

Catholics' radical alternative

Frank Brennan | 09 October 2013

These workshops feature a broad cross-section of church workers from all over Australia. Our hands and feet have reached into every corner of the country. We are a community of faith, formed and informed in the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). One of my ongoing formation communities is my extended family. I am blessed with 20 living nephews and nieces and I will visit my newest grandniece on Friday. She is number 8 of that next generation. My oldest grandnephew is Liam aged 6. His mother, one of my nieces, wrote the other day with news of Liam's latest school assignment at the local convent school. He was asked to use a computer to write the instructions he would give to an intending passenger who had never been on a train before. Liam just loves trains so the mechanical instructions were unsurprisingly very detailed. What did surprise me, and his mother, were the last two points: 'After you've got home, tell yourself if you liked the journey; and, if you liked the journey, ring me. You might like trains as much as me.' Reflection on experience and sharing the reflection on experience in community are constitutive for those of us who find that CST is continuing to shape our mission.

Chris Lowney tells the wonderful story of President Kennedy who meets the janitor at NASA and asks him what he does. The response: 'I'm helping to put a man on the moon.' And he was; and they all were. The NASA staff were working together on a common mission. We are called to work together to facilitate the breaking in of the Kingdom here on earth. We all have our roles to play. Let's choose just one aspect of that mission. How is each of us helping to shape and implement an ethical, humane, compassionate national response to asylum seekers arriving on our shores by boat?

The language of CST must always be prophetic, pedagogical and practical. CST is not just words. It's reflected in words, actions and structures. One of the credibility problems for our Church today is that we proclaim a message of justice, inclusion, and non-discrimination within a structure which is sexist and without sufficient theological coherence or scriptural warrant and which has been grossly neglectful of the best interests of the most vulnerable — abused children. CST provides us with ideas, feeds our imaginations, fires our passions, underpins our conversations, and animates our celebrations in relation to faith and justice — belief in a loving God and solidarity with our fellow human beings. Being Catholic, we respond as community, not as atomized individuals. Our responses are marked by service and ritual, informed by tradition and authority, as well as reflection on lived experience.

The last three popes have armed us with some wonderful concepts for taking on the task of shaping a world bearing more the marks of the Kingdom to come.

In his 1988 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John II spoke of the interdependence of the head and the solidarity of the heart. He told us, 'However much society worldwide shows signs of fragmentation, expressed in the conventional names First, Second, Third and even Fourth World, their interdependence remains close. When this interdependence is separated from its ethical requirements, it has disastrous consequences for the weakest. Indeed, as a result of a sort of internal dynamic and under the impulse of mechanisms which can only be called perverse, this interdependence triggers negative effects even in the rich countries. It is precisely within these countries that one encounters, though on a lesser scale, the more specific manifestations of under development. Thus it should be obvious that development either becomes shared in common by every part of the world or it undergoes a process of regression even in zones marked by constant progress. This tells us a great deal about the nature of authentic development: either all the nations of the world participate, or it will not be true development.'

Inviting us to move from the head to the heart, from thinking to taking a stand, Pope John Paul II then spoke of solidarity: 'At the same time, in a world divided and beset by every type of conflict, the conviction is growing of a radical interdependence and consequently of the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane. Today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided. From the depth of anguish and fear ... , the idea is slowly emerging that the good to which we are all called and the happiness to which we aspire cannot be obtained without an effort and commitment on the part of all, nobody excluded, and the consequent renouncing of personal selfishness.'



Pope Benedict XVI gave us useful insights into the relationship between faith and politics in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. He says:

Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics. The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. But this presupposes an even more radical question: what is justice? The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests.

Here politics and faith meet. Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God—an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason. But it is also a purifying force for reason itself. From God's standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly. This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: it has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just.

Pope Francis, anxious to demonstrate the continuity of CST, made few changes to Benedict's draft of what was to be his last encyclical and published *Lumen Fidei* as his own first encyclical. Francis speaks of the contemporary relevance of our faith for all people, helping us to contribute to the common good: 'Faith is truly a good for everyone; it is a common good. Its light does not simply brighten the interior of the Church, nor does it serve solely to build an eternal city in the hereafter; it helps us build our societies in such a way that they can journey towards hope.'

These concepts of interdependence and solidarity, the relationship between faith and politics, and the assurance that Christian faith can assist everyone committed to justice and the common good can be harnessed prophetically, pedagogically, and practically to formulate our proposals, actions and structures for a more just and peaceful world. They are the building blocks which come to life when we wrestle with a question such as how we might make our asylum policy more humane and more just.

During the 2013 federal election, we Australians were confronted with our major political parties trying to outbid each other with a 'shock and awe' campaign aimed at 'stopping the boats'. Some of us tried to be prophetic with our denunciations. Others pragmatically tried to temper the likely callous outcomes.

In terms of the short term solution to the loss of life at sea and the expanding trade of the people smugglers luring increasing numbers of asylum seekers to Indonesia for transit to Australia, we all need to work within the reality that all major political parties in Australia are committed to a shock and awe approach. Some of us are prepared to discuss how that

shock and awe approach might be tailored to be less callous and objectionable. Others find it so objectionable as to not warrant discussion. Many of us are just deeply troubled and have no idea what to do or say, hoping the problem will go away soon. If in the midst of the evil of the present situation, I can do something to save one life or to accord proper protection to one additional refugee I will do it. I am very grateful that people schooled in CST have been prepared to engage in ongoing dialogue on this issue.

When confronted with moral evil in public policy, church personnel always have a choice: to be prophetic sticking to the moral absolutes (like the Greens or the US style Right to Life Movement), or to be practical engaging in the compromises needed to temper the evil (like the major political parties and those who agitate better welfare measures for mothers so that they might be less likely to choose abortion). Whichever option we take, we all need to concede that at the moment, the only political parties not wanting to embrace a short term shock and awe approach are the Greens, the DLP and the Palmer United Party. I wish them all the best, but neither Christine Milne, John Madigan nor Clive Palmer will ever be prime minister.

Given the large number of Catholics in the Abbott Cabinet, I hope they are listening and happy to contribute to the conversation to those of us who want to utilize CST prophetically, pedagogically and practically. It's great that we Catholics can have the conversation, anyone can contribute, and everyone can listen in.

Many of the Abbott Cabinet are Jesuit alumni. On the Jesuit *Eureka Street* site there has been some spirited disagreement about the effects of a Jesuit education on our national decision makers. One alumnus, Dr John Frawley, said it was heartening to see Tony Abbott's education in a Jesuit school coming through. An ex-Jesuit Michael Breen found this too much: 'Do you mean the self announced pragmatic opportunism, the callousness, the economy before people, the shallow thinking, the rank materialism, the slogans, the disregard for our international obligations, the ignorance of cultural and social matters, the blind eye to newcomers who can afford a plane fare? It is heartening to see the lesson in human compassion given him by Infidel Indonesian commentators which contrast with Abbott's Christian Values? No John ever since Jesuit education has become the captive of their rich materialistic parent client body don't expect too much of that New Testament stuff. I left the Jesuits for several reasons one of which is that I could not teach in a Jesuit school with a good conscience any more.' Dr Frawley spoke of other aspects of a Jesuit education: 'When my wife nearly died on us many years ago and left 7 children (aged 3-15) effectively motherless, 50 mothers from the Jesuits schools in Sydney came to the house every day for a year on a roster system to care for my wife, to teach her all the things she had forgotten and looked after the children so that I could go back to work. The Jesuit headmaster of Riverview took 6 boys into the boarding school and looked after them and refused to send me a bill. That, Michael, is what a Jesuit community is about to me and

perhaps you can see why it saddens me that you seemingly could not find that Jesuit community in your experience. I genuinely hope that you will one day find it again.'

Words, actions and structures have all played their part. During the 2013 election, the boys at Riverview of their own accord wrote to Tony Abbott and all the other Jesuit alumni in the major political parties: 'We feel compelled to express our disappointment that, as graduates of our Jesuit schools, you would allow those principles, cultivated in our common tradition, to be betrayed. We look for heroes among our alumni, for insignes (generous and influential people, as Ignatius styled them). Instead we see only allegiances to parties that trade human lives for political expediency, that choose the lowest common denominator to woo the populace, and that speak of economic problems rather than the dignity of the human person, especially the most vulnerable.' This was highly prophetic language.

Riverview is a very different school from what it was in Tony Abbott's day. One structural difference is that there are now routine scholarships for indigenous Australians and for refugees. So the life experience of the boys is different. Their reflection on their school experience is different. It was this difference that helped to motivate the boys of 2013 to write. The chief author of the letter told the media that the boys had been listening to the stories of their refugee mates: 'Knowing first-hand the direct conflicts they have faced and seeing politicians making decisions that aren't taking into account humanity made us very upset. We wanted to evoke the feeling of what they experienced at Riverview and try to remind them that, when it comes right down to it, it's not about making decisions based on politics. It's about trying to come back to core values.'

Tony Abbott has been receiving a number of letters from students educated in CST. Isabel Teixeira, a Year 12 student at Good Counsel College, Innisfail, daughter of a Timorese refugee, wrote him a five page letter saying, 'If this proposed policy or even the current policy had been established and implemented when my father was seeking asylum from the war in Timor-Leste in the 1970s, I would not exist. However, they were not the policies of the 1970s and, as a result, my father was able to live in Australia, work as a member of parliament in both Australia and Timor-Leste, owns his own law firm and has educated his own children to understand the importance of human rights conservation. Is this not a gain for Australia? Mr Abbott, you know the facts, and if having them reiterated has still not evoked some form of recognition of the illegality of the policies, then I would like you to consider this: by you turning back these boats, carrying people who are potentially escaping situations which most Australians would consider nothing less than horrific, you are turning your back on any inkling of humanity which, through your actions, Australia maintains.'

These prophetic utterances from young Catholics will not win the day on their own. But they are not useless. They are not simply romantic doodlings of out of touch do-gooders. Pope Francis has been very prophetic in his utterances on the same topic. The island Lampedusa is the European equivalent of our hellish Christmas Island. It is a lightning rod for European concerns about the security of borders in an increasingly globalized world where people as

well as capital flow across porous borders. That's why Pope Francis went there on his first official papal visit outside Rome. At Lampedusa on 8 July 2013, Pope Francis said:

'Where is your brother?' Who is responsible for this blood? In Spanish literature we have a comedy of Lope de Vega which tells how the people of the town of Fuente Ovejuna kill their governor because he is a tyrant. They do it in such a way that no one knows who the actual killer is. So when the royal judge asks: 'Who killed the governor?', they all reply: 'Fuente Ovejuna, sir'. Everybody and nobody! Today too, the question has to be asked: Who is responsible for the blood of these brothers and sisters of ours? Nobody! That is our answer: It isn't me; I don't have anything to do with it; it must be someone else, but certainly not me. Yet God is asking each of us: 'Where is the blood of your brother which cries out to me?' Today no one in our world feels responsible; we have lost a sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters. We have fallen into the hypocrisy of the priest and the Levite whom Jesus described in the parable of the Good Samaritan: we see our brother half dead on the side of the road, and perhaps we say to ourselves: 'poor soul ...!', and then go on our way. It's not our responsibility, and with that we feel reassured, assuaged. The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business!

Here we can think of Manzoni's character — 'the Unnamed'. The globalisation of indifference makes us all 'unnamed', responsible, yet nameless and faceless.

Then on his recent visit to the Jesuit Church in Rome he said:

After Lampedusa and other places of arrival, our city, Rome, is the second stage for many people. Often — as we heard — it's a difficult, exhausting journey; what you face can even be violent — I'm thinking above all of the women, of mothers, who endure this to ensure a future for their children and the hope of a different life for themselves and their family. Rome should be the city that allows refugees to rediscover their humanity, to start smiling again. Instead, too often, here, as in other places, so many people who carry residence permits with the words 'international protection' on them are constrained to live in difficult, sometimes degrading, situations, without the possibility of building a life in dignity, of thinking of a new future!

Some of this sounds like politics! In one of his regular recent homilies, Francis made it clear that the gospel and politics do mix. Reflecting on the centurion who asked healing for his servant, Francis said that those who govern 'have to love their people,' because 'a leader who doesn't love, cannot govern — at best they can discipline, they can give a little bit of order, but they can't govern.' He mentioned 'the two virtues of a leader': love for the people

and humility. 'You can't govern without loving the people and without humility! And every man, every woman who has to take up the service of government, must ask themselves two questions: 'Do I love my people in order to serve them better? Am I humble and do I listen to everybody, to diverse opinions in order to choose the best path.' If you don't ask those questions, your governance will not be good. The man or woman who governs — who loves his people is a humble man or woman.' Francis insisted that none of us can be indifferent to politics: 'None of us can say, 'I have nothing to do with this, they govern. . . .' No, no, I am responsible for their governance, and I have to do the best so that they govern well, and I have to do my best by participating in politics according to my ability. Politics, according to the Social Doctrine of the Church, is one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good. I cannot wash my hands, eh? We all have to give something!' He then became a little playful in his homily: "A good Catholic doesn't meddle in politics.' That's not true. That is not a good path. A good Catholic meddles in politics, offering the best of himself, so that those who govern can govern. But what is the best that we can offer to those who govern?'. He concluded:?' So, we give the best of ourselves, our ideas, suggestions, the best, but above all the best is prayer. Let us pray for our leaders, that they might govern well, that they might advance our homeland, might lead our nation and even our world forward, for the sake of peace and of the common good.'

These prophetic remarks need to be matched by practical suggestions. We need to come to the table of practical deliberation committed to finding a better way to treat those who risk all on boats so that they might live. By forming and informing ourselves in CST we can contribute to a more just world prophetically, pedagogically and practically. Within the Church community we can sponsor the respectful dialogue needed so that the inevitable compromises of politics can be better tailored to justice for us all - acknowledging our interdependence and standing firm in solidarity.



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