

AUSTRALIA'S BISHOPS' CRISIS OF LOYALTY

No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to one, and despise the other...

Matthew 6: 24

On Wednesday, September 22nd, at about 9.15 am Eastern Standard Time, an earthquake, the strongest felt since Australia was settled by the British in the late 18th century, shook the State of Victoria in Australia's south east. Eight days earlier, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross six priests from four different Australian dioceses, exasperated at the lack of episcopal leadership in the face of mounting challenges to the well-being of the Catholic faithful precipitated by the response of the country's state governments to the Corona virus, had circulated a Statement setting out the applicable Catholic principles inviting support for their initiative from fellow priests. By the time of the events referred to below, some 75 priests had signified their approval.

The Statement and its introductory letter are reproduced in the Appendix. We have refrained from nominating its signatories. The reader is invited to peruse the documents now.

The six priests had set midday, Wednesday, September 22nd as the time for publication. On the morning of that day, the morning of the earthquake, one of the prime movers among the priests was called by his bishop to a meeting, which call was sufficient to bring the priest's initiative to a halt. At the meeting, which took place at 2.00 pm, the bishop directed him to abandon the exercise; there was to be no publication. The reason reportedly given was that the Statement "would be divisive". There can be little doubt the bishop concerned was acting for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Earlier, two others of the six priests had been instructed by their bishop to withdraw their names.

If you need to do so, Dear Reader, you might care to refresh your recollection of the contents of the Statement. See if you can discover anything in the document which would tend to divide the Church or which departs from Catholic teaching. There is nothing. It follows that the division to which the bishop adverted—a division which Australia's bishops feared collectively—must relate to something else.

Could it be that they feared that the Statement expressed succinctly, if not comprehensively, the issues attention to which any bishop true to his oath of allegiance to Christ and His Church would feel responsible in the current crisis, and that it would expose—

- the extent to which they had abandoned Catholic principle in embracing without due enquiry and investigation edicts imposed by secular authorities as to the need for vaccination?
- their failure to question publicly the morality of vaccines which relied for their vigour on cells taken from aborted infants?
- the bad example they had thus given to the faithful to whom they stood as a father stands to his family?

- the fact that as bishops of God's Church they have a duty not just to Catholics but to all men to proclaim the need of adhering to natural principle?
- their failure to advise and to make known to secular authorities the primacy of the right to follow his conscience of every citizen confronted with the edicts imposed and the duty of the State to respect that right?
- the facility with which they had abandoned the Church's ontological superiority over the temporal order?
- their failure to insist that attendance by the Catholic faithful at Mass and the Sacraments was not to be reduced to, nor would they allow it to be reduced to, parity with attendance at any merely social gathering?
- their failure to insist that every man, whether believing in God or not, is subject to God who gives him life and existence and accordingly owes Him the return of his regard, if not his obeisance?
- that the dominance of atheism in men's thinking is the cause of the serial evils that afflict society notably the appalling evils of contraception, abortion and euthanasia?
- that it was inevitable that atheism's abandonment of moral principle would lead to moral and physical harm to the people?
- that men have understood throughout history that any plague is a punishment for their immoral behaviour, and the present virus is just such a plague?

Could it be, in short, that they feared that the Statement would expose the divide between their responsibilities as bishops and the glaring failures in their conduct with its associated scandals?

Michael Baker

October 3rd, 2021 — *St Thérèse of the Infant Jesus, Patroness of Australia*

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

APPENDIX

To Our Brother Priests

14 September 2021

Dear Brother in the Priesthood,

As you are well aware, over the past 18 months we have seen our most fundamental liberties drastically curtailed, and at the moment we are under growing pressure to receive a vaccine that many of us are opposed to.

Whether or not you have or intend to receive the vaccine, there is so much at stake in the way our people have been treated over the past months that you will want to consider our proposal. As priests we are being approached by many of our people who are in distress: what can they do to resume normal lives without

violating their conscience or losing their jobs? Our people need solid, clear, Catholic criteria to make their prudential decisions.

The attached Statement is intended to support them in this and to encourage them to demand that their rights be respected. The Statement is based on the Natural Law and the Gospel and as such appeals to all.

Even though this is not an initiative of the ACCC, we are among its members and would like to invite you and other faithful priests in Australia to join and sign the document. We think it important to garner at least 100 signatures, but we hope for many more!

Our intention is that it be published some time in the next week or two once we have collected enough signatures.

If you are happy to add your signature to the Statement, please send an email to and please share with other priests as well.

Let us pray for each other.

Yours fraternally in Mary Immaculate,

CATHOLIC PRIESTS OF AUSTRALIA

Statement on Certain Aspects of the Covid-19 Crisis

As Catholic priests ministering in a range of pastoral settings across Australia, we acknowledge our responsibility to work with the government and health providers to protect our people from infection, especially the weak and the vulnerable. We are also conscious, however, that in any crisis a legitimate and proportionate response cannot be at the cost of human rights, which are not conferred by the State but rather bestowed by the Creator, and therefore constitute the inalienable foundation of human dignity. We believe it our duty to respond to the serious concerns and questions addressed to us by many Catholic people and other men and women of good will. Just as health workers have important insights into health emergencies through their professional experience, so we wish to share the fruits of our experience on the front line of dealing with what has also developed into a “spiritual emergency”. By speaking the *truth in charity* (See Eph 4: 15), we desire only to serve the supreme good of individuals and of society. Basing ourselves on the Natural Law common to all people and our Christian faith as professed by the Catholic Church, we affirm the following:

- Any person in possession of his intellectual faculties has an inalienable right, within the limits of the moral law, to make individual medical decisions. No human

authority may legitimately usurp that right. For many, the decision to be vaccinated or not is complex, requiring study, consultation and counsel, and deliberation free of coercion. As the US National Catholic Bioethics Centre states: “The best ethical decision-making occurs when individuals have sufficient information for discernment and are able to reflect without undue external pressures placed on them. Mandates, by their nature, exert pressure that can be severe if employment or the ability to further one’s education is threatened” (Statement of 2 July 2021). In the context of a responsible approach to Covid-19, this involves individuals being able to inform themselves about available vaccines, including possible side-effects, weighing up the risks and benefits to themselves as well as considerations of the common good, and possible alternative measures. Covid-19 vaccines, consequently, may not be mandated by governments or employers. Discrimination against those who choose not to be vaccinated – such as refusing them entry into public areas or most workplaces – is unacceptable.

- Segregation based on medical choices is contrary to the Natural Law. Were it to be imposed, it would lead to a medical apartheid in which some would receive favour and others would be marginalised.
- A vaccine passport would result in ostracising and alienating from aspects of public life those who decline to vaccinate; it would also cause deep resentments in those who accept vaccination only under duress. In both cases, the seeds of serious division would be sown in our society. History tends to discredit those who promote or tolerate such segregation, however high-minded their declared motives might be.
- A person who has not been justly convicted of a crime has a right to freedom of movement and association within his own country. The State exists to protect this freedom, not to negate it by forcing people to remain in their homes or to restrict their movements. This right is inalienable. It accords with the social nature of human beings and allows people to provide for themselves and their families.
- Human beings have the right to go about their daily activities without the fear of being tracked and under surveillance. The present state of fear and sometimes violent repression which we are witnessing in some States is an affront to human dignity. This denial of basic rights threatens the social fabric.
- The physical needs and health of the human person cannot be provided for at the cost of their spiritual needs. To attempt to do so will often put at risk a person’s physical and emotional health as well. In particular, the State has an obligation not to impede the spiritual needs of the sick and the dying from being met; likewise funeral rites and the legal right to marry (for those who are morally free to contract marriage) must not be impeded by the State.
- As Christians and Catholic Priests, we believe that rights grounded in the Natural Law and the dignity of the human person are also affirmed and protected by the gospel and the Catholic Church. Each person has a conscience that is the voice of God in his heart, a voice which he is bound to obey. Conscience is not to be understood as one’s personal preference or desire, or as the origin of the moral law. Conscience acts not as a legislator, but rather as a judge that seeks to apply the demands of God’s law

to a given situation. Every person is obliged to act with an informed conscience, but no human authority remaining within the context of just public order, may licitly substitute itself for or violate the certain judgement of conscience. This is a fundamental axiom of society and civilisation. If it does not continue to be recognised and upheld, we can only expect to see a growing authoritarianism.

- As a Church which has received its mission from Our Lord Jesus Christ, we require the freedom to go about doing good (see Acts 16: 20) and preaching everywhere the Word of God (see Mark 16: 20). Civil authorities have the obligation to respect our mission and our right to preach and to hold religious services in public and in private at our discretion. As ambassadors of Christ, we expect this right to be respected by all. In a secular society (that nevertheless has its roots in Christian belief – as the Preamble to the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia bears witness, when it speaks of our people “humbly seeking the blessing of Almighty God”) we ask nothing more – but also nothing less – than the freedoms that our non-believing fellow citizens rightfully claim.
- *Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God* (Deut 8: 3; Matt 4: 4). As Catholic priests and stewards of God’s Holy Mysteries, we believe that the seven sacraments – Baptism, Confirmation, the Holy Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Holy Orders – are visible and efficacious signs of invisible grace, instituted by Christ and gifted to the Church, as the principal and ordinary means of conveying to God’s people His saving grace, which is a created share in the Divine Life itself. Just as the body, even in the midst of emergencies, must still receive all that is necessary to its continuance, so the spirit, especially during times of trial and distress, must also be permitted to receive all necessary provisions.
- The right to worship according to one’s conscience includes the right to access places of worship. It is therefore contrary to the rights of citizens when the State forces the closing of churches and other places of worship – especially when prudent steps can readily be taken to ensure the safety of all.
- Segregation or exclusion of members from normal participation at worship is contrary to the Gospel, by which we are called to be a source of unity by bringing all souls to God through Jesus Christ. As Catholic Priests, Guardians and Ministers of the Holy Eucharist, we acknowledge that segregation in worship is eminently contrary to the very meaning of this great mystery and sacrament which unites us in Christ.

In conclusion, to all our fellow Catholics and to all men and women of good will in Australia, we say: *Be not afraid* (Matt 10: 28), and *have confidence* (John 16: 33), for *God is with us* (Matt 1: 23).

We Catholic Priests of Australia
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14 September 2021
Exaltation of the Holy Cross