



SERVICE AND PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

“The ancient church (...) that at the same time prayed for emperors, refused to adore them, and so clearly rejected the state religion. The martyrs of the early church died for their faith in God who had revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and so they died also for freedom of conscience and for the liberty to profess their faith, a profession that no State can impose, but can only become one’s own with the grace of God with freedom of conscience.” (Benedict XVI)

In this dossier we will address the thorny issue of the presence of the laity in politics. And we say it this way because, when one addresses the topic of politics in church circles or around a fraternity, discussions often arise that challenge participants because of the diversity of opinions and the *party spirit* that seems to hover around people. At the same time, more and more, we see that the church asks the Catholic laity to analyze its participation in political life to determine if it is characterized by a coherent responsibility toward temporal realities.¹ In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the church praises and esteems the work of those who, at the service of man, devote themselves to the good of public affairs and accept the weight of the corresponding responsibilities.²² In this sense and as a fruit of the Synod on the “Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World,” Pope John Paul II expresses that “the faithful laity should in no way abdicate from their participation in “politics”; that is to say, from the many and varied economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural actions, destined to promote organically and institutionally the common good.” (*Christifidelis Laici* 42)

As *Secular Franciscans*, we are called “to be present... in the area of public life” (Rule 15). In addition, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: “citizens must, as much as possible, take an active part in public life (*Catechism of Catholic Church* 1015).

When we speak of “public life,” we refer to the social framework in which all our existence unfolds, with individual and collective activities that condition our life. But, it is evident that the field of politics has a special importance and somehow affects all other activities. For this reason, it is important that we delve into the issue of specific activities of the laity in politics.

We understand “politics” to mean the science that deals with the government or the conduct of states, cities or communities in general. It is the activity of the body of citizens that participates in the affairs of a state, a city, an autonomy, etc., with its vote, petitions, protests or otherwise.³

Being a faithful Catholic in political life is something that is not easy to practice because, we, not only have to know the obligations we have as believers – (those obligations) that come from the faith that we profess -- but we must assume the responsibilities that we have as citizens; we need to honor both obligations or we will not be complying with either of the two. For this reason, for political participation to be effective, it is important that the laity be informed and know the problems that affect the community and the various proposals for a solution (Cfr. CIC 414). In addition, (the laity) needs to understand that the reason politics exists is for the search of the common good. For this reason, when politics puts itself at the service of particular interests, personal or based on supporters, its results are radically perverted. “The social order and its progress must subordinate themselves to the good of the people ... and not the other way around.” (GS 26,3)

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, 24 nov 2002, Internet (2.19.14): http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_sp.html

² *Gaudium et spes*, 75.

³ *Diccionario Manual de la Lengua Española Vox*, 2007, Larousse Editorial, S.L.

With the direct and clear language that characterizes him, Pope Francis, when answering a question made by a Professor on the political and social endeavors of Christians in society,⁴ comments: “It is an obligation for a Christian to get involved in politics. We Christians cannot ‘play Pilate,’ wash our hands: we cannot. We must get involved in politics, because politics is one of the highest forms of charity, because it seeks the common good. And lay Christians must work in politics. You might say to me: ‘But it’s not easy!’ Neither is being a priest. Easy things do not exist in life. It’s not easy: politics is too dirty! But I ask myself: It’s too dirty? Why? Because Christians did not get involved in politics with an evangelical spirit? I leave you with one question: It is easy to say ‘it’s somebody else’s fault.’ But, me, what am I doing? It is an obligation! To work for the common good is the obligation of the Christian! And many times the road in which to work is politics. There are other roads: professor, for example, is another road. But political activity for the common good is one of the roads. This is clear.”

The theme of the commitment of the Christian in politics recurs in the Magisterium of the Church, that always seeks clarity in this matter since there are those who think that the Church, as such, should remain separate. In their “Message to the People of God,” the Bishops, united at the Synod on “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith” (Vatican, October 26, 2012), declared: “One area in which the light of the Gospel can and should illuminate the steps of humanity is public life, to which you are asked for a selfless and transparent commitment for the common good, with full respect for the dignity of the human person from conception to his natural end, for the family founded on the marriage of a man and a woman, for educational freedom, for the promotion of religious freedom, for the elimination of injustices, inequalities, discrimination, violence, racism, hunger and war. A clear testimony is asked of Christians, to live the law of love (charity) in the exercise of politics.”⁵

Instruments of Political Participation

“Political parties have the duty of encouraging broad participation and access for all to public responsibilities. Parties are called upon to interpret the aspirations of civil society directing them to the common good, offering citizens the actual opportunity to come together for the formation of political options. Parties must be democratic in their internal structure, capable of political synthesis and with a vision of the future.” (Compendio DSI 413). “There can generally be a number of parties where Catholics can serve in order to exercise – particularly through parliamentary representation – their right/duty to participate in the building of the civil life of their country” (Nota doctrinal, 3). The importance of this participation in public life should be noted, being that the most important contribution a Christian can give is that of offering testimony of the Gospel, in defense of ethics, morality and morals. “If there are no ethics, everything is possible,” notes Pope Francis at his address on Pentecost 2013.

What does the common good refer to?

“The common good embraces the sum of those conditions of social life with which men, families and associations can achieve their own perfection more fully and easily.” (Gaudium et spes 74) When we refer to the common good we must mention that politics at the service of the common good must ensure among others, the fundamental right, first and foremost, of every human person to life from the very instant of conception which must be recognized in its ontological dignity as a person, to natural death. Politics at the service of the common good is equally one that defends and protects the family, formed on the true marriage that unites a man and a woman.⁶

⁴ Interview with Pope Francis <http://infocatolica.com/blog/sacroprofano.php/1306101033-entrevista-con-el-papa-franci>

⁵ XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 7-28, 2012, “Message to the People of God”, 10, en Internet (19.02.14): http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20121026_message-synod_sp.html

⁶ “Manifest” that aired on November 22, 2009 in Madrid, XI Congress “Catholics and Public Life, organized by the University Foundation San Pablo CEU, work of the Catholic Association of Propagandists

Bearers of peace

As Secular Franciscans we cannot lose our direction, “called to be bearers of peace in the family and society.” (CC.GG.23.1) Therefore, we cannot remain indifferent in the face of all that can put peace in danger. This entails the commitment to actions on behalf of the truth, liberty, justice and charity, all of which form the foundation of peace. Thus, we must be clear about what our attitude should be when we confront the lie, the lack of liberty, justice and charity.

Acting in conscience and in freedom

Man in general, and the lay Catholic unequivocally, has the right to act in conscience and in freedom to make moral decisions personally (CIC 1782). Society and the State should not constrain a person to act against his conscience, nor impede him to act in conformity with it (Compendio DSI 421). Therefore, there are inalienable rights that must be respected:

- The Right to Conscientious Objection: The citizen is not obliged in conscience to follow the requirements of the civil authorities if these are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or to the teachings of the Gospel. (Compendio DSI 399). Refusal to participate in campaigns in favor of laws that violate human life, by refraining from support with your vote, must be included here.
- The Right to Resistance: It is legitimate to resist authority in cases when it violates seriously and repeatedly the principles of the natural law.

TESTIMONIES

Among its saints, the Church venerates numerous men and women who have served God through their generous commitment to political and government activities. Saint Thomas More (1478-1535), a Franciscan tertiary, stands out. He is proclaimed Patron of Government Leaders and Politicians. He decided to witness by his martyrdom the “inalienable dignity of conscience.” Although he was submitted to various forms of psychological pressure, he refused to compromise, and without abandoning “constant fidelity to authority and institutions” that distinguished him, affirmed with his life and his death that “man cannot separate himself from God, nor politics from morality.”



We also include the testimony of Austrian Secular Franciscan **Blessed Franz Jägerstätter** (1907-1943). From the beginning, Franz Jägerstätter refused to cooperate with or support the Nazis, who had taken power in Austria in 1938, since he saw Christianity and Nazism as two completely irreconcilable poles. He considered it a sin to carry out battles and murders so that Hitler could govern the world. His wife, mother, family members and various priests tried to get him to change his refusal to participate in military service and to carry a weapon based on his religious belief ... he could not be a Nazi and a Catholic at the same time. Because of his refusal, he was condemned and executed on August 9, 1943 at the age of 36. He was beatified by Benedict XVI on October 26, 2007.

It is important to remember here also the testimony of the Minister for Minorities of the Pakistani Government, Shahbaz Bhatti (1968-2011). His passion and devotion was the cause of minorities in Pakistan. He was a strong voice in favor of the rights of Christians and against the blasphemy laws and their arbitrary application. Despite the fact that he knew well the risks of his job and his public position against extremists, he never vacilated nor compromised his message. He was an example of courage to live the faith for Christians that face threats of death every day in the villages and cities of Pakistan. The memory of his courage continues touching the heart of Christians in Pakistan who feel permanently indebted to him. We propose his words recorded in a video: *“I believe in Jesus Christ, who gave his own life for us. I know the significance of the Cross and the value of the Cross. I am prepared to die to defend the rights of my community and of people who suffer, even dying because of my principles. I prefer to die because of my principles and the justice of my community before compromising because of these threats.”*⁷ Minister Bhatti was assassinated on March 1, 2011 at the age of 42.



REFERENCES

- Video of Pope Francisco <http://www.youtube.com/embed/-F5MwyYWKvQ?rel=0>
- Testament of Shahbaz Bhatti <http://www.noticiacristiana.com/sociedad/persecuciones/2011/03/yo-quiero-servir-a-jesus-shahbaz-bhatti-ministro-paquistani-asesinado-por-ser-cristiano.html>
- Video Testimony of Shahbaz Bhatti <http://infocatolica.com/blog/oportune.php/1103031018-shahbaz-bhatti-yo-creo-en-jes>

⁷ Exclusive footage of Shahbaz Bhatti's interview, en Internet: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBTBqUJomRE>