

The churches and economic issues

A rejoinder to Fr Frank Brennan's address to the Yarra Institute

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On 8 November 2013 Fr Frank Brennan SJ gave the keynote address to a conference on Christian social thinking conducted by the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy. His address, entitled “Christian social thinking for Australia: Key challenges and responsibilities of the churches in the current social and cultural context” (published in full in *Eureka Street* on 11 November 2013), included the following:

I have one major reservation about undertaking this task. My training is in law; I know little about economics. Sadly, I think the Christian churches are all but absent from the economic debate other than making the occasional, predictable utterance about ensuring that no one is left worse off as the result of new policy measures.

Fr Brennan is right to point out that, unlike law, he has no training in economics. He makes it clear that he is not an economic expert, which is relevant when addressing a body like the Yarra Institute on this kind of topic. Having made that point he goes on to make a comment that seriously understates the public advocacy of the Australian churches and which does a disservice to many people and organisations.



Fr Frank Brennan

The address is about a range of important social issues, including some on which Fr Brennan is a leading and invaluable Australian commentator: human rights, religious freedom, asylum seekers, indigenous disadvantage and same-sex marriage. The address demonstrates his prodigious knowledge and his personal involvement in these issues. He is, in the view of many, Australia’s leading Catholic commentator. Hence my concern about his comment on the churches’ contribution to economic debate.

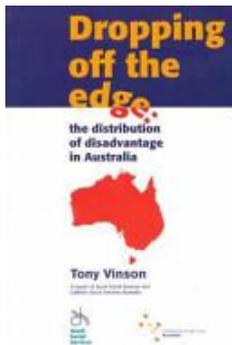
Although he refers generally to the churches, I assume Fr Brennan particularly had the Catholic Church in mind. My response is from a Catholic viewpoint, but I expect that the substance of my response will be shared by other Christians who are engaged in the Christian social ministry.

Economics is central to Christian social thinking and Catholic social teaching

In his concluding remarks under the heading “The tools of Christian social teaching”, Fr Brennan says:

Religion does not provide the answers to difficult questions about law, politics and economics... Our key challenges are to be credible, relevant, and distinctive, aligning our resources, structures, actions and utterances. We need to be prophetic, pedagogical and practical. Our key responsibilities are: being a leaven in the public square fostering hope and love; enabling the forming and informing of consciences; being able respectfully to eyeball decision makers and those impacted adversely by their decisions; advocating and acting for freedom of religion, *the rights of the poor and marginalised*, the common good, and the stewardship of creation for future generations (emphasis added).

The discussion of these “tools” contains no suggestion that the social teaching of the Catholic Church, in particular, covers many aspects of economics, economic relations and economic rights. Of course, the title of the address refers to Christian social thinking in the “current social and cultural context”, a title that may, on one view, free the speaker from dealing with economic matters. Yet knowledge of these areas is needed if we are to move beyond predictable and formulaic utterances about the rights of the poor and marginalised.



The fact of the matter is that Catholic social teaching (to take one part of Christian social thinking) is primarily about economic relations of one form or another. The labour/capital question was the central purpose of *Rerum Novarum*, the seminal document in modern Catholic social teaching. Economic issues around capitalism and socialism, world trade and development, work and workers’ rights and more have been at the heart of Catholic social teaching. The ‘social question’ addressed by successive encyclicals has changed, but always it involves economic issues and the consideration of economic structures. Catholic social teaching has come to address a wider range of issues, such as some of those addressed by Fr Brennan, but the core of the teaching is economic.

The recent public statements of Pope Francis about the poor are based on more than a century of modern Catholic social teaching, honed by debate and reflection across decades of momentous social, political and economic change throughout the world. Those commentators who criticise Pope Francis for being glib and impractical do not understand the depth of the Church’s social teaching and the foundation that it provides for his statements.

Catholic social teaching on economic justice and human rights

A major part of this development in Catholic social teaching has been the articulation of economic *rights* and economic *justice*. The views on justice and rights go beyond the areas covered by Fr Brennan in his address. They are an essential part of the Catholic contribution to human rights discourse. Since *Rerum Novarum* the Church has emphasised the rights of workers. In more recent times it has articulated and supported other kinds of economic and associated rights, including the right to participate in society. This development was summarised by the Catholic Bishops of the United States in 1986 (well before we started to talk about social inclusion) in the following terms:

Recent Catholic social thought regards the task of overcoming these patterns of exclusion and powerlessness as a most basic demand of justice. Stated positively, justice demands that social institutions be ordered in a way that guarantees all persons the ability to participate actively in the economic, political, and cultural life of society. The level of participation may legitimately be greater for some persons than for others, but there is a basic level of access that must be made available to all. Such participation is an essential expression of the social nature of human beings and their communitarian vocation. (*Economic Justice for All*, 1986, paragraph 78.)

The right to participate in society is a right that necessarily involves economic participation. To work through the implications of this right, and to give it practical effect, requires substantial knowledge of the working of the economic system. It requires, especially, a capacity to engage with those who oppose market intervention.



Christine Carolan campaigning against trafficking

Poverty is the absence of economic and social participation. It is important that those who campaign for the alleviation and elimination of poverty frame poverty as a human rights issue. And human rights activists need to incorporate economic rights into their advocacy.

Fr Brennan's assessment of the churches' track record on economic matters

I return to Fr Brennan's claim that the churches have not made any contribution to "the economic debate" and the suggestion that they have nothing useful to say, in any event.

It is true that many church leaders, Catholic Bishops in particular, do not easily engage in economic issues, partly because, like Fr Brennan, they are not trained in economics. And when they do speak out there are many voices in the community that remind them of that fact, as if a degree in economics or work at some coal-face or another is a pre-requisite for comment on economic issues that threaten the common good or impact on the poor and marginal. But we cannot retreat from economic debate because we are not academically trained or professionally engaged in economics; or because we have never run a 'business'.

Too often church leaders are reluctant to engage in public debate; but not always. Remember *Work Choices* in 2005. The rationale for these employment laws, which stripped away a range of employment rights, was the claimed need for increasing economic productivity and efficiency. Early criticisms by church leaders (Catholic and others) were met by claims in the media that the churches had no expertise and should stay out of the debate. Yet the Australian Catholic Bishops published a major Statement in November 2005 setting out their grounds of opposition to the proposed legislation, based on established principles of Catholic social teaching, and calling for changes to be made to it. Subsequent events vindicated their position. So in the major issue regarding work, workplace relations and labour market regulation over the last few decades, the Catholic Bishops were not guilty of merely making predictable utterances.

Contributions like the *Work Choices* Statement are not required every year. But what the Bishops do every year is to issue a Social Justice Statement for release on Social Justice Sunday. In the last two years the Bishops have addressed issues of economic importance: *The Gift of Family in Difficult Times: The social and economic challenges facing families today* in 2012 and *Lazarus at our Gate: A critical moment in the fight against world poverty* in 2013. The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, which provides advice to the Bishops, also publishes a range of material on economic-related issues.

A wide range of Catholic organisations, either under the umbrella of Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) or otherwise, advocate over a range of economic and federal budgetary issues. The work that Professor Tony Vinson did on economic and social disadvantage (*Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia*, 2007), under the auspices of Jesuit Social Services and CSSA, which identified “the complex web of disadvantage that ensnares generations of Australians” had a major impact on research and public advocacy. The St Vincent de Paul Society is a very vocal advocate on a range of economic issues that impact on the poor and marginalised, and supports its public advocacy with economic research. The Christian churches cooperate on a range of submissions across economic and budgetary policies.

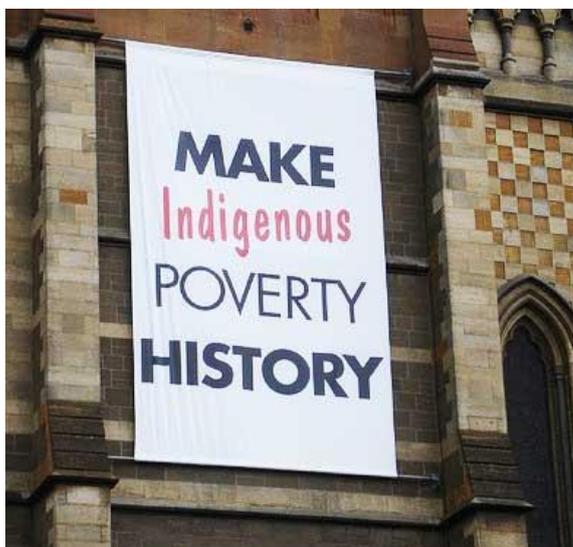


Photo Chrisjtse flickr cc

Across the health and aged care sectors, Catholic providers and organisations have engaged in the economic issues associated with adequate and efficient care for those in need, especially those who rely on the social safety net. The economics of health and aged care are complex and responses from the many church agencies are typically considered, principled and client-oriented. The advocacy is underpinned by Catholic social teaching.

All of the churches are actively engaged in foreign aid; see, for example, the work of Caritas within the Catholic Church. Their

long-standing engagement is not limited to the mere raising and transport of money and goods. It requires of organisations and individuals a substantial knowledge of development economics and a range of economic issues, including those about the relative benefits of trade and aid.

So economics and economic issues, both macro and micro, are well-known across Catholic and other church organisations and are part of their public advocacy.

We also need to keep in mind that, collectively, the Catholic Church is one of the largest employers of labour in Australia (with over 180,000 employees) and is one of the largest economic undertakings in the country. Whatever the funding sources, their mission and the demand for their services ensure their commitment to efficiency and good economic management.

As a major employer seeking to operate efficient, fair and productive undertakings in accordance with its social doctrine, the Catholic Church is in a good position to advocate on

behalf of low-paid workers and their families. Each year the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations makes extensive submissions to the national wage review, which reviews and adjusts minimum wage rates. These safety net rates are vitally important for those workers who have no capacity to bargain for higher wage rates.

I should also stress that the social advocacy regarding economic matters by other churches is substantial and cannot be described as “making the occasional, predictable utterance about ensuring that no one is left worse off as the result of new policy measures”. The research and advocacy of, for example, Anglicare, UnitingCare and the Salvation Army in regard to economic matters are very substantial.

All church organisations which advocate for incomes that will provide participation, social cohesion, social inclusion and the alleviation of poverty know that good economic research and economic reasoning is an essential part of their advocacy. They know that they have to go beyond mere claims of fairness and show that the proposals are practical. You cannot be a practical advocate for the poor without some knowledge of economics.

Still, we must do better

Had Fr Brennan simply made the observation that there is too little advocacy on economic matters by the Catholic Church, I would have agreed. Much more could be done, both in promoting Catholic social teaching and in seeking to apply it. Many working in the social ministry of the Catholic Church would like Catholic leaders and organisations, including parishes, to be more active in advocating for social and economic change within the parameters set by Catholic social teaching.

Part of the reason for this shortcoming is the reluctance to enter into economic debates in the absence of relevant data and an economic framework. Catholic social ministry organisations need to address this deficiency. But under current arrangements this can only be done within very limited budgets which give a high priority to direct service delivery.

Catholic and other groups arguing for programs that promote a more inclusive society in which individuals have a fair chance of realising their God-given talents are confronted by a range of organisations and lobbyists. Australian public policy is being increasingly formed by well-resourced ‘think tanks’ with skilled media personalities. In this regard the churches are lagging behind. The merit of our arguments can win through, especially with adequate institutional support; but they are not helped by comments that unfairly understate the contribution that churches are making to the economic debate.

We need more bodies like the Yarra Institute, both ecumenical and Catholic. There is no institute of the like in Australia that is charged with the promotion and dissemination of Catholic social teaching and the generation of



**"I've had it with all you yes-men!
— I'm going to create something
with free will!"**

Courtesy Hunter Bennett, flick cc

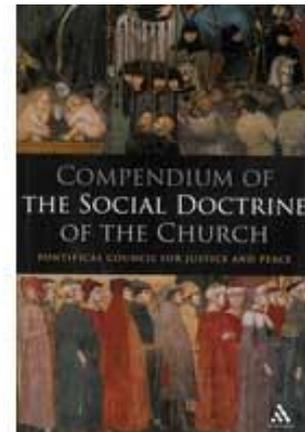
the research and advocacy that is necessary for

appropriate policies to be argued in the public square. However, there has been support from the top for this kind of initiative. Pope Benedict has written:

With regard to an ever more interconnected social question in its varied spheres, the commitment to form the Catholic laity in the social doctrine of the Church seems particularly urgent. In fact, it is the immediate duty of the lay faithful to work for a just social order. As free and responsible citizens, they must commit themselves to promoting a correct configuration of social life with respect for the legitimate autonomy of earthly realities...

After the promulgation of the *Compendium [of the Social Doctrine of the Church]* and of the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, it is natural that the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace should be dedicated to studying new elements in depth, and, in collaboration with others, to seeking more suitable ways to convey the content of the social doctrine, not only in the traditional Christian formative and educational courses of every kind and at every level, but also in the important centres of the formation of world thought — such as the great organs of the secular press, the universities and the numerous centres for economic and social reflection — which in recent times have developed in every corner of the world. (Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to Cardinal Peter Turkson, 3 November 2010, regarding the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, November 2010).

I expect Pope Francis will have some impact on Catholic priorities and advocacy through his emphasis on the need for the Catholic Church to be a church for the poor. His two predecessors have made comprehensive contributions to church teaching on economic matters, teaching which gives a framework for dealing with a wide range of contemporary issues. Pope Francis has a profound ability to communicate the Gospel message through an economy of words and powerful images. The recent photo of his embrace of a severely disfigured man will probably have an impact on many more people than another encyclical would have.



Pope Francis will transform the way in which many live their faith. His leadership should also cause us to question the ways in which the organised Social Ministry of the Catholic Church goes about its work. When he reminds us that we must be a church for the poor it is incumbent on all of us to identify the economic relations and economic structures that exclude and marginalise the poor. We need to argue the economic case for the society that Pope Francis envisions. A commitment to Christian social principles calls for a deep knowledge of economic forces and realities. This is a challenge for all of those engaged in the organised social ministries of the churches.

Fr Brennan's assessment of the churches' track record on economic commentary should promote some discussion within Catholic and other church organisations. But it will not be a productive discussion if it does not lead to some change in the way in which the Catholic Church, for one, makes its contribution to community debate about the economic issues regarding the protection and support of the poor and marginalised.