

Religion, Style and the Public Square



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Catholic health care plays a critical role in the public square, perhaps now more than ever. The ministry's moral voice and moral influence in society and health care are vital as American society grapples with numerous choices about technological developments in medicine and public-policy decisions — all of which profoundly affect the well-being of individuals and communities. These decisions are frequently made in an extremely pragmatic manner and reflect a limited perspective or vision. Considerations about what it means to be human and what kinds of communities we ought to become are usually not recognized or, if they are acknowledged, are not engaged. Catholic health care (along with others) can help raise these and other questions in many ways.

The Catholic health ministry also brings a certain civil style or tone and a profound commitment to a range of life issues, from its opposition to abortion and embryonic stem cell research to its support of health care reform and care for the poor. Why is this important? During the past 12 months or so, a very audible, though minority, Catholic voice in the public square has exemplified a much different tone and a more narrow set of concerns that inadequately reflect the best of the Catholic tradition and the Gospel. It would be a travesty if the harsh, judgmental, punitive and non-dialogical approach of some in the Catholic community defined the Catholic voice in society.

Author John O'Malley, SJ, describes a certain "spirit of Vatican II" in his 2008 book on the Second Vatican Council. He observes that the council spoke in a style different from previous councils and thereby "teaches by means of its style." Eliminated from council documents are "words of alienation, exclusion, enmity, words of threat and intimidation, words of surveillance and punishment."¹ These words are replaced by "words of reciprocity, such as 'cooperation,' 'partnership,' and 'collaboration.' ... The words 'dialogue' and 'conversation' abound."² O'Malley's comments are apropos to the current context:

"A style choice is an identity choice, a personality choice, a choice in this instance about the kind of institution the council wanted the church to be. ... [T]he style shift expressed and promoted a shift in values and priorities. ... At stake were almost two different visions of Catholicism: from commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from definition to mystery, from threats to persuasion, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to dialogue, from ruling to serving, from withdrawn to integrated, from vertical to horizontal, from exclusion to inclusion ..."³

O'Malley's characterization of these two contrasting styles also seems to describe the different styles that characterize the current Catholic voice in society. Some would justify the harsher approach as being "prophetic," but as M. Cathleen Kaveny, Ph.D., observes in a lecture titled "Prophetic Discourse in the Public Square": "There is a tendency of both prophetic speakers and their audience to view prophetic indictments as a weapon in political, moral and cultural battles, a weapon whose core is a type of pugnacious incivility."⁴

Incivility in society can be dangerous. The relationship between religion and public discourse has not always been harmonious, particularly in this country. Some contend that religion should have no place in public discourse. Incivility does not help the cause; it only strengthens the hand of those who would silence religion's voice. This type of behavior can not only turn off people to what religion and religious communities have to say and close their minds and hearts to new possibilities, but can also harden minds and hearts instead of transforming them. People stop listening when they are shouted at or denounced or humiliated. Even the minds and hearts of the faithful can be hardened, keeping them from seeing reality more completely.

The pugnacious incivility we have so acutely

experienced during the past year is also difficult to reconcile with the Gospel. It is unlike the style of Jesus who engaged with those involved in wrongdoing with respect, mercy and compassion, without compromising the clarity and force of his message. The examples are numerous. Style and tone, no matter how right the message, can be a counter-sign to the kinds of people and communities Christians are called to be. They can also convey an attitude of self-righteousness and an “us vs. them” stance, which also seem inconsistent with the Gospel.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan, then archbishop of Milwaukee, addressed the Wisconsin State Legislature on the topic of civility in 2003.⁵ “Scholars, commentators, pundits, authors far wiser than I observe a destructive tendency in our society to throw to the side all *civility*, which I contend is the cement that keeps a respectful, trusting, productive society and community focused and fruitful.” He continued: “... [I]f we lose that [civility] — and we’re in danger of doing so — we’ll lose our noble battles on all the other challenges. Sometimes we can’t do much about all those other issues, but we can always do something about courtesy and civility. Sometimes more important than what we do is how we do it.”

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin also espoused the need for civility. In a lecture on religion and politics at Georgetown University in 1984, he stated:

“... let us remember a favorite theme of John Courtney Murray: the need for *civility*. We can keep our deepest convictions and still keep our civil courtesy. We can test others’ arguments but not question their motives. We can presume good will even when we strenuously disagree. We can relate the best of religion to the best of politics in the service of each other and the wider society, national and human ...”⁶

Another example by Cardinal Bernardin came in his 1996 lecture titled “The Catholic Moral Vision in the United States”:

“How religion engages the political order is a question of style ... One reason why some have apprehension about religious involvement in public life is the style sometimes employed by religious institutions or communities. My proposal, therefore, is that

effective religious witness depends, in part, on our style of participation. Engagement in civil society must be characterized by commitment and civility; witness must be a blend of advocacy and restraint.”⁷

People stop listening when they are shouted at or denounced or humiliated.

Catholic health care, even with its struggles and shortcomings, because of what it is, what it is committed to, how it operates, and its size and influence, can demonstrate a different style within the Catholic community — a style marked by charity and civility, dialogue and a search for common ground, and persuasion coupled with rigorous argumentation, while vigorously pursuing our deepest convictions. As O’Malley reminds us, “The ‘what’ of speech and the ‘how’ of speech are inseparable.”⁸ ■



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NOTES

1. John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 48.
2. O’Malley, 50.
3. O’Malley, 305, 307.
4. M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Prophetic Discourse in the Public Square,” (lecture, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, Calif., Nov. 11, 2008). Speech transcript and podcast are available at www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/events/lectures.
5. Timothy Dolan, “Address to the Wisconsin Legislature,” (speech, Wisconsin State Legislature, Madison, Wis., March 18, 2003). Speech transcript is available at www.archmil.org/news/ShowArchivedNews.asp?ID=1369.
6. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “Religion and Politics: Stating the Principles and Sharpening the Issues,” in *A Moral Vision for America*, ed. John P. Langan (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), 50.
7. Bernardin, “The Catholic Moral Vision in the United States,” in Langan, 148-149.
8. O’Malley, 306.

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