

The case for an apolitical church

We live in hyper-political world, and as a result, the Catholic Church has been dragged into the sphere of politics. Church leaders can make a million statements and do a million actions, but the media will only focus and report on the political ones. Subsequently, the church is portrayed as obsessed with political issues. Perhaps it is time for the church to step back from political activism.

Guilty by association

To become politically active, church leaders have to make alliances with political parties that are outside of their control. With the rise of political parties in the 19th century, the church in Europe allied with the monarchial, conservative parties, and as the general public turned against the monarchs, they also revolted against the Catholic Church. Thus, Catholic authorities were targeted along with government officials in the liberal and socialist revolutions of the nineteenth century.

In the first half of the 20th century, European countries were torn between communism and fascism. The communists were radical atheists and sought to end religious practices, and therefore, the church often sided with the fascists. To be clear, Catholicism was opposed to fascism, but leaders worked with fascists as a lesser of two evils. To this day, the limited cooperation with fascists, especially in Italy and Spain, hangs over the church and has caused many people to question the moral authority of the church.

In the current political climate, the church has great difficulty working with political parties in the United States. Lay Catholics are highly confused when church leaders work with a pro-abortion Democrat on a poverty initiative, for instance. Or on the flip side, church leaders, who have a closer relationship with Republicans on social issues, might face a backlash when allied with a Republican who has advocated for an aggressive war.

Reactionary

In engaging in numerous political struggles, the church is perceived by many young

people as an institution that is against modern ideas. A young atheist noted in an interview: "If you ask millennials what comes to mind when they think of Christianity, when they think of the church, they will tell you it's anti-gay, anti-doubt, anti-woman, anti-science, anti-sex education. We all know what the church is against, and we really don't care what the church is for."

Progressives believe that the religious decline among young people is due to the church's position on many controversial positions, and if they changed these teachings, then it would be more popular. I believe that the church's problem with young people is not its controversial teachings, but that most young Catholics do not know what the church actually teaches on key issues.

Ask a millennial: what does the church prohibit with regards to sexuality, and you will receive an instantaneous and lengthy response. Ask the same person to describe the church's theology concerning sexuality, and you will be greeted by silence. The church has made a great effort to inform the general public what it is against through numerous political campaigns. If the same energy and resources were placed into educating the public on the church's teaching, then the church would be far more effective.

Not effective

Beginning in the 1960s, the clergy made a shift from focusing on spirituality to emphasizing social justice. Locally, people might remember the Catonsville Nine, which included two priests, one former priest, and one religious brother, who protested the Vietnam War by burning draft files; or the Harrisburg Seven, composed mainly of priests and nuns, who planned to kidnap Henry Kissinger and bomb steam tunnels. These church leaders hoped for a more politically engaged church, but their actions only turned people away from the church as a moral authority.

Politics has a great toxicity to it. One only has to review the approval ratings for Congress, for example, which barely crack the double digit mark. Americans love to hate anything in the political sphere, and everything that comes into contact with it. Conversely, people are looking for an alternative to the political world as a guiding force in America, and the church is perfectly placed to be that alternative. In the

modern world, the church has been exceedingly unsuccessful in the political sphere, and yet, Catholics still place a lot of hope in politicians and political parties in changing the moral atmosphere. The discrepancy between hope and repeated failures has done a great disservice to the church, and the church needs a new approach.

Ambiguity

Instead of having laws conform to the theological positions of the church, Catholic leaders have distorted Catholic teachings to fit the language of current laws. When church leaders comment on current political issues, it is seen as an endorsement or condemnation of the law, not an endorsement of a church teaching. There is a beautiful theology centered on caring for God's creation, but it is not synonymous with a carbon tax or opposition to pipelines. Reducing the church's teaching on the environment to a position on the carbon tax is tricky, at best.

The same could be said for the struggle over religious freedom. Catholics all agree that we should be able to practice our religion freely, but without reference to right and wrong, promotion of religious freedom is complicated. We do not support a religious freedom to practice polygamy, nor do we support Satanists placing their statues on public grounds.

Church doctrines are exceedingly clear, but the application of them to specific laws can be complex. Unfortunately, people know very little about what the church teaches and far more about the political stances of the church leaders. As these positions make their way into homilies and intercessions, I often wonder: are these statements even Catholic?

What's the alternative?

One important distinction must be made before progressing, and that is, individual Catholics must remain politically active, being informed, voting and running for office. My reservation is directed toward the clergy and official institutions of the church. In addition, while I am hesitant for church leaders to focus on political activities, Catholic theology related to current events must be preached unabashedly and loudly by the clergy. Lastly, if a political party that espouses Catholic principles

and is rooted in Catholic culture appears in the future, it would make sense to work with that institution. Yet at this time, such an entity does not exist.

More than anything, I am arguing against mixed priorities. I maintain that politics flows from culture, and if you want to change politics, change the culture. In the debate over abortion, Catholics should not seek to merely overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Imagine that some legal procedure could nullify the Supreme Court ruling. It would not be a complete victory. Pro-abortion leaders would find another avenue to legalize abortion.

Instead, the focus should be on a conversion of hearts. That is to say, change the cultural discourse to make abortion not illegal, but unthinkable. The former is political change, but the latter is cultural change. When the population realizes the horrors of abortion as it is in reality, the laws will change and even the most hardened politicians, at least for their own self-interest, will disown it.

Lastly, church leaders need to focus on Catholics. We, as a church, are a bit of a mess right now, and we need to get our house in order before we address the rest of the country. I know that sounds like the comment of an anti-Catholic, but it's the unfortunate reality. The Supreme Court has six Catholics, and only three non-Catholics. The Vice President, Speaker of the House, House Minority Leader are Catholics. In all, 31 percent of Congress is Catholic. Yet, the church faces a lot of political hostility from these "Catholic"-led political institutions.

The general population of Catholics does not fare much better than our "Catholic" politicians. The majority of Catholics voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012, and I find it hard to comprehend how Catholics supported a candidate who so blatantly opposes Catholicism on key issues. I am not saying that Catholics needed to support the Republican candidate—I did not vote for McCain or Romney either—but it is impossible to rationalize supporting Obama in good conscience. Given this, it might be time for church leaders to step back from politics for a time, and focus on building a Catholic culture and better catechizing the Catholic population.

This is the second article in a series on Catholic culture. You can read the first on Baseball, the Mass and Catholic culture.