ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.com

# Faith and Politics:

# Christian Spirituality and Working for the Common Good

**David Hollenbach, S.J.**

**University Chair in Human Rights and International Justice**

**Boston College**

**Sacred Heart Church, Detroit Michigan**

**September 18, 2008**

## INTRODUCTION

**BISHOP TOM GUMBLETON**

Just this past week, when Senator Biden returned to his home in Scranton, Pennsylvania to do some campaigning, the bishop in Scranton announced that he would be barred from Holy Communion in that diocese. So were in the middle of a campaign that could easily be divisive once more within the Catholic community. And so for us to have a program today where we talk about faith and politics, I think, is very timely. And we have a person speaking to us today who is well qualified to do this.

Fr. Dave Hollenbach was born in Philadelphia and attended elementary and secondary Catholic schools there, attended St. Joseph's University, and then entered the Jesuits in 1964, was ordained in 1971 as a priest. His career as a Jesuit has involved him in many teaching situations – which is the main charism of the Society of Jesus. He has taught in Africa for the last few years, doing a semester or so at a time. He told me he intends to go back there this year in Kenya, East Africa, where he teaches at the university there. He also, sometime back, was on the faculty of the Westin School of Theology, the Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Currently, he is on the faculty at Boston College; and he is also a professional theologian and university professor.

He's been on the Board of the Catholic Theological Society of America. He has also been on the Editorial Board of the Journal of Religious Ethics. He is also on the Steering Committee for the American Academy of Religion and their Consultation on Religion and Human Rights. At Boston College he is also the Director of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice. So his career has been very much involved in social justice and the ethics connected with human rights.

He's published a variety a variety of articles; and he has also told me that he has just completed editing a book that he worked on with the Jesuit Refugee Services – and it's a book about refugees and human rights. Some time ago he met with the Catholic Bishops' Committee that wrote the Peace Pastoral when we did a five year update. Dave met with us to help us to reshape the necessary part of the document. And he also consulted over the whole period of the time the Catholic bishops were working on the Economic Pastoral in 1986.

And so Dave's career, as a teacher working for human rights and actively involved in the Church as a priest and Jesuit, and his close connection with all the issues we've become involved in politics, makes him a very, very important person for us to listen to. And so I am very happy that I can present to Fr. Dave Hollenbach.

**FAITH AND POLITICS: CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND WORKING FOR THE COMMON GOOD**

**FR. DAVID HOLLENBACH**

My reflection on the relation of faith and spirituality to U.S. politics today will be shaped by a conviction central to the Catholic tradition, namely that citizens have a moral responsibility to promote the common good of the larger society rather than simply pursuing their own individual goods. This theme has implications that challenge much of the pattern of political life today. It suggests that Christians and the church have an opportunity to make an indispensable contribution to American politics today, for our society is desperately in need of a politics that serves the common good. I will proceed in three steps. First I will outline a bit of history that should orient an approach to politics founded in Catholic faith and spirituality. Second, I will highlight several ways that the church is on the path to making such a contribution and several ways that it is, in my judgment failing to do so. Finally, I will sketch an approach drawn from Catholic spiritual life that can help us move forward.

## 1. Historical Perspectives.

The common good is an ancient theme in Western and Christian moral thought. Over two millennia ago, Aristotle argued that the good of the community should set the direction for the lives of individuals, for the common good is higher or more "divine" than the particular goods of private persons.[1] In a Christian context, St. Thomas Aquinas identified the good to be sought by all persons in common with the very reality of God: "the supreme good, namely God, is the common good, since the good of all things depends on God."[2] Thus for Thomas Aquinas, the pursuit of the common good carries out the Bible's double commandment to love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The attainment of the common good in this truly rich sense is the attainment of what we call the communion of saints—our full union with both God and our neighbors. Further, Aquinas held that the advancement of the common good is the prime purpose of all civil law, and therefore politics. Thus, "the virtue of a good citizen" is the justice "whereby a person is directed to the common good."[3]

This centrality of the common good in Christian life was echoed by Ignatius Loyola in the sixteenth century, and his approach is relevant to a perspective on politics based in spirituality. When Ignatius set forth the spirit that should govern all the decisions of his followers he wrote that they should seek the broader, common good. Ignatius directly linked "the glory of God" with the earthly reality of the common good. Indeed Ignatius came close to identifying the two ideas when he wrote that Jesuit activities should be directed "according to what will seem expedient to the glory of God and the common good."[4] This single phrase led Jesuits to see close connections between the spiritual and the civic, even between the religious and the political. This is no otherworldly spirituality. For Ignatius, the pursuit of this-worldly aspects of the common good was an eminent responsibility of Christians and closely linked with one's vocation from God.

In addition, Ignatius Loyola's vision of the common good was extraordinarily expansive in scope. Indeed he saw it as *universal.* The full common good is the good of the whole of humanity, extending to the ends of the earth.

This brief historical sketch indicates that service to the common should be central to a life that is authentically Christian both morally and spiritually. It shows why commitment to the common good is also essential to good political life.

## 2. Strengths and Limits of the Church's Service of the Common Good Today

I like to understand this commitment to the common good as actualized both in deeds and in words, both by citizens acting together to create a common life and by deliberating together about what their action should be when they at first disagree on what their society should do. I call these forms of interaction the *social solidarity* that enables peoples to participate actively in social life and the *intellectual and imaginative solidarity* that connects people to each other in discussion, conversation, and debate about how they should live together and helps them imagine what it is like to be in another's shoes.

In my view, the Catholic church in the United States has been making important contributions to this social solidarity, but that it has not been making the full contribution that it is capable of through the

deliberation that I call intellectual and imaginative solidarity. In making this argument I will focus particularly on the public role of the Catholic bishops, especially their recent *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.*

The commitment of the bishops to promoting the social solidarity that supports economic justice is evident in much of their recent teaching. The bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on *Economic Justice for All* stressed a vision of justice that secures everyone's' participation in social life to at least to the level required by their fundamental human dignity. Human dignity can be realized only in community. Thus to be left out or excluded from active participation in community is to have one's basic dignity undermined. The good of an individual person is thus woven together with the social good. All persons who seek work should be enabled to find it within a reasonable time period. Protection of the health of individual persons is also in large part a social undertaking. In both advanced and developing societies today, health is increasingly dependent on access both to a healthful environment and to preventative and basic therapeutic forms of health care. All these goods are increasingly shared or common goods, so the bishops argue society has a duty to provide them to all.

Thus the U.S. bishops argued that the most basic requirement of justice requires working for "*the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons*." Or in negative terms, "The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were nonmembers of the human race." [5] Such exclusion is the very opposite of solidarity, for it "marginalizes" persons and whole groups from participation in the common life of the larger community. There are so few decent jobs in many urban ghettos that people simply give up looking for work. As the bishops put it in 1986, they are effectively told by the community: "we don't need your talent, we don't need your initiative, and we don't need *you*."[6] This undermines the common good of urban communities, as we see in the violence of many American urban centers today.

The challenge of social solidarity and the common good also arises on the international level. For example, in the face of African poverty, the key question is how to move from patterns of global interaction that leave out whole peoples and large parts of a whole continent to patterns based on inclusion and reciprocity. Pope John Paul II called this "globalization in solidarity, globalization without marginalization."[7] Thus in 2007 *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* called for a global solidarity that addresses the scandal that more than a billion people today live on less than two dollars a day. [8]

Thus if we are to begin the task of securing minimal justice, we need overcome the divisions in both U.S. domestic life and globally. We need to make a fundamental "option for the poor" and for the excluded or marginalized. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* put it this way: "While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern."[9]

In fact, the church in the United States seems to have been somewhat successful in communicating this message that concern for the poor is a central part of the Christian life. The recent study of the actual beliefs held by American Catholics in 2005, William D'Antonio and his co-authors concluded that 84% of American Catholics believe that "helping the poor" is "very important" to their lives as Catholics. This is the same percentage that holds that "belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead" is very important to their Catholic identity. It is notably higher than the 47 % who believe that "the Catholic church's teachings that oppose same sex marriage" are "very important" or the 44% who believe that "the Catholic church's teachings on abortion" are "very important."[10]

Why has the leadership of the church been more effective in communicating the importance of concern for the poor than the importance of opposition to abortion or same sex marriage? *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* repeatedly states that abortion is an "intrinsically evil" act that can never be justified. In the bishops words,

> There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. . . . They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia.[11]

This is extraordinarily strong language. The central question becomes why less than half of American Catholics see opposition to abortion and euthanasia as "very important" to their lives of faith.

One answer could be that the Catholics who do not share the bishops' unambiguous rejection of abortion, euthanasia, and embryonic stem cell research are not, in fact, faithful Catholics. The same might be said of those who support politicians who do not seek to ban abortion or same sex marriage: they are being unfaithful to the teachings of the church and, for that reason, should leave the church. There are some very disturbing data in the recent U.S. Religious Landscape Survey done

by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that suggests that a number of Catholics may reaching this conclusion themselves.

This Survey has revealed that "Approximately one-third of the survey respondents who say they were raised Catholic no longer describe themselves as Catholic. This means that roughly 10% of all Americans are former Catholics."[12] The Catholic church has experienced a greater net loss of those raised within it than any other religious community in the United States. As my colleague at Boston College, Alan Wolfe, has put it, the non-immigrant Catholic membership is "in free fall."[13]

I am not in a position to offer a definitive explanation of why so many Catholics have been leaving the church of their youth. Surely the general cultural openness to religious change is part of the reason. Another possible explanation is that Catholic moral doctrine makes demands that are particularly burdensome in the context of the culture of the United States today. Pope John Paul II would likely have agreed with this interpretation, for he saw a dramatic conflict today between a "culture of life" and a "culture of death" growing in the US. Perhaps many are leaving because they are unable to accept the moral demands of the "culture of life." If so, one could conclude that the church is in fact better off without them and that those who remain are a faithful remnant not afraid to challenge a society whose values should be confronted.

But we need to reflect carefully on whether this is the right interpretation of what is happening.

In my judgment, the hesitancy of many American Catholics to unambiguously condemn all abortions or to judge same sex relations as intrinsically evil is not due to their capitulation to a culture of death. Rather I suspect it arises primarily from the strong commitment most Americans have to extending respect and tolerance toward all persons, even those with whom they disagree. Of course, Pope John Paul II saw this high valuation of tolerance as the source of far too much openness to the legitimacy of practices such as abortion. Thus a "sign of the times" that alarms John Paul II is the way these forms of life-taking are sometimes not regarded as crimes but as "*legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights*."[14]

I have myself argued that an ethic based on the single value of tolerance is not enough to sustain the common good of American and global society today. In my view, however, movement to the common good does not in the first instance call for the passage of legislation that would coercively ban practices judged morally unacceptable in the official teachings of the church. Rather, I think the first step must be serious engagement among those who hold different assessments of these issues. This is the virtue I have called intellectual and imaginative solidarity. It is the virtue that calls us to reach across cultures and moral positions through listening as well as speaking in a genuine dialogue. It requires an intellectual commitment that seeks to understand others. It also seeks imaginative insight into how the world looks to others and the ways the structures of our society are working and what they are actually doing to the most vulnerable. It calls for developing well-rounded proposals on how to transform the institutional centers of decision-making in our increasingly interconnected societies so they serve all members of the human race. In short, it calls for long-term, serious work that takes commitment to the common good as its loadstar.

But note well, this virtue of intellectual and imaginative solidarity can only be developed in an atmosphere of respect for freedom and from a stance of intellectual humility. Nothing will prevent its development more surely than the view that one already knows all that one needs to know to develop coercive legislation that will genuinely serve the goods of all members of society. To move quickly and without the required dialogue to categorizing broad categories of actions as "intrinsically evil" and thus to be banned by coercive law as soon as this can realistically be achieved is neither to respect the freedom of others nor to assume the posture of humility required by intellectual and imaginative solidarity.

I fear this lack of respect and humility can be discerned in some aspects of church teaching today. I am aware, of course, that the bishops leave some room for prudential judgment about how their commitment to eliminating what they see as intrinsically evil acts should be translated into public policy. It would appear, however, that *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* regards the issues presented as "intrinsically evil" as outweighing the other moral matters treated. This priority is explicit, though perhaps inadvertently set forward, when the bishops write that that "resorting to unjust war" and "an unjust immigration policy" are "serious moral issues that challenge our consciences" and thus are "matters for principled debate."[15] I say this must be an inadvertent statement, because a war or an immigration policy that is unjust cannot be a matter of "principled debate." If a war or immigration policy is unjust, it is immoral, period. There is no such thing as a morally acceptable unjust war. What has happened here, it seems, is that war, whether just or unjust, is being judged not important enough to make the kind of unambiguous claim on conscience that

abortion is judged to make. In my view, the question of whether banning abortion through the instrument of coercive civil or criminal law demands more discussion that this

A sizable percentage of American Catholics do not appear to accept this cut and dried approach to the complex issue of abortion, nor to some other matters declared intrinsically evil by the bishops. For example, a broad group of Catholic members of the U.S. congress have been seeking to develop a policy position that significantly reduces the number of abortions by providing economic and other forms of support for women who face problematic pregnancies or by seeking to help prevent problematic pregnancies through greater access to contraception for sexually active young people. The bishops themselves state their support for "laws and programs that encourage childbirth and adoption over abortion and by addressing poverty, providing health care, and offering other assistance to pregnant women, children, and families."[16] Unfortunately the practical implication of the use of the language of "intrinsic evil" in the condemnation of abortion means that some candidates who are stressing such approaches are approached with suspicion by the bishops and even declared unworthy to receive communion by a few bishops.

Whether the number of abortions can be more effectively reduced by taking economic measures that reduce pressures on women to consider abortion or by passing legislation that simply bans abortion outright is clearly a matter of practical wisdom. Reaching a judgment on such a matter calls for exercise of the classic virtue of prudence. Discussion and debate about such issues with those who hold positions on them that are different from one's own is an exercise of the virtue I have called intellectual imaginative solidarity. It is my fear that the bishops' current approach may well undermine both of these virtues. I also fear that at least some of the Americans who have left the church have done so because they think that its bishops are leading it in a direction that is lacking in prudence and therefore unvirtuous. If that is that case, we face a serious crisis indeed.

## 3. A Spirituality of Solidarity in a Complex World

Let me conclude with a brief statement of the direction in which I hope we can move. I believe what we need from the church in the current political scene is not simply lists of intrinsic evils or of actions we should never do. We need a presentation of the deep and broad Catholic vision of what a good society could look like. The bishops' 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* included a rich description of the Old Testament's vision of a society formed by covenant with God and by Jesus's proclamation of the coming reign of God. Only against the backdrop of this rich biblical vision were more detailed moral norms of economic justice presented. Sad to say, I find this powerful biblical vision almost entirely lacking recent episcopal teaching. Rather, we are often presented with lists of do's and don'ts, prescriptions and proscriptions. At some level of moral discourse such prescriptions and proscriptions are appropriate. In my judgment, however, they are not what are needed from the church in the current cultural situation of the United States. The need today is for hope and for a vision that points the way to a civic and global community that is truly worthy of our loyalty. Lists of evils, and condemnations of actions or persons, are just what we do not need if we are to inspire action for the common good.

Instead of this, we need to be helped to see how God empowers and enables us to take action through the gifts of grace. Most of us already know the many ways that things are not in good shape in our cities, our country, and our world. But we feel pretty powerless in the face of the gap between the way things are and the way they ought to be. What we need is to be helped to grow in our awareness that God's gracious, healing, and redeeming love can and will help us transform our public and civic lives together. Feelings of social powerlessness sometimes tempt us to turn to God as a refuge from the negativities of public life rather than as a source of empowerment to engage these negativities. A spirituality that encourages such retreat from public engagement is far removed from the central thrust of the Catholic tradition's convictions about the common good and solidarity. In particular, Catholic sacramental and liturgical life can link those of us who participate in it to the mystery of the redemptive activity of God throughout the whole of human life, both in its public and more personal dimensions. This is true of the Eucharist above all. As Robert Bellah put it, in the Eucharist "I become immediately and physically one with the body of Christ, and so one with the whole of creation." This sacramental oneness with Christ can lead worshipers into networks of solidarity, both private and public, in which God's love is present.[17]

The sacramental life of the church therefore, is an empowerment for solidarity, and especially for solidarity with those who are hurting or in need. Unleashing this power in the life of the Catholic community today will do more to stimulate faithful citizenship, I believe, than presenting lists of "thou shalt nots" and of

"intrinsic evils." The question, then, is how the ministry of the church can make the power of this grace accessible.

This will occur first and foremost through the Eucharist itself. The Eucharist is the real presence of the redemptive love of Christ in the lives of all who enter into it through communion. But the Word—in the Scriptures, in preaching, and in the entire educational ministry of the church in its many forms—is needed to bring the public significance of the Eucharist to explicit consciousness in the minds of Catholics in the pew. The Word in all these forms can help form their understanding that the Eucharist is an empowerment for engagement in public life, especially for public activity that expresses and leads to solidarity with those in need. Such Word-inspired understanding is the intellectual imagination and, even theological, aspect of growth in a spirituality that leads to public engagement rather than to retreat in the face of social complexity.

American Catholics thus need to be helped both to understand and to experience how the same Christ who is present in the Eucharist is also present in efforts to address the major issues of public life. Appreciation of this integral presence of Christ will help us experience Sunday worship and our lives as citizens as internally connected. Call this the public or civic or even political dimension of Christian spirituality. Growth in such spirituality can both empower us for active lives as citizens and help us discern how Christ's love can shed light on the political decisions we face.

Thus Sunday preaching should help us to a deeper grasp of the full public meaning of the acclamation "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Jesus's death is the revelation of God's love for all or us, especially for the poor. It is simultaneously God's utter solidarity with all who suffer in our world—the poor, people without health care, prisoners on death row, those whose lives are threatened by hunger or taken by violence. In rising, Christ enables us to trust in God's promise to bring fullness of life to all who are deprived of it. It also sustains us with a power vastly greater than our own when, as citizens, we work to overcome the deprivation and death that mars public life. Such hope and sustenance is an essential source of long-term engagement in public life when discouragement threatens to become resignation. And the acclamation that Christ will come again is the promise that God's reign of love, justice, and peace is the destiny of the whole of creation, both for the all of us and for those who have suffered deeper wounds and losses than we have.

When we enter into communion with Christ at the Eucharist, therefore, we are sent on a mission of solidarity in public life and sustained in that mission by the grace of God. This grace can touch all we do at work. It can energize our efforts to aid our communities as volunteers. It will sustain our engagement as citizens as we reflect on political questions, debate these questions with our friends and co-workers, vote, support candidates, and participate in public life a many other ways.

The gospel still beckons, and the grace of Christ still sustains the action of many faithful Catholics in their lives as citizens. My hope is that a deeper appropriation this Christian vision can expand the number of those drawn both to the life of the church and to service of the common good in their lives as citizens. I am convinced both the church and our world need this today. It is a key aspect of our spiritual vocation in the United States today.

---

## Notes

[1] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1094b. This is an adaptation of Martin Ostwald's translation (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962). The Greek *polis* is translated "state" by Ostwald, but "city" has been used here to avoid the impression that Aristotle is speaking of the good of the modern nation-state.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 17. Again, the translation has been adapted, using "God" rather than "Him," from that contained in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1945), vol. 2, p. 27. Adaptations in the interest of gender inclusiveness will be made as appropriate in citations throughout this book.

[3]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 58, art. 6.

[4] This identification can be found in the apostolic letter of Pope Julius III, *Exposcit debitum* (July 21, 1550) that gave papal approval to the "formula of the Institute" of the Society of Jesus. It is contained in the contemporary normative documents of the Jesuit order, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms*, *A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), I. Formulas of the Institute of the Society of Jesus, Julius III, no. 1, p. 4.

[5] National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All,* no. 77.

[6] See the documentation provided in National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, chap. 3. The bishops' numbers are for 1986, but the situation is very similar today.

[7] John Paul II, "From the Justice of Each Comes the Peace of All," World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1998, no. 3. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121997_xxxi-world-day-for-peace_en.html (downloaded May 7, 2002).

[8] See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,* no. 88.

[9] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,* no. 50.

[10] William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Mary Gautier, American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 24.

[11] *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, nos. 22.

[12]Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (2008), "Summary of Key Findings," available online at: http://religions.pewforum.org/reports (accessed March 5, 2008).

[13] Television interview with Alan Wolfe, on WGBH-TV's "Greater Boston," Tuesday, February 5, 2008, available online at: http://streams.wgbh.org/online/gb/gb20080226religion2.mov (accessed March 5, 2007).

[14]*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 18. Emphasis in original.

[15] *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 29.

[16] *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 65.

[17] See Robert Bellah, "Religion and the Shape of National Culture," *America*, July 31, 1999, 13.