of Mrs. Schachter which psychologically tore the passengers apart. A few days later, their train pulled up at a station and everyone peered out. There, before them was written boldly, the name of the station: Auschwitz! None of the thousands of Jewish passengers had ever heard of that name before. But, no sooner had they got off the train than they saw the fires, the flames and the furnaces of Auschwitz, fires which would devour almost all of them. Sadly, Mrs. Schachter had already died from their beating and could not say how it was that she had seen the fire many days before they had arrived at this infamous station.

Mr. Elie Weisel, a survivor, would spend the rest of his life trying to find out how it was that the world did not hear or see the fires before they swallowed six million Jews. How was it that the Journalists did not write about it? How did the politicians not speak about it? How did the Churches not condemn it?

When I read this little book, I felt that Mrs. Schachter's fate was similar to that of the prophets before her. How is it that the world seems always unable to develop a remote sensing capacity for detecting the smoke of evil well before these disasters engulf the world? Time after time, the world has woken up too late for the victims of injustice. Time after time, the world has refused to see the *Fire* and has ignored, muffled or bludgeoned the voices of the prophets. The stories are all too familiar, including the most recent ones: the slave trade, Nazism, Apartheid,

Bosnia, Rwanda, North Korea, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and so on. I fear that in many corners of the world today, even in the name of democracy, atrocities are being committed, but again, it will probably be too late before the world wakes up to see the smoke or the *Fire*.

In these reflections, I wish to argue that despite the physical evidence of the presence of democracy in many countries around the world, the Church has to remain vigilant so as to detect the smoke and the *Fire* well ahead of time. We must do this by reasserting the Teaching authority of the Church. My conclusion is that the Church must reclaim its voice by teaching in season and out of season, welcome or unwelcome, while also decoding and distilling the prophesies of the millions of the voices of the Mrs. Schachters who inhabit no thrones or kingdoms and wear no prophetic garb.

I will therefore divide this paper into three sections. Firstly, I will briefly explain how and why, despite its flaws, the democratic environment provides us with the best hope for the defense and protection of human life. Secondly, I wish to explain how and why we must insist that our citizens return to Politics as a noble vocation. Finally, I will identify some of the key areas of intervention to ensure that Democracy places the human person at the centre of its principles and practices.

The imperative of democracy

It can be argued that despite the ironic explosion of violence which made the human person the first casualty at the dawn of the return to Democracy it will be right to argue that the return to Democracy has been the first victory of *the end of history*. We can also argue that the real challenge now is not so much a question of whether developing nations will adopt democracy but how they will deepen it. Although democracy itself provides the necessary environment, we know that it is not sufficient to ensure the protection of the lives of ordinary citizens. Nazism, the Congo, Somalia and Rwanda represent twisted forms of democratic expressions.

Today, as with the Parable of the sower, the growth of the seeds of democracy is threatened by so many forces. Yet, we have to continue to nurture and tend these seeds with patience. Many developing nations

are fighting many battles in this regard. After so many years of civilian and military dictatorships the institutions to support democracy are still very new and weak while the socio-economic challenges are really enormous. The dangers and possibilities of citizens backsliding and crying for the fleshpots of the past exist. Like the people of Israel, the temptation to recall the good old days continues to appear on the horizon when people feel frustrated by democracy. With our experiences of the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Rwanda, there are many who continue to wonder if some of our developing nations are *ready for democracy*. In a country like Nigeria, return to democracy has been marked by the resurgence of violence which continues to claim thousands of lives in the name of old primordial sentiments, generally couched as ethno-religious conflict and a skewed view of religion as espoused now by Boko Haram.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Nigerians are yet to appreciate the full weight of democracy especially given that corruption persists especially among the elite and with the judiciary increasingly compromised. We must appreciate of course that most of what we are facing now is the legacy of the military regimes of the last thirty years. It will take time to tame the dragon, but we must remain committed to Democracy and Freedom. For, as the great Winston Churchill said, *Democracy itself is the worst form of government, except for others*. What we ought to be concerned with is how to ensure that democracy is built on a sound foundation that will last, how these structures can ensure a just and fair society that creates an environment for individuals, groups and communities to fulfill their Godgiven ambitions.

As Professor Amartya Sen, the winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics has reminded us, it is only under conditions of freedom that individuals and nations can grow and develop (Amartya Sen, *Development As Freedom*, 1999). I wish to propose that a system that guarantees the expression of individual freedom is an antidote to dictatorship and a guarantee for the attainment of the *Common Good*, that true test for the legitimacy of a democracy. To do this, we shall now turn our attention briefly to how, through the application of the rich texture of the Church's social teachings, we can help to institutionalise democracy and ensure the defense of human life.

Democracy as a tool for the Common Good and the defense of life

To establish that the defense of human life and human rights is the condition and basis for the legitimacy of democracy we need to explain why the province of Human Rights should be the sacred ground for the drama of politics in any democracy. To do this, we need to properly understand Human rights against the backdrop of the Church's Social teachings.

While we note the monumental leap that the world made by adopting the 1945 Human Rights Charter, we must not lose sight of the historical context in which these developments took place, namely that more than three quarters of the peoples of the developing world were still living under colonial bondage and considered subjects or surrogates to existing empires. The world has made tremendous progress since then and it is a welcome development to note that Africa, Arab and the Asian worlds have now adopted their own Human Rights instruments taking into consideration their own cultural peculiarities and challenges. Examples of these include the *African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, adopted in June 1981; the *Arab Charter on Human Rights*, adopted by the League of Arab States in September 1994; and the *Declaration of Asian Human Rights Charter* adopted in November 2001. Many of these Instruments are still in formative stages, but they at least provide a frame work for Human Rights discourse, the development of a political culture and the deepening of political culture. Indeed, the Asian Charter even more progressively offers the right to Democracy as a Human right when it states:

Colonialism and other modern developments significantly changed the nature of Asian political societies. The traditional systems of accountability and public participation in affairs of state as well as the relationship of citizens to the government were altered fundamentally. Citizens became subjects. The traditional systems of accountability and public participation in affairs of state as well as the relationship of citizens to the government were altered fundamentally. Citizens became subjects, while the government became more pervasive and powerful. Colonial laws and authoritarian habits and style of administration persisted after independence. The state has become the source of corruption and the oppression of the people. The democratization and humanization of the state is a pre-condition for the respect for and the protection of rights.

The state, which claims to have the primary responsibility for the development and well-being of the people, should be humane, open and accountable. The corollary of the respect for human rights is a tolerant and pluralistic system, in which people are free to express their views and to seek to persuade others and in which the rights of minorities are respected. People must participate in public affairs, through the electoral and other decision-making and implementing processes, free from racial, religious or gender discriminations (*Declaration of Asian Human Rights Charter, Right to Democracy*, sections 5:1/2, updated, March 18th, 1998).

We need to state right from the beginning that at the centre of the claims of Human rights is the right to Life. Everything else is important only to the extent that it protects, guarantees or facilitates the attainment of the welfare of the human person. Thus, the right to Life is so important because, in the final analysis, it is the basis of our common humanity irrespective of religious or cultural differences. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, the right to life is divinely conferred on the individual by God, the Creator. Secondly, each Individual lives in a person-in-relationship situation. Thirdly, the Individual is unique, irreplaceable. It is a proper understanding of this that provides a context for what Africans refer to as the spirit of *Ubuntu*, *I am because we are*. Note that the word *Ubuntu* was popularized during the South African Truth Commission discourse. It became the metaphor for defining reconciliation. This theme is taken up by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* (2000). Thus, on closer examination, it is evident that the spirit of democracy and Human rights has its roots in our common humanity across cultures and histories (Amartya Sen, *Democracy Isn't Western*, 2006).

For us in the Catholic Church, it was really in the 1960s that the Human rights discourse leapt into public memory with the publication of the earth breaking Encyclical, *Pacem In Terris*, by Pope John XXIII. In a statement made in 1998, fifty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales summed up the thrust of the encyclical:

Human rights include the right to life; the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and the necessary social services; the right to be

looked after in the event of ill-health, disability, widowhood, old age, unemployment; the right to a good name; freedom to investigate the truth, and freedom of speech and publication; freedom to pursue a choice of career; the right to be accurately informed about public events; the right to share in the benefits of culture; the right to receive a good general education; the right to raise children, which belongs primarily to the parents; the right not only to be given the opportunity to work but also to enjoy the exercise of personal initiative in that work; the right to a just wage; the right to the private ownership of property including that of productive goods; the right to meet together with others and to form associations; the right to freedom of movement; and the right to take an active part in public life, and to make a contribution to the common welfare (1998).

After *Pacem In Terris*, Pope John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis* stands out as another Encyclical that focused on human dignity and human rights. The Holy Father used this, his first Encyclical, to demonstrate that the centrality of the restoration of human dignity would be a primary preoccupation of his Papacy. Drawing from Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, this Encyclical focuses on the mission of Christ and its redemptive flavour. Pope John Paul II developed a Christian anthropology that showed how the *new human being redeemed by Christ* now has dignity and thus ought to be the focus of the Church's concern. He continued by stating that:

The Church has always taught that the fundamental duty of power is solicitude for the common good of society; this is what gives power its fundamental rights. Precisely in the name of these premises of the objective ethical order, the rights of power can only be understood on the basis of respect for the objective and inviolable rights of man. The common good that authority in the State serves is brought to full realization only when all the citizens are sure of their rights. The lack of this leads to the dissolution of society, opposition by citizens to authority, or a situation of oppression, intimidation, violence, and terrorism, of which many examples have been provided by the totalitarianisms of this century. Thus the principle of human rights is of profound concern to the area of social justice and is the measure by which it can be tested in the life of political bodies (*Redemptor Hominis*, 17).

The high point of Pope John Paul II's teaching on the sanctity of life came

with the earth breaking Letter, *Evangelium Vitae*. Here, the Holy Father opens with the definitive call to us to realize that incomparable worth of the human person and argues that: "After all, life on earth is not an 'ultimate' but a 'penultimate' reality; even so, it remains a *sacred reality* entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters".

Over the years therefore, the Catholic Church has been consistent in the fulfillment of its role as Teacher. However, it is clear that in spite of all this, the world's problems have not gone away and we are forced to recall the admonition of St Paul on the need to preach the Gospel, welcome or unwelcome.

When the state fails in its duty to weave a garb of legislative support to ensure that these rights of the individual are protected while also ensuring that the individual performs his or her duties and obligations to the state, our society comes to resemble Hobbes' state of nature where life was *brutish, nasty and short*. But, the duty of protecting and enforcing these rights cannot be left to the state alone. This is because the state itself can and does overstep its bounds and it is sometimes the greatest violator of the rights of the individual. In these moments of moral upheaval, as was articulated by His Holiness ahead of his election as Pope Benedict XVI, this is where the Church appears to clarify the moral vision (Ratzinger, 2005, see especially chapter 1). Thus, along with other organs of society, now commonly known as Civil Society Organizations, the church becomes a monitor, regulator and agent of restraint of the state by way of advocacy and engagement.

This is important because outside the Creator, no other organ of state and no individual has a right over this life, even their own. Only the Giver, God, can take it away. Thus, the state has a duty to ensure that the individual protects his/her own life. This is why, right from the beginning, Jesus Christ categorically stated that it was the essence of His mission: *I have come that you may have Life and have it to the full* (Jn 10:10). The mission is operationalised through the removal of all barriers that stand in the way of the realization and fulfillment of a full life as we see in Lk. 4: 18. Our next question is, how does the Church engage the state and how should we articulate this challenge? To answer this question, I will list some proposals as to where and how I believe the Church needs to

engage society to ensure that it nurtures democracy and also to ensure that the defense of human life becomes the primary concern and condition of democracy.

How the Church can nurture democratic values

The end of Communism in 1989 left the world rather confused. The nations of the West burst into celebration believing that the end of Communism marked the *beginning of the end of history*. Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), began a storm of debate over the interpretation of the events of 1989. Embedded in this line of thought was the belief that western liberal democracy, driven by market forces, would naturally be the choice of all nations. Looking back, from Bosnia, Rwanda to 9/11, subsequent developments have proved this prophesy to be inaccurate and presumptuous.

The result, as we see today, is that the struggle to expand the frontiers of democracy has taken on a missionary momentum, most of which is really about power and building of new secular empires. After the Church relaxed its guard, politicians are now engaged in what a scholar has referred to as the construction of *a theology of empire* (Jim Wallis, 2005).

The rise of global terrorism has not only posed a challenge to the foundations of democracy but now threatens human life and all that we hold dear. There seems to be a crisis around the concept of *Truth*. The terrorist holds on to a kind of certainty regarding his or her absolute claims that s/he is right to kill, murder and maim innocent lives in the name of his or her own views of Truth. But what is this evidence of? It is evidence of a world in search of a culture of truth informed by a right conscience. In abandoning or loosening its hold on its teaching authority, the Church has created a condition for the erosion of the fine edges of the human conscience, introducing relativism that is the product of the culture of a conscience in dire need of proper formation.

In exercising its teaching authority, the Catholic Church does not only aim at reaching its adherents, but it also speaks to men and women of good will. Through the application of Philosophy/Reason and Natural Law, the Church can achieve the same level of understanding with men and women of non Christian faith traditions. By the application of

Revelation, on the other hand, the Church sometimes reaches consensus and builds bridges with other denominations within the Christian community. Perhaps this explains why the late Pope John Paul II's Pastoral Letter, *Fides et Ratio*, generated so much controversy when it was released. But we find in that Document an opportunity for the realization of this consensus through dialogue based on Faith and Reason. In it, the Holy Father noted that:

Theology's source and starting point must always be the word of God revealed in history, while its final goal will be an understanding of that word which increases with each passing generation. Yet since God's word is Truth (cf. John 17:17) the human search for truth - philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules - can only help to understand God's word better. (*Fides et Ratio*, 73).

In the pursuit of this methodology that applies both faith and reason we seek to identify areas of engagement between Church and state that can ensure and guarantee a sustainable democracy that places the human person at the centre of policy. I refer to these as the options and challenges for the Church today.

Options and challenges for the Church today

1. Clarification of moral options/conscience

It should be clear to us that the prognosis of the new world order, hinged on a view of the world that focused on reason and had little time and attention for faith, was wrong. The rest of the world has not rushed to embrace western, liberal models of Democracy as if it was a one size fits all. Although the Church did so much to bring down Communism, it does not seem to have been at the starting blocks helping to point at the moral imperatives of creating a new world based on human values. The result is that we have ended up with a world that now threatens the future of humanity and has also made life so cheap. The fact that the greatest threat to world peace today is posed by non state actors that base their arguments on a rather skewed and eclectic reading of human history is a major challenge to the Church. It is important that the Church pursues more aggressively a programme of education of our Laity and the general society on the role and place of Conscience. The development of a human rights culture and a programme of Civis in our educational

system would be very helpful.

2. A concerted effort to end poverty

There is a general belief that the world does possess enough to feed all God's children. But, as the late Mahatma Gandhi said *There is enough for everyone's need, but there isn't enough for everyone's greed*. Many scholars have come to believe that the battle to end world hunger is not an illusion and that it is a project that we can execute successfully in our life time (Jeffery Sachs, 2005). These were the ideals that inspired the Debt Cancellation efforts spearheaded by the Church and a lot of groups and individuals like Bono and Bob Geldof.

There has been a lot of debate about the role and place of Aid in ending poverty. However some of us are of the view that if the international community can help design a mechanism for monitoring economic outflows from developing nations, with a view to ensuring the creation of more equitable trade and business environments, more and more countries can climb out of poverty. This would be preferable to the excruciating wait for aid from the donor nations which comes with too many strings.

There is an urgent need for the Church to keep abreast with the objective goals and principles of the new *secular catechism* to end Poverty known as the *Millennium Development Goals, MDGs*. Already the Goals are being presented as a cure-all for the problems of the developing world. There is need for extra care and to deepen our people's understanding and appreciation of the issues involved in the attainment of these lofty goals. The various Churches must engage their governments to ensure that either by Legislature or Policy, values that undermine the Family and the sacredness of the individual person do not get sacrificed on the altar of politics. The sacredness of human life remains one of the best meeting points for dialogue as demonstrated in the way that many Muslims responded to the Encyclical on the dignity of human life, *Evangelium Vitae*, when it was released in 1995.

3. Rethinking strategies for coping with globalisation/terrorism

The problems posed by the so-called fight against terrorism need some very careful consideration, articulation and clarification. The so-called fight against Terrorism has become a Trojan horse and an incubator for old hatreds, greed and new forms of colonial expansionism. For, there are too many historical injustices that still persist which the terrorists

continue to use to prey upon the Muslim community in general and other developing nations. These injustices give credence to some of the claims, no matter how dubious they may sound. Clearly, guided by the Church, the world needs to think more clearly and creatively as to how the problems of the Palestinians will be resolved without sacrificing the right of Israel as an independent state. Terrorist organisations have continued to draw inspiration from the claims of this injustice.

Right from the early stages of his Papacy, the late Holy Father did take up this challenge, with the climax marked by the official visit to President Yasser Arafat by the Holy Father in the year 2000 in Bethlehem. During that historic visit, the Holy Father reminded Mr. Arafat: "Our meeting today makes clear the commitment of the Catholic Church to work unceasingly for peace in the Middle East as a partner of all peoples. The Church understands the aspirations of the different peoples and insists that dialogue is the only way to make those aspirations a reality rather than a dream" (John Paul II, 2000).

Today, such terrorist groups as the Boko Haram in Nigeria have also fed into the ideology that seeks to internationalise Muslim grievances. It is important to note that the persistence of perceived injustice and poverty offer these groups the ground to continue to seem relevant. This is why both Muslim and Christian religious leaders must find a common ground by standing and speaking out together. On both sides, there must also be a concerted programme for common citizenship, the punishment of criminals and a robust judiciary to end impunity.

4. Engage in proactive law making advocacy

There is the need for Local Episcopal Conferences to sharpen their capacity to negotiate and participate in law making, law reform and so on. To do this effectively, Justice and Peace initiatives must incorporate the efforts of competent legal experts to monitor but also to guide lawmakers in their task in developing nations. Our lawmakers in the National Assemblies and Parliaments in developing nations are constantly under pressure and attack from foreign lobbyists for organizations that devalue human life. Very often, these legislative initiatives come under the cover of assistance for the advancement and attainment of Women's rights. It is important that our Christian women groups attain all the information that they require from the Nigerian Constitution, State Laws and relevant Church Documents to enable

them have a voice on the issues that affect them. Since the Beijing Conference, women groups have tended to present the Catholic Church as an obstacle to the realization of some of its goals. Yet, as the late Holy Father did show, the world has more to gain from exploring and deepening its appreciation of what he himself called the genius of woman (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).

5. Acquire expertise on key economic and environmental issues

As a corollary, there is need for the Church to also improve its arsenal of knowledge regarding such issues as Economy, Environment, Trade, Debts and a range of other issues that affect the family and the majority of our people especially under the cover of economic reforms. Today, oil exploration, along with the so-called *blood for diamond* adventures into Africa have seen the lives of poor people made more vulnerable and added pressure put on the environment. Unaware of the conditions under which they live, poor people daily struggle with environmental elements that endanger their present and future lives. For effective advocacy, the Church will need to possess the requisite tools of expertise to enable it engage the state and the multinational companies which do business in the developing world. Also, matters relating to national income, budgeting, allocation of income to various segments of society, all these are areas where the Churches need to be able to engage the state vigorously to ensure that resources are effectively put to good use.

6. Ensure proper management of resources

There is need for the Churches to equip themselves with the details of the contents of agreements which Governments enter into on behalf of their people. Negotiations relating to borrowing of funds from international agencies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Paris Club and so on, need to be transparent. With proper knowledge of the issues the Churches can help citizens participate and in the process enrich the debate. In the years of the struggle for Debt cancellation, citizens of developing countries ought to have learnt many lessons regarding the dangers of not holding their countries to account. The great lesson we in Nigeria and other developing countries ought to have learnt is to become eternally vigilant over what happens to our resources. This requires a much bolder and an invigorated civil society, energised by a proper knowledge of the issues around the Oil industry with a view to helping citizens understand how their resources are being pilfered and how all these connect with the persistence of violence and

crises in our society.

7. Ensure the protection of the Family

The Family remains the most vulnerable institution today. We cannot talk about human rights and human dignity unless we get the arguments right about the family as the beginning of society and the Church itself. To discuss the various assaults on the family today would deserve an entire paper. But suffice it to state that if we get it right with the family, whether it is in the area of culture, faith, education, values, or social security, other problems of the larger society will be easier to deal with. There is need for the Church to continue to guide its children on the ideals of family life especially given that abortion, teenage pregnancies, casual sex, the destructive scourge of HIV-Aids, same sex marriages, and so on, threaten our collective survival as a people today.

There is also the need for the Church to lead the way in concretizing the meanings of the empowerment of women. There is no doubt that today, in many developing nations; women constitute an endangered people whose future is trapped in a twilight zone where culture, religion and tradition conspire to consign them to the lower rungs of society. There is an urgent need to formulate policies that can release the latent energies of women for the growth and development of society. The Church can help our women realize that beyond just being told that empowerment is about the manipulation of their bodies, they need to realize that their greatest strength lies in their roles of the anchor of the family.

8. The need to rescue religion from politicians

As I have stated, the Church did seem to have relaxed its guard after the collapse of Communism in 1989, perhaps due to the fact that some of its children were now in power and the old order had collapsed. It was assumed that democracy and freedom were in good hands. These scenarios have been replicated in Africa and Asia where the Church has struggled to install democracy only to see some of the old habits of the past reproduced in the new order. But, His Holiness, Pope Benedict has provided a more insightful analysis and concluded that we did not have the correct diagnosis. He has captured these sentiments in his reflections on the collapse of Communism by noting that we wrongly focused on the externalities of the failures of Communism. According to His Holiness:

The collapse of Communist systems was due in the first

instance to their false economic dogmatics. But there is a tendency to overlook the deeper fact that they broke down because of their contempt for man and because they subordinated morality to the needs of the system and its promises of a glowing future. The real catastrophe that the Communists left behind is not economic. It consists in the devastation of souls, in destruction of moral consciousness (Ratzinger, 2005, 145).

Sadly, somehow, the rest of the world seemed to have been more concerned with the ideological consequences of the end of the cold war. The result has been the lack of restraint exhibited by the powerful nations especially the United States of America and the United Kingdom on the tragic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, their involvement with the *Arab spring* coming to a climax with the killing of Muammar Ghadafi. Clearly, the consequences and implications of these developments, for good or for bad, will haunt humanity for a long time to come. Rather than facing the consequences of what has produced the cloud of Terrorism that now threatens the world, the proponents of this fight have been engaged in the appropriation of the moral fiber of international discourse, pretending that, somehow, they are the world's knights in shining armour. What has turned out to be a misadventure was presented to the world as a *holy war*, some form of a skewed Christian adulterated form of jihad, with the result that we were eventually unable to tell the difference between the contending moral claims by both Osama Bin Laden and the President of the United States of America along with his surrogate of those days, the British Prime Minister, Mr. Tony Blair.

There is an urgent need to redeem what is left of the moral contents of the cup of politics. For, as we have seen, politicians have increasingly become holier than the Pope in matters relating to the political and economic goals of their nations. The book *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, published in 2001, seemed also like a cry in the wilderness when it addressed this issue with sufficient urgency. In this book, the author, Jim Wallis, showed how politicians in the United States had held the liberating truth of the Gospels captive. According to Mr. Wallis, there is need to rescue religion from those politicians who love to say how religious they are but utterly fail to apply the values of faith to their public leadership and political policies (Wallis, 2005, 4).

These criticisms notwithstanding, the Church must encourage support for politics and politicians. Again, as the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales noted

Not the least of the concerns we have at this time is the low status of politicians in public estimation, which is neither justified by the evidence nor good for the health of democracy. Politics is an honourable vocation, which often exacts great personal cost from those who engage in it, and from their families. The fact that some politicians from time to time fall short of the highest standards is not grounds for dismissing the whole class of politicians as unworthy of respect (1998, n. 58).

The objective of this call to my mind is the urgent need to distill the truths of the Gospel, to help ordinary people see how they can be agents of Truth in their daily lives and how politics as a vocation can help Christians fulfill their duties and responsibilities.

9. Reasserting the Teaching Authority of the Church

Again, as I have said over and over in this paper, there is an urgent need for the Church to engage society as Teacher. In a way, fighting Communism or ending Apartheid or military dictatorship in Africa and Asia may have exhausted the Church or created the impression that the enemy has been defeated and that the new arena of politics remains solely the responsibility of politicians. But, as we know, the old order does not yield so easily. It will be a costly mistake for the Churches to think that the business of politics now is the business of politicians who can be trusted even if these wear the cross on their lapels. Clearly, the great challenge of clarifying the moral options remains perhaps even a greater challenge than that of overthrowing the ancient regime. After all, it is easier to destroy the foundations of the building than to erect new ones.

To this end, although the leadership of the Churches must remain above partisan politics, they must create an environment for the recruitment of leadership that will serve society in the field of politics. As such, Christian Students and Youth Associations, Knights of the Church and their Ladies must be encouraged to seek politics as a noble vocation in life.

The observations by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in their

excellent study and reflections on the Common Good are pertinent. The Bishops noted that:

The Church has the right and the duty to advocate a social order in which the human dignity of all is fostered, and to protest when it is in any way threatened. Thus the Church opposes totalitarianism because it oppresses people and deprives them of their freedom. While recognising the importance of wealth creation, the Church denounces any abuses of economic power such as those which deprive employees of what is needed for a decent standard of living. The Church also rejects the view that human happiness consists only in material well-being, and that achieving this alone is the goal of any government. If a government pays too much attention to material welfare at the expense of other values, it may advocate policies which reduce people to a passive state of dependency on welfare. Equally, if a government gives too little priority to tackling poverty, ill-health, poor housing and other social ills, the human dignity of those who suffer these afflictions is denied. In every society respect for human dignity requires that, so far as possible, basic human needs are met. The systematic denial of compassion by individuals or public authorities can never be a morally justified political option (1998).

In responding to this challenge, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria has performed quite creditably in championing the course of freedom and justice. Just like a lot of other African nations, we still have a lot of difficulties on the socio-economic front, but on the whole, our role in ending dictatorship and bringing about democracy and freedom has been commended by all and sundry. These initiatives have been well documented (Peter Schineller, 2004; Matthew Kukah, 2003). The Churches in Africa can and must seek to do more and not relax on their vigilance.

10. The Church as an agent of reconciliation

Perhaps another one of the greatest challenges that most developing nations face is that of national reconciliation in the post conflict situations in which they find themselves after the old order has collapsed. The opening of the files in the former Communist enclaves has revealed astonishing evidence of compromise by even senior Church personnel, family members, close friends and associates. Similarly, nations which lived under military or civilian dictatorship and apartheid

faced the same problems. The challenges of bringing closure to the past and laying a foundation for the future fall outside the immediate influence of the state and its agents which tend to see reconciliation as a means of side stepping some of the difficult questions of the past. In the end, the Government of the day tends to see reward and cooption of friends and cronies as a means of spreading the gains of reconciliation. There is an urgent need for the Church to help to create a moral template to ensure reconciliation with justice and equity. In my own experience in Nigeria, which I have documented in my book *Witness to Justice*, I found that many victims tended to appreciate moral and spiritual support, comfort and solidarity more than economic or political compensations as the solutions to their pains.

For many nations coming out of dictatorship, healing the past and building the future is an uphill task and very often the new political class does not possess the requisite experience and expertise to undertake this duty. Sometimes, the Churches, with their international outreach, universal claims and experience can help to provide support and expertise for their nations. Bosnia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo have demonstrated to us that even some states that are religiously or culturally homogenous do not escape the fracture and fissures of the disproportionate deployment of power, position, privilege and other decisions which create exclusion for some citizens.

11. Occupying the Watchtower

Still on their reflections on the Common Good, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales noted that:

The Church in each country, under the pastoral guidance of the local bishops, has a continuing duty to apply the values of the Gospel to the problems of society, and so help all members of the church, lay, religious and ordained, to play an active part in striving to build a just and compassionate social order. The foundation of this teaching is the dignity of the human person. In virtue simply of our shared humanity, we must surely respect and honour one another. Each individual has a value that can never be lost and must never be ignored. Moreover, each of us is made in the image and likeness of God. Society must therefore first of all respect and protect human life itself - at all its stages from conception to its natural end. This is the bedrock of our civilisation, and it is why abortion virtually on demand is one of the greatest scandals of our time (1998).

At the close of the last millennium, the Catholic Church had every reason to be proud of its achievements at least in playing the role of the sentinel. From Poland, the Philippines, to South Africa, Latin America, Malawi or Nigeria, the role of the Churches in bringing about an end to dictatorship by the deployment of its sheer moral force has been celebrated.

Conclusion

The Church must constantly warn the world never to let its guard down. In the light of this and against a backdrop of the issues we have raised, I believe if we return to where we started, we ought to see Mrs. Schachter as a metaphor for us to addressing a world that is challenged by moral relativism. In this way, can identify the fires well before we walk into the lurking flames of our modern Auschwitz.

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