Why the Church s social justice so str

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A seismic shift has occurred in the Church's thinking about its role in the world since the Second Vatican Council, bringing social justice and solidarity with the poor to the very heart of its mission. On rare occasions in history, there have been such seismic shifts deeply altering how Christians saw their role in the world. We are living through one of these shifts now to heighten our social consciousness. Popes, bishops and Catholic organisations have issued literally thousands of documents affirming this shift.

There can be no doubt that this more robust social and political engagement of the Church has been a recent development, and was not typical in the centuries since the Reformation, especially in English-speaking countries.

Enforced disengagement from social issues

The reason for the Catholic Church's low profile on public issues in the past stemmed in part from the religious conflicts of the times. Catholics often suffered social liabilities and struggled to maintain their religious practice in hostile religious and social environments. The Church 'circled the wagons', as it were, in a defensive formation, to tighten its internal cohesion and resist sectarian attacks.

This strategy established clear boundaries about who was part of this defensive formation. Particularly important in Australia were the ban on mixed marriages, the effort to develop Catholic schools, networks of Catholic organisations designed to keep Catholics together socially, the growth of nursing and teaching religious orders, and the strong authority structure from the local clergy, through the bishops to the pope.

This pastoral strategy, as we might call it, worked remarkably well for a long time, maintaining high levels of religious practice and encouraging a devotional culture to add warmth at a popular level, at a time when the Latin liturgy itself was cold and remote.

The down side of this strategy was that it was an emergency response to the sectarianism of the time. It needed enemies to succeed. Once outside pressure began to dissolve, as it did in the 1960s, the particular style of Catholic culture we had been so familiar with began to fragment. This raised acute problems of practice and identity about what it meant to be a Catholic, problems with which we are still struggling.

However, we need to recognise clearly that the earlier Church culture was the result of a forced disengagement from social and political concerns. It was difficult for Catholic leaders to speak out on critical social issues of the day, unless they also had wide support in the dominantly Anglican/ Protestant culture, such as on opposition to abortion, the dangers of alcohol, and the defense of family life. When Catholic leaders decided to strike out on a path of their own, as when Archbishop Mannix opposed conscription during the First World War, then they were likely to rouse sectarian reaction.

The most significant early attempt to break out of this forced disengagement from socio-political affairs stemmed from the activism of the Campion Society groups in the 1930s, and found expression in the social justice statements inaugurated in 1940 by the Australian bishops. Most of the bishops' statements until 1955 were drafted by B A (Bob) Santamaria who attempted to develop the implications of Catholic social thinking for Australia.

This promising enterprise eventually came to grief, particularly over the limits of Church-based political activity. During 1954-55, Santamaria's secret organisation in the unions, the anti-communist 'Movement', met in-principle opposition from other Catholics who argued that it was not proper for an organisation ostensibly under the control of the bishops to operate clandestinely in politics. The Holy See intervened in 1957 to separate the political Movement from direct Church involvement.

Bruised and divided by the controversy, Church leaders tended to withdraw from commentary on social and political affairs. Sectarian animosity and fears that Catholics were plotting to seize political power revived for a time, and forced many Catholics back into the defensive positions of enforced disengagement.

resses ongly today

'How would history judge a generation which had all the means to feed the population of the planet, and yet with fratricidal indifference refused to do so?'

POPE JOHN PAUL II IN AFRICA, 1990.

Vatican II calls for new social engagement

Quite unexpectedly, Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI in the 1960s led the Church out of the old 'fortress Church' mentality. The Second Vatican Council sketched a fresh picture of what it means to be Catholic in the contemporary world, affirming the right and duty of Catholics to tackle the urgent social challenges of war and peace, of hunger and poverty, of social justice in all its dimensions. The period of forced disengagement from the so-called 'worldly' affairs had passed.

Since then, successive popes and other Church leaders have made prodigious efforts to relate the values of the Gospel to pressing social questions, and stressed the moral duty on Catholics to share the task of building a more just world. For the most part, the Church is encouraging a wider constituency of conscience on areas of public policy, but leaves direct engagement in party politics to lay people acting independently on their own initiative. This new stress on social engagement has affected Catholics' sense of identity, encouraging them to move beyond earlier ethnic or cultural forms, especially if they obscure the core Gospel message.

New markers of Catholic identity?

The markers of Catholic identity are still undergoing a profound change. Identity markers are complex and do not easily change, but the critical elements in a renewed sense of Catholic identity seem to me fundamentally to be these:

- belief in the great Creator-force of the universe whom we call God but who remains ultimate Mystery
- recognising the unveiling of this mysterious Being in the human person of Christ, in his words and action
- with his Spirit continuing to breathe life most expressly into the community of believers but undoubtedly into all the world, especially people searching for God.

Central to this unveiling of the inner being of our Creator is this message: that God is so passionately concerned about human wellbeing as to lay down his life in Christ, not to assuage the Father's anger, but as God's astonishing commitment in solidarity with all who suffer, while offering the promise of final resurrection.

Further, God's command that we love one another, the central identity marker in Christ's view, goes deeper than the religious labels people wear and includes everyone, as the parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates. Indeed neighbour here refers to one quite foreign to us but in dire circumstances. Hence our care for one another must be expressed especially by searching out opportunities to support the 'poor', Christ's code for all in distress.

God's Last Judgment in Matthew 25 overlooks religious observances and concentrates entirely on our practical solidarity with the hungry, sick and homeless. This solidarity is expressed in many ways, through our families, work and careers most obviously, but also in support for charitable or social endeavours. In the words of the Vatican agency, Cor Unum: 'In the groanings of the hungry, it is God who is hungry and is calling' (*World Hunger a Challenge for All*, 1996, #60).

Many Catholics still remain strongly committed to their institutions promoting health, welfare and education especially, in what John L Allen recently termed 'eruptions of grace', in 'a vast conspiracy of good undertaken each day by women and men of faith, striving to redeem their small corners of the world'.

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