

*The Inaugural St. Thomas More Forum Address
A Catholic in Public Life*

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Representatives
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Having been tagged first as an “arch-monarchist” and second as a parliamentary “bovver-boy”, I don’t particularly want to become “Captain Catholic” for a whole host of reasons, one of which is that I am far from an exemplar of those values and aspirations which we Catholics hold. Still, they are important and that is why I’m here tonight.

I’m also here tonight because of the respect I have for Dennis and Angela Shanahan – journalists of courage as well as professionalism.

As Angela mentioned, I spent some time as a seminarian back in the mid-1980s. My final year was spent as a pastoral assistant in the parish of Emu Plains. The parish priest, to humour me as much as anything, would sometimes ask me to say a few words after the Gospel in place of giving a sermon himself. One night I gave what I thought was a particularly riveting post-Gospel address. As I was walking out behind a couple of parishioners, I overheard them say “that bloke shouldn’t try to be a priest, he ought to be a bloody politician.”

Some years later I was Parliamentary Secretary for Education and presided at the opening of a Catholic school in western Sydney and gave what I thought was a splendid encapsulation on the civic values that brought us all together. On the way out I overheard people saying “that bloke shouldn’t be a politician, he should have been a bloody priest”. So you just can’t win.

As some of you may know, I was taught by the Jesuits at St Aloysius College and then at St Ignatius College in Sydney. I’m not quite sure that the Jesuits would all be happy with the way their product turned out. Some of them would wish that they had not helped to produce a Minister in the fascist Howard dictatorship. But I’ve never forgotten their example and inspiration will always remember a phrase that they drilled into us day in, day out to be “a man for others”. It doesn’t matter what you do as long as it is, in some way, for other people and leaves the world a slightly better place.

If I may make one statement of fundamental belief: If something is not good ethics, it can’t be good politics. If it’s not ethical, it’s not something that politicians ought to do.

But there are some important caveats. First, when we are talking about ethical standards in politics, when we are talking about the moral responsibilities of politicians, even Catholic ones in a secular society such as ours, the standards are not those of revealed religion. They are not the standards that are handed down to us by church leaders. They are the best standards that human wisdom can establish. The ethical standards that are properly followed by politicians, including Christian politicians, are the standards that human reason can establish.

Now, that should not be a problem for Catholics. It was Cardinal Newman, I believe, who once said that if Catholicism and truth are in conflict, either it's not really true, it's not really Catholic, or there's no real conflict. The social teaching of our church does not depend fundamentally on the Bible or on the authority of Popes. It's supposed to be what human reason can discern concerning these great truths which we should attempt to live by in our world.

It was the playwright Robert Bolt who put into the mouth of your patron (as I recollect): "I die the King's good servant, but God's first". In my view we do God's work when we are the best possible servant of the King. That doesn't mean "anything goes", far from it. What it means is that it's man's standards, not man at his worst, but man at his best which sets the rules for the King's servants or, in this case, for politicians in a secular society.

The second caveat is that many of the acts of governments, including governments with a fair proportion of Christians and Catholics, will disappoint people who regard themselves as concerned with ethical standards. That's not because people in government are uninterested in behaving ethically. It's because human beings often disagree over what the best human wisdom might dictate in particular circumstances.

Now a second fundamental statement: while individual Christians are called to emulate Jesus and to live a life of love, the governments in which they serve are called to give each man his due and to do justice for all. There is a fundamental distinction between the dictates of love (which we are supposed to live by as individual Christians) and the dictates of justice (which we are required to adhere to as politicians).

To take an obvious example: the challenging Gospel story of the rich young man who would be perfect and was therefore enjoined to give his goods to the poor and to follow Jesus. Giving all your goods to the poor may be the highest possible virtue in a human being but would be the quintessence of madness in a government. A government which massively increased social security benefits would not necessarily be a good government because governments don't spend their own money, they spend money that they have taken from taxpayers.

I really want to make this clear: an act which might be the highest virtue for an individual might be quite wrong if undertaken by politicians using resources which they hold in trust for the people.

There were tremendous tensions in the life of Thomas More because, so to speak, there are values and there are values. It's not always possible to do all good things simultaneously. It's not always possible, for instance, to pay workers more and simultaneously to have more successful industries. It's not always possible to provide higher unemployment benefits and simultaneously to have people diligently undertaking their obligation to look for work. It would be nice if it were possible to be compassionate and to be just at the same time but often it isn't. Hence politicians have to manage the tension between these important values every day.

As a challenge, perhaps, to some in the audience, I want to take three contemporary political issues, examples of what a "concerned Christian" might be tempted to describe as unfair and heartless government, which can, I think, be justified as not incompatible with fundamental Christian principles.

The first: mandatory detention of people who come to Australia without the proper immigration clearance. This is obviously a very difficult issue because none of us wants to see human beings locked up. We feel for people who aspire to a better life, even if they cut corners to achieve it. But if you don't have mandatory detention, or some other adverse consequence for people who fail to enter according to the rules, sooner or later Australia loses control of its borders. I don't expect people in this audience to warm to the policy of mandatory detention. Still, in the imperfect world we inhabit, where people often have to make unpalatable choices, it's hard to see how mandatory detention is incompatible with Christian ethical standards.

Take another very difficult example: the war in Iraq. Again, the last thing I would expect anyone in this audience to be enthusiastic about is the use of military force. No sane human being ever wants war. Unfortunately, we live in a world which is not free of human evil.

Saddam Hussein may have been, in some sense, the legitimate ruler of Iraq but he was also one of the more significant tyrants of the latter half of the twentieth century. No one liked the fact that the UN did not support the Anglo-American invasion, which Australia supported. No one was happy with the inevitable civilian casualties in these circumstances. No one can be other than concerned about the continuing difficulties that the people of Iraq face and that the Anglo-American forces, assisted by Australia, face in Iraq.

Still, the tyrant is gone and there is a chance that somewhere in that corner of the Middle East we just might achieve some kind of a functioning pluralist society. That would be a good thing for the world if it can be brought off.

The final contemporary issue: workplace relations reform. We Catholics have a long tradition of seeking wage justice. It goes back to Papal encyclicals of the nineteenth century. It is a long and honourable tradition. Even so, providing more freedom and more choice in the workplace is not an unreasonable goal and is not incompatible with our social teaching. If deregulation resulted in gross exploitation, that would be a different situation.

As a Catholic whose first political mentor was BA Santamaria and who has been a member of a union, I am not unmindful of this tradition. Indeed, on one occasion, I moved the strike motion after Kerry Packer sacked The Bulletin's entire photographic department, including many who had more than thirty years service. The upshot, though, was that the workers lost two days pay, Kerry Packer got his magazine produced more cheaply and the photographers in question all ended up earning far more as contractors.

The alleged wrongs that will be bandied around over coming weeks and months as the government seeks to get its industrial relations legislation through the Parliament need to be judged against the totality of what's happening in the real world rather than some kind of abstract pseudo-theological standard. In the real world, the Howard Government's laws have helped to produce more jobs, higher wages and fewer strikes.

The final point I want to make is that it's important that we strive to do right but it's also important to understand the complexities and the ambiguities of the human condition. The older I get, the more sympathy I have for character of the whiskey priest in Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*. He broke nearly all the rules but still thought the rules were important and was ultimately the better for that. None of us are everything we should be. None of us ever quite manage to be the husbands, fathers, friends, neighbours, politicians or leaders that we ought to be but it's important to aim high. We will rarely match our aspirations but would do much worse but for them. Certainly that is infinitely better than saying there are no standards worth striving for, there is nothing worth achieving.

Angela and Bill, thanks very much for having me, I look forward to a vigorous discussion.