

# How Should a Catholic Think About Politics?

## Part 1: Morality and Ethics, Politics and Economics:

### 1. Introductory Comments:

Before I begin, I would like to say a word or two about the choice of title for this evening's talk: "*How Should a Catholic Think About Politics?*" It is not "What Should a Catholic Think About Politics? It is not for me to tell you what to think. I do want to explore with you something about the relationship between ethics and politics and, in doing that, I will draw on the rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, which has been developed particularly over the past 125 years. It is something of a happy coincidence that this talk takes place three days before the general election. We all knew, of course, that the election was coming, but our date was set back in November and was based largely on when I had a free evening in my diary.

### 2. Morality and Ethics:

There is an essential relationship between ethics and politics, but this is not always recognised these days because of the widely divergent views that people hold about what ethics actually is. It all begins with the experience of morality.

The experience of morality is not a uniquely religious experience, and it is certainly not limited to Catholics. Most people experience the deep down desire to do good and to be good. St. Paul recognises this when he points out that, those who have not been brought up under the law of Moses, do have a law in their hearts.

*For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus. (Rom. 2:14-16)*

I want to ask you a question. When you do something kind or courageous, there are a number of consequences:

- There is the effect that this has in the world around you
- There is the change that takes place in you, what you become
- There is the feeling of goodness that you have

Which do you think is the most important? Now imagine the classic image of refugees in a war zone, homeless, hungry and afraid. When we see it on our television screens, we are moved to compassion. Compassion feels good, but it is no use unless it motivates us to action.

*"Solidarity" as Pope John Paul II wrote, "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the*

*contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” (SRS 38)*

Sometimes when the image is repeated day after day, the compassion fades and it is then that we are challenged to act decisively even in the absence of strong feelings.

Ethics could be defined as the “science of morality”. It is *how we move* from the *desire* to do good and to be good, *towards the actions* that will bring about that goodness. The fundamental ethical question of course, is the question asked by the Rich Young Man in the Gospel (Mt. 19:16-30). *What must I do?* It is a question that we ask ourselves so often in the daily circumstances of our lives. This is where the confusion begins.

- Some argue that one must always do what the law says. This might be described as conformism.
- Some argue that one must follow one’s feelings about what is good. This is sometimes described as emotivism.
- Others have suggested that one must do whatever will bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. This is the Utilitarian approach.

What is often missing in ethics, however, is the focus on truth. The good cannot be achieved where the truth is ignored. Pope John Paul, in his encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, wrote that the truth is *objective* and has its origin in God’s plan for creation. In other words, the truth is not something that we create or formulate for ourselves; it is something that we are called to discover by the use of reason (*Veritatis Splendor* 32).

One of the great truths about the human person is that we are endowed with free will, but that freedom is not absolute; it has to take into account what we are called to be. If a decision is to be good it must be consistent with the truth. That means that, in making ethical decisions, we have to examine the circumstances, we have to examine the likely consequences of acting in a particular way and, most of all, we have to examine what it is we intend, in order to see if it is in accordance with the truth, including the truth about our own vocation as human beings.

I imagine that, by this time, many of you will have recognised that I am talking about conscience, which is the process of making moral judgements. *Conscience* literally means “*with knowledge*”. The Church teaches that we must be bound by the judgement of a properly informed conscience. For Catholics, that means that in making ethical judgements, we must allow ourselves to be guided, not only by science and human reason, but also by the Word of God and the teaching of the Church.

### **3. Ethics, Politics and the Common Good**

You might, by this stage, be asking yourself, what has this to do with politics. The answer is that it has everything to do with politics. The word Politics is derived from the Greek word *Polis*, which means *the city*. Just as ethics is the

science of morality for the individual person, politics is the science of morality for the city or the state, and its purpose is to move us *from* the desire for a good society, *to* the kind of actions and decisions that will lead to the common good, which is the good of all and of each individual.

St. Thomas Aquinas argued that:

Each person is concerned with his own good and is naturally inclined to resist anyone who seeks to take that good away from him. The end towards which one person's activity is oriented is his own good, and not particularly the good of others.<sup>1</sup>

He points out, however, (in agreement with Aristotle) that human persons are naturally social and that life together in society requires that someone should take responsibility for the *common good*. This is the purpose of politics and ultimately of government. This need is also reflected in the contemporary social teaching of the Church, as we read in the Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

*The people who come together in the political community are many and diverse, and they have every right to prefer divergent solutions. If the political community is not to be torn apart while everyone follows his own opinion, there must be an authority to direct the energies of all citizens toward the common good, not in a mechanical or despotic fashion, but by acting above all as a moral force which appeals to each one's freedom and sense of responsibility.*

*It is clear, therefore, that the political community and public authority are founded on human nature and hence belong to the order designed by God, even though the choice of a political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free will of citizens.*

*It follows also that political authority, both in the community as such and in the representative bodies of the state, must always be exercised within the limits of the moral order and directed toward the common good—with a dynamic concept of that good—according to the juridical order legitimately established or due to be established. When authority is so exercised, citizens are bound in conscience to obey. (Gaudium et Spes, 74)*

One of the greatest political philosophers of the pre-Christian period was Plato, who wrote - among other things - a dialogue called "The Republic". In developing his vision of the ideal Republic, one of the key principles was the division of society into three classes, the Rulers, the Military and what he describes as the Artisans. He argues that society will only flourish if the members of these three classes carry out their own responsibilities, for which they are best suited, and if there is no cross-breeding between the classes. He argues, interestingly enough, that an over-emphasis on freedom ultimately leads to a tightening up of security and the growth of tyranny.

#### **4. Truth and Falsehood:**

One of the things I find fascinating, however, is Plato's admission that, in order to make sure that this plan for society actually works, it will be necessary to tell one great lie. It will be necessary to convince all the citizens that this division of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, Ia, Q.96, 4 ans.; also II IIae, Q.58, 9 ad 3.

the classes was designed by nature. Needless to say the lie begins with those in power, because it is in their interests that the artisans and the soldiers should continue to acknowledge their natural right to rule.<sup>2</sup>

There are a few features of the Republic that strike me as interesting when you consider them in the light of our own 21<sup>st</sup> century society:

- women and men are equal, in matters of education and employment. It is, however, an equality within a fundamentally unequal society.
- people may have children only with someone of their own class, and only when it is consistent with the good of the state:
- children will be placed in nurseries and educated to the level of their class. They will not be reared by their parents, because the primary responsibility of adults is to the state
- children conceived outside the class structure are likely not to be of the desired calibre and these - according to Plato - would have to be disposed of as creatures "that must not be reared."<sup>3</sup>

I will come back to some of these things in the second half of my talk but, for the moment, let me just say that I find it interesting that, in Plato's ideal Republic

- the needs of the state take priority over the needs of the family, and
- children who, for practical reasons, are considered not "up to the desired standard" are disposed of

All of this would appear to flow from a social order which is based on a lie. Could this in any sense be true of our own society today.

I mentioned earlier that a certain confusion has entered into ethics in modern times, because of the tendency in some strands of contemporary philosophy to place more emphasis on individual freedom than on objective truth. The same kind of confusion can sometimes arise in politics, because there is a tendency to confuse what is *possible* and *convenient* with what is *good* and *true*. The question that every citizen must ask himself or herself is this: "to what extent is our social order based on the truth about the human person". If it is not, I might ask myself: "to what extent am I responsible for perpetuating the lie" or, more positively "what can I do to ensure that the truth about the human person becomes more central to the way we make political decisions?"

Before I go on to look at some of the specific issues that arise for Catholics in thinking about politics, I might perhaps say something briefly about the relationship between politics and economics. One of the mantras of the present election campaign is that "it is all about the economy". This is true, *provided* we remember that the economy is primarily about people, not just money. The word "economy" comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means the *care of the household*. Money and material things are essential elements of the proper

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<sup>2</sup> Plato. *Republic*, # 414

<sup>3</sup> *Republic* # 461

functioning of the household, but so are love and care, protection and forgiveness, health and mutual respect. The ethical principles outlined in the Social Teaching of the Church guide us towards a vision for society that places the dignity of every person at the centre of policy decisions. In the household of the state, as in the household of an individual family, the strong make sacrifices for the weak and the preferences of the many give way to the fundamental rights of the individual.

## **Part 2: Specific issues that arise for Catholics in thinking about politics**

The common good is the essential purpose of every society. It is not something concrete or fixed, because one society is different from another and societies are constantly evolving. It seems clear to me, however, that the common good is always closely related to the way in which fundamental human rights are reflected in the working of a society. Pope John Paul, in his first encyclical letter, wrote:

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.<sup>4</sup>

With that in mind, I want to focus on some of the key human rights which are reflected in both the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN) and in the social teaching of the Church. I think it is important to distinguish between human rights and civil rights. Human rights are those who belong to us precisely because we are human beings. Civil rights are those to which we are entitled as citizens, or which are conceded to us within a particular society.

I would ask you to be patient if there is something important that I don't mention. I am not an expert on everything but, more importantly, "everything" is more than anyone could manage in one evening.

### **1. Respect for Human Life**

*Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. (UNDHR 3)*

*Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life (Pacem in Terris 11)*

Respect for life is one of the key indicators of a civilised society. Within the Christian tradition, as in Judaism and in Islam, human life is regarded as a gift from God and not simply the product of a biological process. The laws of biology could not account for human reason, which explores far beyond the limits of the material world.

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<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Redemptor Hominis*, 17

When we take to ourselves the right to decide when another human being lives or dies, we call into question the fundamental right to life for each and every person. This is why the Constitutional declaration of the right to life of the unborn, together with the equal right to life of the mother is so appropriate. If we deny that right to one category of human beings today, the logic is that we could deny it to other categories tomorrow. This, of course, is where the lie makes its appearance. We try to convince ourselves that some human beings are not as human as others or, as the Supreme Court did in 1992, we convince ourselves that though the right to life of the unborn is equal to that of the mother, the right to life of the mother "carries more weight".

In 2013, the Government passed legislation which permitted direct abortion in certain circumstances. Nearly four years after the tragic death of Savita Halappanaver in October 2012, the Deputy-leader of that government is still promoting the idea that the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment was responsible for her death. The truth, presented in official reports is quite different. Savita died because of "a failure in the provision of the most basic elements of patient care".<sup>5</sup>

In recent months there has been talk of removing the right to life of the unborn from the Constitution. This talk tends to focus on babies with life-limiting conditions and, in the public debate, much of what is presented as fact is actually quite misleading. Women have asked me, quite seriously, what is wrong with aborting these babies if they are dead. The truth of course is that they are not dead; they are just *spoken of as if they were*. These children may have a much shorter life expectancy than most of us but they are living human beings. While they are seriously ill, some of them will live to complete primary school. Their sickness or death, of course, is a cause of great sadness for their parents but, in their short lives, they can also be the focus of great love. For a Christian, there is no such thing as a life without value. For as long as they live, children with life-limiting conditions are entitled to be loved and cared for like any other child. The focus of government policy should be the provision of peri-natal hospice services to support parents in caring for their seriously ill children.

Some of the political parties and some individual candidates have made no secret of the fact that they favour the widespread availability of abortion, while others have begun to talk about "assisted suicide". Pope John Paul II wrote: "To claim the right to abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, and to recognize that right in law, means to attribute to human freedom a perverse and evil significance: that of an absolute power over others and against others. This is the death of true freedom."<sup>6</sup>

Should we even have a referendum to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment? Think about it! Why would any civilised society want to remove the protection of unborn children from the Constitution. We need to convince our politicians of the importance of supporting and promoting a culture of life that recognises the

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<sup>5</sup> HIQA, Patient Safety Investigation Report. Wednesday, October 9, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Pope John Paul II. *The Gospel of Life*, 20

unique value of every human person, and we need to actively support those who do. Meanwhile, I find it very difficult to see how any Catholic could, in good conscience, vote for a candidate or a political party whose policy it is to legalise abortion.

## **2. The Rights of Family and Education:**

*The family, founded upon marriage freely contracted, one and indissoluble, must be regarded as the natural, primary cell of human society. The interests of the family, therefore, must be taken very specially into consideration in social and economic affairs, as well as in the spheres of faith and morals. For all of these have to do with strengthening the family and assisting it in the fulfilment of its mission. Of course, the support and education of children is a right which belongs primarily to the parents. (Pacem in Terris 16 & 17)*

*Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality, or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage, and at its dissolution. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State. (UNDHR 16)*

*Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. (UNDHR 26)*

In the light of last year's referendum on the meaning of marriage, there might be a tendency to feel that, for better or worse, the political question about the family is over and done with. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is true that the Constitutional definition of marriage has changed, at least for the time being, but marriage has not changed and the very real challenges that face mothers and fathers and children in our society have not gone away.

The final report of the recent Synod of Bishops describes the family as the "primary good of society". It goes on to say that "the concern guiding the administration of civil society must provide for and promote family policies which support and encourage families, primarily those of modest means".<sup>7</sup>

Family breakdown brings with it not only devastating personal costs, but considerable social costs. It is a major contributing factor to poverty, homelessness and other forms of social exclusion. There is clear evidence that financial difficulties contribute to marital breakdown. Child poverty rates in Ireland are among the highest in Europe.

The protection of the family begins with investment in marriage, strengthening parents' relationships and supporting them in their parenting to maximise opportunities for their children. In recent years, Accord, the Catholic agency for Marriage and the Family, which provides services in these areas, has seen its funding drastically reduced, while demands for its services continue to increase. The next government needs to prioritise the resourcing of organisations such as Accord that work with families to prevent relationship breakdown. Previous cuts in this area have been detrimental to the wellbeing of families and should be reversed.

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<sup>7</sup> Final Report on the Synod of Bishops, 2015, 12

It is worth noting that both Pope John XXIII and the United Nations recognise the primacy of the right of parents when it comes to the education of their children. Political ideology, as well as calling into question the relevance of faith, seems more and more to be influencing the content of the wider curriculum and, indeed, placing enormous burdens on the schools. We owe a debt of gratitude to generations of teachers in our Catholic schools but, in a rapidly changing society, we cannot assume that teachers will always have the same level of personal commitment to faith. We have a responsibility both to them and to our children to be clear about what we expect in a Catholic school and to actively support that in our daily family life at home. Catholic citizens and Catholic parents in particular, need to be aware both of what is introduced into the classroom and what is, in some cases, being neglected or actively excluded. In the meantime, I think we need to impress on our politicians that, when parents want a Catholic school, then it should be free to be a Catholic school, not just in name but in reality. The same, incidentally, applies to schools of other religious traditions and none.

### **3. The Right to Adequate Healthcare**

Pope John XXIII includes the *right to be looked after in the event of ill health; or disability stemming from work or in old age*, in his list of the fundamental human rights (*Pacem in Terris* 20). The United Nations similarly refers to the right to *medical care* (UNDHR 25).

The care of the sick was central to the ministry of Jesus and, for that reason, has always been part of the mission of the Church. In the course of my work I meet many nurses and doctors who give tirelessly of their energy and their skill in caring for the sick and the elderly, in the two large hospitals in our diocese, in a wide range of nursing homes and in the community. When Catholics think about politics, we need to consider how it might be possible for society to provide people with the treatment they need, without undue delay, in an environment of care and respect for dignity. Notwithstanding the best efforts of many healthcare professionals, this is not the case at the present time and has not been the case for many years. In a pre-election statement last week, the Irish Catholic Bishops described the present situation in healthcare as “the result of a fundamental failure of politics”.

I spent many years on the Board of a large hospital caring for the North Inner City of Dublin and providing specialist services to patients coming from all over the country. The *Emergency Department* crisis was always on the agenda as a major cause of concern. Nobody believed that it was acceptable that people who were seriously ill or frail due to old age had to spend hours and even days on trollies in overcrowded emergency rooms. Everybody knew that the cause of the problem was the number of frail and elderly people who no longer needed to be in hospital, but who did still need nursing care and for whom there was no alternative to hospital.

Most elderly people would prefer to live in their own homes if they could and, as I visit parishes around the diocese, I meet many of them who are enabled to do that, because they have the support of their adult children and their neighbours.

Economic policy over the past thirty years or more, however, has encouraged both men and women to work outside the home. It is reasonable to argue that this has greatly enhanced the lives of women and improved the financial security of many families. It has also meant that, when frail elderly people leave hospital and need significant nursing care, they often do not have the option of going home or going to live with a relative. If the economy encourages all adults to seek employment outside the home, then economic policy must include the provision of quality-assured nursing homes at a reasonable cost, so that elderly people can be cared for in or close to their own community, where they can have their family members and friends to visit. Until this is done, there will be no solution to the Emergency Department crisis.

Another important consideration in this area is the structure and the under-resourcing of the ambulance service. When an ambulance takes someone from Roscommon to Galway, it often ends up being re-deployed in Galway, leaving Roscommon dependent for hours on ambulance services in Westmeath and Offaly, which may or may not be available. When minutes can make a difference between life and death this is not acceptable.

#### **4. The Right to Housing**

*The family has the right to decent housing, fitting for family life and commensurate to the number of its members, in a physical environment that provides the basic services for the life of the family and the community*<sup>8</sup>

*It is sometimes presented as a pretext that the lack of housing is proper to a certain type of culture. Anything which does not meet the basic needs of a person alone or in a family cannot be considered part of any authentic culture. From this point of view, the right to housing is a universal right.*<sup>9</sup>

*This right to housing is also included in the UNDHR at Article 25.*

More families are becoming homeless in Ireland now than at the height of the economic crisis or, indeed, at any time in modern Irish history. We are not just talking about people who bought enormous houses. In many cases we are talking about young couples who started out on their life together with the hearts full of hope. The irresponsible lending policies of the banks and the failure of the state to regulate this simply meant all the couples competing in the market place for the same houses had the ability to pay more. Those who were selling the houses simply raised the prices in order to increase their profit margins. When people questioned the wisdom of such lack of regulation, government ministers assures them of treason.

The desire for excessive profit was described by Pope John Paul as a “sinful attitude” giving rise to “sinful social structures”. It seems to me that Catholics, with an understanding of Catholic Social Teaching, would have to insist that, just as the state was complicit in promoting those social structures, so the state has

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<sup>8</sup> Holy See. *Charter on the Rights of the Family*, Art. 11

<sup>9</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother? The Church And The Housing Problem. #2*

a moral obligation to come to the assistance of those who, through no fault of their own are homeless.

We cannot, of course, forget those who are homeless for other reasons, including those who are on the streets because of family breakdown, unemployment or addiction. There is no “on-size-fits-all” solution. Our own homeless hostels here in Sligo have explained to me for example, that many of their clients would feel uncomfortable in a house or an apartment on their own. For some of them, Shalomar or Maryvale *are* home. But public policy seems to be that they are “*strongly encouraged*” to move into the private-rented sector where they might not have the skills or the resources to survive.

Pope Francis has said: “We can find no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing,” (24 September 2015). Homelessness and housing insecurity have a major impact on wellbeing, affecting health, relationships, access to education and employment and a person’s ability to participate in society and contribute to the community. Housing issues can be both a major cause and a consequence of family breakdown. Unsuitable emergency provision – such as the housing of families in a hotel room – leads to serious child welfare and safeguarding concerns. We need urgent intervention to address the situation of those who are homeless at present, together with long-term investment in social housing.

## **5. The Right to Leave One’s own Country and to Seek Refuge in Another Country**

*Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.* (UNDHR 13)

*Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries, asylum from persecution. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.* (UNDHR 14)

*Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own State. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular State does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men.* (Pacem in Terris 25)

In 1982, Pope John Paul defined the refugee crisis as “a shameful wound of our time”. War and famine are not new phenomena, and there have always been refugees. There are a number of characteristics, however, that make the refugee crisis in our times seem unique:

- the nature of modern warfare is so destructive that whole societies can collapse and it becomes impossible for people to remain
- the modern means of communication have a kind of double effect, not only are we more immediately aware of people in crisis, but they are also more immediately aware of us and of what we have in our societies. There can be no denial of the reality.

- even allowing for the absence of internal borders in the EU, international borders are over-all much more restrictive than they were even fifty years ago.

The problem for refugees is that they are, by definition, people whose own society is either unable (for reasons of poverty, famine, war etc.) or unwilling (for reasons of racial prejudice etc.) to provide for their common good. The universal common good includes them.

For some years now, Trócaire, the Catholic agency for development, has been working with local partners in Syria. It has frequently warned of the impending refugee crisis which erupted last Summer. We have every reason to be proud of the work done by the Naval Service in rescuing so many refugees in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately those refugees have been left kicking their heels in refugee camps on the mainland of Europe. Notwithstanding the huge public expression of concern and the many offers of help, the process of bringing refugees to Ireland seems to be painfully slow.

It is true, of course, that due care has to be taken to ensure that those who come are genuine refugees. Part of the problem is that the UN definition of a refugee is extremely narrow. It does not include, for example, people who are displaced within their own country, as is the case of so many people in Syria at the present time. They are legally regarded as being under the protection of their own government. A lot of use that would be to them! So, while due care has to be taken, that care has to be balanced with the urgent need of so many families who, through no fault of their own, have lost everything they have. When it comes to food, shelter, clothing and other basic needs, it matters little either whether they are Muslims or Christians.

## **6. The Right to Religious Freedom**

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (UNDHR 18)*

*among man's rights is that of being able to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of his own conscience, and to profess his religion both in private and in public. (Pacem in Terris, 14)*

Religious freedom, which is the mark of any true democracy, includes the freedom of the majority as well as the freedom of the minority. Many Christian communities in the Middle East and elsewhere are being systematically targeted simply because they are Christian. Together with my fellow bishops, I have met with some of their religious leaders and listened to their concerns. As many as 100,000 Christians are being killed every year because of their faith. Others are being tortured, imprisoned, exiled, threatened, excluded, attacked and discriminated against on a widespread scale. Persecution against Christians is reported in 110 countries. Many of these countries have significant trade links with Ireland. It is not unreasonable to think that Ireland, in its turn, might bring to bear some diplomatic and even economic pressure in support of them, given our own ancient Christian tradition.

If we are to advocate for the protection of freedom of religion and belief in other countries, we need to ensure that practices here reflect the highest standards in the promotion of pluralism, which is not the same as secularism. For Christian citizens, an essential consideration is the need to protect the space for faith values and faith-based social action. Christian communities and organisations have a long tradition of being present where society is broken, picking up the pieces for those who have been left behind. There is a growing concern that this valuable perspective and experience is being marginalised and devalued, because of political opposition to our principles in key areas such as marriage, health and education. Elected representatives need to be reminded that there are real issues here for people of faith. Christians are citizens too.

Many faith-based organisations are facing increasing demand for vital social services which contribute enormously to social equality and to the common good. At the same time, however, they are seeing their public funding come under threat as a result of equality legislation that does not recognise the right to protect religious ethos. In the name of inclusivity, Christian organisations are at risk of being excluded. Like every organisation – and like the state itself – what we do, flows from who we are. It is not unreasonable, therefore, for us to say that there are some things that we *don't* do precisely because we are Christian. If this is not appropriately recognised, many Christian organisations, deprived of public funding, may no longer be in a position to offer support to some of the most vulnerable members of our society. What is needed is a pluralistic, inclusive approach to social service provision that recognizes the unique role and contribution of faith-based organisations alongside other providers.

## **7. The Climate as a Common Good**

*Climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all.* (Laudato Si, 23)

*The notion of the common good also extends to future generations.* (Laudato Si, 159)

*Unless citizens control political power .... it will not be possible to control damage to the environment.* (Laudato Si, 179)

As I visit the primary schools of the diocese, I am now coming across schools which are on their fifth or sixth green flag, for various projects associated with the environment. It would be easy to discount all of this activity as just another form of political correctness. It is far more than that; it is actually a very valid context for political engagement for the common good on the part of adult Catholics too, as Pope Francis has reminded us in *Laudato Si*.

When I was still a young priest in Dublin, Mary Harney, as a junior Minister for the Environment introduced legislation, which allowed only smokeless coal to be used within the Dublin city area. Arguably she achieved as much for the health of the nation in that one courageous decision as in all her years as Minister for Health. Other significant decisions, which greatly improved the quality of our environment were the restrictions on smoking in public places and the tax on plastic bags.

In a year when people in many parts of the country were out on the streets protesting about water charges, it is paradoxical that, all over our diocese, people have spent the last few months pumping water out of their homes and their businesses and watching helplessly as their farms turned into lakes. There is a direct connection between the environment and the common good and, in the area of water management as in every other aspect of the common good, elected representatives and citizens have a shared responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, I think it is important to add that those who hold public office and who exercise that office with integrity, provide a very significant service to the common good. They work long hours, they sacrifice their own privacy and that of their family and, in return, they have relatively little job security. There will be some candidates with whose policies we might vehemently disagree and for whom we might never consider voting, but while asking them the hard questions, we treat them with respect, because that is what Christians do. I am often heartened when people tell me that they pray for me every day. How many of us, I wonder, pray for our politicians, on a daily basis. Perhaps we should.

Helping our politicians to make the right decisions requires that we ourselves exercise our own political responsibility. This involves taking the time to inform our consciences, praying for wisdom to discern what will contribute to the common good, engaging in dialogue about these issues and finally going out to cast our vote.