



The Laity and Political Affairs

Position Paper No. 3

Catholic Civil Rights League (Canada)

The lay faithful¹ are fully members of the Church and citizens of this country. We are citizens by birth or naturalization, and Christians by rebirth through baptism. Our citizenship brings with it ties to the larger community and the obligation to contribute to its progress and the solution of its problems,² while through Baptism and Confirmation we are appointed by the Lord to share in the mission of the Church.³ This mission is both secular and spiritual, reflecting the distinctive natures of citizenship and Christianity.⁴

The principal duty of the laity is to reveal Christ to others,⁵ helping one another to greater holiness of life even in our secular activities, so that the world may be filled with His spirit.⁶ While clergy and religious share this obligation, secular duties and activities belong properly (though not exclusively) to the laity.⁷ Our special vocation is to bloom where we are planted “in the midst of the world and of secular affairs”⁸ so that the Gospel can take deep root “in the mentality, life and work” of the nation.⁹ Especially by the example of lives “resplendent in faith, hope and charity,”¹⁰ we are to bring Christ and His Church to places and circumstances where only we can go, and make fruitful vineyards where only we can labour:¹¹ in our families, workplaces and communities, and in political affairs.¹²

Beginning with practical things, we must become truly proficient in our chosen fields of work and in key secular disciplines, contributing our labour and skills to the development of a humane and fruitful civil culture that will ensure the just distribution of goods and social benefits.¹³ A laity informed by the faith should seek and articulate the higher principles that should motivate behaviour in the home, workplace and society.¹⁴ Such an appeal to natural virtue should be attractive to all citizens, and will afford opportunities for glad co-operation with others working toward the same objectives.¹⁵ Again, as a practical matter, Catholics have a duty to vote. Beyond that, we ought to be active in political life, in the administration of public affairs, and in determining public policy.¹⁶

The emphasis must be on animating social and state institutions from within¹⁷ in the interests of brotherhood, unity and peace,¹⁸ and on encouraging the formation of citizens who are cultured, generous and beneficent.¹⁹ Ultimately, the presence of an active Catholic laity in all walks of life, including political affairs, will allow Christ to “increasingly illuminate the whole of human society with his saving light.”²⁰

The challenge in a pluralistic democracy is to find a way to explain and defend Christian principles so that our fellow citizens understand that they can be safely and correctly applied to the problems facing our communities.²¹ The object is not to establish a theocracy, nor the social or political hegemony of a particular religion, but a society of love, justice and peace which will be to the benefit of all.²²

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However, this is possible only if, minimally, society and the state do not reject the will of God as expressed in divine law,²³ from which all secular laws derive their authority.²⁴ Political and judicial authority is binding in conscience only when exercised for the common good, within the limits of the natural moral law.²⁵

Even when public authority becomes oppressive, Catholics are bound to obey the laws of the state insofar as they do not conflict with divine law. But no parliament, no legislature and no court has the authority to set aside the commandments of God, nor to command obedience to laws and regulations that are contrary to the natural moral law. When this abuse of authority occurs in a democracy, Catholics must take all legal and political steps necessary to defend ourselves and our fellow citizens, and may, in addition, resort to conscientious objection, civil disobedience, non-co-operation and other forms of non-violent resistance in accordance with the natural moral law and the Gospel.²⁶ Should such steps become necessary, the unity of Christians and non-Christian believers in God and our willingness to suffer will ultimately overcome the abuse of authority and power of the state.

At all times in political affairs one must properly inform one's conscience²⁷ so as to act always according to the mind of the Church.²⁸ It is essential that we work with the hierarchy,²⁹ turning to them "for guidance and spiritual strength."³⁰ However, the clergy cannot offer ready answers to every social or political problem, nor even to every grave problem. Finding solutions is the responsibility of the laity, guided by Christian wisdom the teaching authority of the Church.³¹

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The Catholic Civil Rights League assists in creating conditions within which Catholic teachings can be better understood, cooperates with other organizations in defending civil rights in Canada, and opposes defamation and discrimination against Catholics on the basis of their beliefs. The Catholic Civil Rights League is a Canadian non-profit organization entirely supported by the generosity of its members.

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Notes

1. "The term 'laity' is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church." Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic*

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Constitution on the Church, 21 November, 1964 (*Lumen Gentium*) 31

2. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*) 7 December, 1965, 21

3. *Lumen Gentium*, 33

4. Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, 18 November, 1965 (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) 5; *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 19

5. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 21

6. *Lumen Gentium*, 36 “[The laity] have also, according to the condition of each, 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.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983) Canon 225(2)

7. Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 7 December, 1965 (*Gaudium et Spes*) 43

8. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2

9. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 21

10. *Lumen Gentium*, 31

11. *Lumen Gentium*, 33

12. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 21; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 14

13. *Lumen Gentium*, 36, *Gaudium et Spes*, 43

14. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 16

15. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43; *Lumen Gentium*, 36

16. *Gaudium et Spes*, 75

17. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 15

18. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 8

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19. *Gaudium et Spes*, 74

20. *Lumen Gentium*, 36, 31; *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 21; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5; “In their patriotism and in their fidelity to their civic duties Catholics will feel themselves bound to promote the true common good; they will make the weight of their convictions so influential that as a result civil authority will be justly exercised and laws will accord with the moral precepts and the common good.” *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 14.

21. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6

22. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 19, *Lumen Gentium*, 36

“... the Church’s moral teaching should not be seen simply as the domain of obligations and legal imperatives, but rather as the authoritative proposal of a way of life that best corresponds to the human heart’s deepest yearnings for happiness.” E. Christian Brugger, review of Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Morality: The Catholic View*. St. Augustine’s Press, 2001. In *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 2004, p. 26

23. *Lumen Gentium*, 31; *Gaudium et Spes*, 43; *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 15

24. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1901. “A human law has the character of law to the extent that it accords with right reason, and thus derives from the eternal law. Insofar as it falls short of right reason, it is said to be an unjust law, and thus has not so much the nature of law as of a kind of violence.” St. Thomas Aquinas, Sth I-II, 93, ad 2.

25. See note 24. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1903. *Gaudium et Spes*, 74.

26. *Gaudium et Spes*, 74

27. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43

28. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6

29. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 21

30. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43

31. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43