Imagine That!
The Catholic Moral Imagination and Political Responsibility

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With U.S. Catholics having a heightened awareness of their political responsibilities as the elections approach, pastoral ministers are invited to engage their communities’ moral imagination through preaching and teaching about political responsibility and in so doing commemorate the tenth anniversary of *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*.

With the 2008 elections approaching, some Catholics are seeking principles to guide their voting. Others are already aware of rich insights from the Catholic moral tradition, some of which are communicated in shorthand through principles. When some mistakenly equate Catholic morality with the application of principles to situations, they neglect the significance of the Catholic moral imagination. Whether one is trying to better understand the tradition or the contemporary situation, the power of images should not be underestimated. In *Faithful Citizenship*, the image of a table invites the Catholic imagination to reflect about political responsibility and about the implications of being a eucharistic people. Since *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* does not engage the moral imagination to the same degree as the previous statement on political responsibility, pastoral ministers will need to be more intentional about sharing Catholic social teaching in ways that bring the tradition to life and help Catholics see the contemporary situation.

Commemorating the tenth anniversary of *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, this article invites pastoral ministers to consider ways in which they might engage the

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Catholic moral imagination about political responsibility through preaching and teaching. First, we consider the way in which “preaching the just Word” shapes the Catholic moral imagination. In so doing, we remember the important contributions of Walter Burghardt who dedicated the last years of his life to helping the church hear biblical justice through the proclamation of the Word and see its significance for our world today. Second, we examine recent ecclesial teaching about political responsibility in terms of its engagement of the Catholic moral imagination. In so doing, we are attentive to the importance of engaging the Catholic moral imagination in order to share Catholic social teaching more effectively.

**Preaching the Just Word**

*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* reminds us: “The word of God announces God's reign of justice and peace. Our preaching of the just word continues the preaching of Jesus and the prophets” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 3). Just as the preaching of Jesus and the prophets met resistance, contemporary preaching, in which the Gospel raises consciousness about injustices in our social life and calls for conversion, will meet resistance. Yet, pastoral ministry calls for embracing the opportunity to invite people to enter the biblical story with their imaginations and see contemporary reality more fully in light of this.

**The Teaching of Jesus Engaging the Moral Imagination**

Both the proclamation and fulfillment of Jesus’ teaching ministry engage the moral imagination. Echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah, the Gospel of Luke identifies his mission as “to bring good news to the poor . . . proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, [and] to let the oppressed go free . . .” (Luke 4:18). Jesus roots his teaching ministry in Israel’s story of salvation history. This story of Jesus in the synagogue recalls the prophet Isaiah who provides images of peace to a people experiencing political oppression and eventually deportation. Isaiah’s prophecies provide images of hope: swords beaten into plowshares (Isa 2:4) and wolves and lambs living together peacefully (Isa 11:6). Isaiah’s words not only invite one to imagine a future peace that God promises but also invite one to remember and be faithful to the covenant that God formed with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. For a people who had experienced the oppression of slavery in Egypt and God’s activity in freeing them from this captivity, the covenant called them to remember God’s concern for the poor and powerless and to imitate this. The images of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger drew attention to the powerless in society, who needed to be treated with justice.

At the heart of the moral life for Catholics is the covenantal call to love God with one’s whole being and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Discerning what this means in concrete circumstances is challenging at times. This can lead one to echo
the lawyer who asked Jesus to define his terms. Jesus’ response is noteworthy: he did not provide a definition of neighbor but rather told a story to engage the moral imagination of his interlocutor. The image of the despised Samaritan responding with generosity to the needs of a suffering victim invited the lawyer to see reality in a new way and be challenged to act with mercy like the Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). This story engages the analogical imagination, shedding light on contemporary situations that are not identical but comparable. For instance, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council reflect in *Gaudium et Spes*:

> In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience. . . . (no. 27)

Just as the story of the Good Samaritan can help individuals see and respond to the needs of other individuals, it can also help communities, both ecclesial and political, to recognize and respond to particular individuals in need and to social structures that contribute to their needs.

Poverty and abortion are two political issues facing our world today that are illuminated by this story of the Good Samaritan. As Jon Sobrino reflects on “The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy” from his experience of poverty and violence in El Salvador, he imagines an ecclesial response to people suffering from poverty and repression that would embody a new way of seeing reality and acting with mercy (17–24). Sobrino believes that “the church, too, even *qua* church, should reread the parable of the good Samaritan and listen to it with the same rapt attention, and the same fear and trembling, with which Jesus’ hearers first heard it” (20).

Archbishop John Roach and Cardinal Terence Cooke shared this perspective and at the same time recognized the power of this story to function as a classic that speaks across traditions. As they reflected on legalized abortion in the United States in their 1981 congressional testimony, they turned to the story of the Good Samaritan to engage the moral imagination about political responsibility. They stated:

> The New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that no Christian can sit back and ask “Who is my neighbor?” in an attempt to define limits to his or her obligations with respect to others. . . . This duty moves us not only to condemn abortion as the killing of our neighbor, but also to reach out to the pregnant woman with assistance and support both for her and for her child. . . . (Roach, 15)
Burghardt insists that Scripture, tradition, and the cry of the poor need to be appropriated by the preacher, not just as information for the intellect but also as formative influences. By modeling a prayerful response to these revelations of God among us, one invites a similar response from the community. Describing the homily, Burghardt says it “calls for all the arts of persuasion; it calls for imagination and passion; it calls for vision and fire” (53). A long quote from *Rerum Novarum* (1891), the first major document of modern Catholic social teaching, is not likely to accomplish this, but an appropriation of its concern for the worker suffering in inhuman working conditions and receiving an unjust wage can help the community see workers, such as farm workers in Immolakee, Florida, who live in similar conditions today. The combination of Scripture, tradition, and the cry of the poor invites one into
solidarity with the Immolakee workers who provide produce at low cost to fast-food restaurants, but at high cost to themselves and their families (Allen, NCR Conversation Café). The preacher does not need to determine the particular wage the workers should earn or the workers’ strategy for change, for the homily is not the place to solve complex social issues, but it is a place to raise consciousness. A parish forum for mutual discernment that draws on the gifts and expertise within the community provides a valuable complement so that the community can discern a response after awareness is raised. Not only is such a forum a place for discernment about issues of social justice raised through preaching but also for ones raised through episcopal teaching about political responsibility.

**Teaching Political Responsibility**

Politics in this election year and beyond should be about an old idea with new power—the common good. The central question should not be, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” If should be, “How can ‘we’—all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable—be better off in the years ahead? How can we protect and promote human life and dignity? How can we pursue greater justice and peace?” In the face of all these challenges, we offer once again a simple image—a table (Administrative Committee, 2).

Notice the importance of both a persuasive style and the use of an image to engage the moral imagination as the U.S. Catholic bishops introduce and frame their 2003 statement about political responsibility. The most recent statement of the U.S. Catholic bishops on political responsibility takes a step back from this one in its use of images, whether conveying the Christian story through Scripture and sacrament or representing the signs of the times to which the church responds. For precisely this reason, pastoral ministers will need to be attentive to engaging the community’s moral imagination as they share values and insights from *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

A little over a decade after the Second Vatican Council identified the mission of the church in the world in terms of reading the signs of the times in light of the Gospel and identified the life of political communities as an issue of special urgency, the Administrative Board of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference issued its first quadrennial statement on political responsibility, “The Church in the ’76 Elections,” responding to a decline in American political participation (565, 567). Continuing the tradition of quadrennial statements on political responsibility more than a quarter of a century later, the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility* in 2003. Like previous statements on political responsibility, this one offered a theological foundation for the church’s political activity and provided an extensive list of issues to consider when
voting. Identifying new signs of the times, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the clergy sex abuse scandal, the statement takes into account primarily the context of the church’s mission but also obstacles to its witness.

An important development in this statement was its use of the image of a table—a table as a place where life is nourished, a place where decisions are made, and a place where the Eucharist is celebrated. In *Faithful Citizenship*, the image of a table invites reflection on creating a place for those on the margins in society and on the formative experience of gathering around the eucharistic table. Reminiscent of the parables and Jesus’ practice of table fellowship, this engages the moral imagination and frames Catholic participation in political life in terms of the call to holiness.

Unfortunately, the most recent statement on political responsibility has not continued to use images like that of a table and has a different tone that is more directive than persuasive. To understand this change, it is helpful to recall some significant pastoral experiences since 2003. Few American Catholics will soon forget the divisions experienced within the U.S. Catholic Church during the 2004 campaigns: from debates over denying Catholic pro-choice politicians Communion, to homilies highlighting a single issue (typically war or abortion) for voters’ consideration to a “Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics,” that failed to attend seriously to the breadth of Catholic social teaching articulated in *Faithful Citizenship*. In an attempt to respond to these ecclesial signs of the times, the U.S. Catholic bishops worked collaboratively to produce a statement that the full body of bishops could support, and the statement was approved with virtual unanimity in 2007. Yet, many compromises were made to achieve this, including a diminishment of the images and persuasive style of the previous document.

*Imagining Political Responsibility*

While one might anticipate that the new theological focus on conscience in the most recent statement on political responsibility would lead to more attention to the moral imagination, this was not to be. If the theological foundation articulated in previous documents drew on ecclesiology and social ethics to emphasize the role of the church in political life, the theological foundation of this most recent document drew on fundamental moral theology to emphasize conscience formation, yet there is no explicit consideration of the imagination. The document begins its consideration of conscience formation by stating: “Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church” (no. 17). This is certainly a true statement, but one might ask how complete it is. Scripture, liturgy, and other ele-
ments of the tradition, like the lives of the saints, have the power to engage our moral imagination in significant ways that certainly contribute to conscience formation.

Not only was the consideration of the imagination inadequate in theory but it was also inadequate in the practice of describing the preferential option for the poor. The Catholic understanding of the preferential option for the poor has undoubtedly emerged from biblical reflection on contemporary poverty. This key theme of Catholic social teaching reflects God’s activity, the prophets’ message, and the person and mission of Jesus, as described in the 2003 statement on political responsibility:

Scripture teaches that God has a special concern for the poor and vulnerable. The prophets denounced injustice toward the poor as a lack of fidelity to the God of Israel. Jesus, who identified himself with “the least of these,” came to preach “good news to the poor, liberty to captives . . . and to set the downtrodden free.” The Church calls on all of us to embrace this preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, to embody it in our lives, and to work to have it shape public policies and priorities. A fundamental measure of our society is how we care for and stand with the poor and vulnerable. (15)

The biblical roots of the option for the poor are not evident in the 2007 statement. Instead of inviting Catholics to understand this theme of Catholic social teaching biblically, this statement turns to Deus Caritas Est and the Catechism of the Catholic Church to describe the option for the poor. While this might be an effective strategy to achieve unity within the episcopate on the topic, it deprives Catholics of hearing once again powerful elements of the biblical story that shape the moral imagination. It is interesting to note that the one biblical reference that was maintained in the more recent statement is the reference to “the least of these.” In this case, rather than invite people to recognize Jesus’ identification with “the least of these” as was done in 2003, the focus shifts to the means by which we will be judged.

Not only do we find less engagement of the Catholic moral imagination through a diminished use of Scripture but we also find it through the use of more abstract language to identify the signs of the times. This is particularly true as the document identifies racism twice in the section on doing good and avoiding evil. This abstract language could easily lead a person to agree that it is an evil but not see its expressions in U.S. society today. Images of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Superdome in New Orleans reveal structural racism. In similar fashion, images from the immigration debate raise questions about the extent to which race affects the debate. Catholic Charities’ recent document, “Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good,” invites people to be attentive to the structural disadvantages and privileges associated with race (9).
Finally, the tone of the document has shifted in a significant way. There has been a movement away from verbs like “call” and “urge” to greater use of verbs like “must” and “should.” While these verbs emphasize obligations with clarity and provide a means of challenging members of the community who neglect important issues, it is worth asking whether a different tone would more effectively engage the moral imagination and foster discernment among mature Catholics.

As pastoral ministers share this latest contribution to Catholic social teaching, it will be important to supplement it by engaging our Catholic moral imagination through our rich biblical heritage, formative liturgical experiences, and remembrance of holy people who are icons of Catholic social teaching. For instance, the lives of Dorothy Day, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, and Pope John Paul II shed light on Catholic social teaching about the worker and peace, the preferential option for the poor, the consistent ethic of life, and the church’s critique of both socialism and capitalism, respectively. While it might not provide the clarity that some seek, it provides a richness that is needed for forming a Catholic moral imagination that it is ready to discern how to embody Catholic social teaching in our world today.

References


