

Bishop Richard Moth
Faith in Politics

Paper for Rome Conference
February 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am grateful for this opportunity to offer a few relatively brief thoughts on the place of the Lay Faithful in the Political Sphere. It is good for us to begin with the Sacred Scriptures and Jesus words to the disciples, recorded in Matthew's Gospel, remind us of the far-reaching nature of our Gospel Living. The Lord's call to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner and those who are sick,¹ is a call to recognise the dignity of every person. This will surely bring us into the political sphere and we must remember that the measure in which we respond to this call is the measure against which we shall be judged.

The Code of Canon Law makes clear, in the first part of Book II 'People of God' the obligation on all the baptised to promote social justice and, with a reference to the Lord's command, to help the poor.² On the lay faithful is placed the "special obligation to permeate and perfect the temporal order of things with the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, particularly in conducting secular business and exercising secular functions, they are to give witness to Christ."³

These obligations place the Christian in the political sphere. Some amongst the lay faithful may be called to this service directly: in my own country, for instance, in local government, in service as Members of Parliament or as members of the House of Lords. This can bring tensions, for the Christian will sometimes be called to, as it were, stand apart in order to comment on – and influence – government policies to ensure the Common Good and the rights of those who most vulnerable. Indeed, all who profess faith in Christ must be able to proclaim the Gospel in word and action – even if this brings with opprobrium and rejection. This is a consequence of living by the Beatitudes.⁴

In those societies where secularist and consumerist agendas hold old significant sway, it is more necessary than ever for those who serve in the political sphere be open to the guidance of the Spirit in their witness. This same demand lies in all the faithful, but for this call to be answered effectively, formation in Faith is needed. In this context it is significant that the conversations taking place in the Dioceses of England & Wales, as part of the Synod Journey, produced a significant call for more formation in Faith. It is clear, therefore, that an important element in this formation will be equipping people for this sphere of the Church's life.

¹ Mt. 25:31-46

² CIC, c. 222§2

³ CIC, c. 225§2

⁴ Mt. 5:11-12

In England & Wales, a number of initiatives have developed in recent years that are enabling the Church to develop its place in the political sphere. I shall outline these, briefly, highlighting benefits and challenges.

For some years now, the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales has been running an **Interns Programme**. This brings together post-graduate students who have gained good grades in their courses. They spend one year on the programme. It is residential and includes times of retreat and spiritual direction. The interns spend their year working in the public and political sphere: in the offices of MPs or Peers, with CAFOD or in the offices of the Bishops' Conference. The year includes visits to Rome and to the Holy Land, enabling interns to broaden their experience of the Church's life in these two deeply significant places. This experience is designed to equip them to be Catholic leaders and to be ready to take the Gospel into the sphere of politics and public life. Experience has shown that some of them go on to work for the Bishops' Conference and former interns are now working also with the Holy See. The benefits are clear to see, for the formation for future public life as committed members of the lay faithful is reaping benefits in many areas. The greatest challenge is funding. In times past, the programme has had higher numbers, but funding the scheme is expensive and finding suitable accommodation with easy access to the Houses of Parliament is not so easy. These things said, the Interns Programme is something of a jewel in the life of the Catholic Church in England & Wales.

Another important initiative that has grown out of the work of the Bishops' Conference is **Blueprint for a Better Business**. This was a response to the banking crisis some years ago, when people from the financial district that is the City of London recognised that Catholic Social Teaching has something to teach the world of business. This led to a process of engagement in this aspect of public life and with finances having such an influential place in the political sphere, this initiative continues to inform the world of business. The initiative is no longer directed from the Bishops' Conference and it might be suggested that the less obvious link facilitates a 'soft influence' for the Common Good.

At the National Level, the Bishops' Conference Department for Social Justice has, in recent years, developed a practice of hosting **Round Tables** on a series of themes. These are rather informal gatherings, but nonetheless effective. In a few weeks time, we hold the second such event on the theme of Criminal Justice. The first was held in the Palace of Westminster – the home of Parliament – bringing together MPs from across the political divides, to discuss the challenges faced by the Criminal Justice System. The second will bring together members of the Judiciary, to explore the same themes. Another Round Table, this time exploring the challenges facing Mental Health Provision, will take place later this year. These conversations inform the work of the Church and keep the life of Faith before those who hold significant places in public life. The challenges with them is that such conversations can be slow to bear fruit. However, the ways in which, at national level, non-confrontational dialogue can be facilitated has many benefits in the longer term and helps to keep the Gospel before the eyes of those in public life.

Much can also be achieved in collaboration when working ecumenically. One of the strongest examples of this approach can be seen in the work of **Citizens UK**. This organisation grew out

of the needs of families living in the East End of London, faced with a particular problem arising from factory pollution. Grounded in Catholic Social Teaching, this organisation gives a voice to those who would not otherwise have one. It enables people to come together to make their concerns known and to bring about change at local level. It has grown to become a respected organisation, present in a number of cities in the UK, promoting dialogue with those in power and fostering the Common Good.

In a short paper such as this, it is not possible to explore every avenue, but these few examples are indicative of both the aspiration and impact that is possible when men and women of faith respond to the Lord's call to serve their brothers and sisters. This involves, necessarily, a willingness to step into the public square, to take a place on the political sphere. Such a step requires courage, for society as a whole does not understand the ways of faith as was once the case and the Church has not always been her own best advocate. These are major challenges.

However, challenges are also opportunities and the Gospel Message and Catholic Social Teaching of which it is the foundation, offer the answers to the difficulties of our time. The vital element in enabling every member of the Church to take their place in the public square and the field of politics lies in formation. This must be grounded in prayer – for without the foundation of a relationship with Christ, all will lose its direction and purpose. I do believe that the Church is at a moment when there is a renewed openness to formation, not least amongst our young adults and teenagers. They have a thirst for justice, for the right use of the gift of creation and an authentic desire to serve. These are gifts that we must celebrate. The energy and enthusiasm that is present in this generation demands a response of prayer-filled support, encouragement and accompaniment. It is in this setting that formation in the Gospel, in the life of the Church and in her Social Teaching, will be most effective. This opportunity must be a source of hope for the Church and for the world, for the life this formation will bring will bring about change in the social and political sphere that will, in turn, build the Kingdom.