



TEN QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

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1. Should the Church get involved in politics?

We have heard this for the longest time: the Church should never get involved in politics because it is a violation of the “separation of the Church and State”. We need to settle this once and for all. There is no such prohibition in the Church. Such prohibition is a Constitutional injunction for the State, not for the Church. First, it states that the State shall not pass laws establishing any religion (Art. III, Sec. 5). Second, the State shall not pass laws prohibiting the free exercise of any religion (Art III, Sec. 5). These are called the “non-establishment clause” and the “free exercise” clause. In short, only the State can violate it, not the Church or any church personnel. When Duterte and his government criticize the Church for violating the separation of Church and State, they are “barking at the wrong tree”.

On the contrary, it is the role of all citizens—Churches and their members included—to call out the State authorities when they favor one religious group over another or prohibit some religions the free exercise of their beliefs.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes: Politics is “one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good” (FT 180). “A good Catholic meddles in politics so that those who govern can govern well.” This is not new; he was just quoting Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1106) and earlier popes on the notion of political charity.

But because of the strong influence of the dualistic view of Christian spirituality with regard politics, I observe several kinds of Christians in our times: (a) apolitical Christians — those who think that their home is in “heaven” and what happens in this “world” is of little or no value at all; (b) neutral Christians — those who follow the minimum requirements of political duties like the elections but consider it a “private affair”; when it is a question of injustice, they are neutral; (c) non-neutral but non-partisan — those who call out society on human rights violations as against Christian principles but refuse to name names or promote partisan candidates; (d) non-neutral and partisan — those who engage in social and political issues and get involved in partisan politics.

Based on the majority of church documents, the third type (non-neutral but non-partisan) is the place for the religious and clergy. The fourth type (non-neutral and partisan) should be the responsibility of the laity.

2. Does the proper “religious mission” of the Church prohibit the clergy from engaging in politics?



Vatican II documents and Canon Law are used by many writers to prove that the clergy cannot engage in politics because the Church's proper mission is "religious". Based on these quotations (and their parallels in other church documents), the conclusion is that bishops and priests cannot engage in partisan politics. Doing otherwise would be "crossing the line", as one author suggests.

- "Christ, to be sure, gave his Church no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one." (GS, 42)
- "The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person." (GS, 76, Canon 2245)

Let us unpack this assertion in the context of the Vatican II spirit.

First, the "Church" is not equal to the bishops and the clergy. To use the same Vatican II documents, the Church is the "whole people of God" — lay, religious and clergy. So, to describe the Church's mission as "religious" actually refers to the Church as a whole body, as a whole institution. To restrict its meaning to the clergy is the height of clericalism.

Second, if we read *Gaudium et Spes* closely, its purpose is to find the role of the Church in the "modern world". To separate the Church from the world of politics or economics is against the spirit of Vatican II. In fact, after the assertion that the Church's role is a religious one, a crucial text follows: "But out of this religious mission itself come a function" in the social, economic, political world. The following chapters talk about these Christian duties in the world — development of culture (Ch 2); economic life (Ch 3); politics (Ch 4); promotion of peace (Ch 5). This is practically the whole of *Gaudium et Spes*.

To advance a sense that the Church should not be engaged with the secular because its mission is "religious" is not contemplated by Vatican II. GS 43—the very next item from that which has been often quoted—has a very important reminder: "The split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives [in the cultural, economic and political worlds] deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age" (GS 43).

This dualism is not helpful for the Church. On the one hand, it reinforces a dualistic and truncated spirituality which is reflected among many today—both clergy and laity. On the other hand, it is now instrumentalized by power holders to curb dissent and demand for accountability by combining it with the notion of the "separation of the Church and State".

3. What is the role and competence of the Church in politics?

GS 76 (and Canon 2245 which merely quotes it) is quite clear on the role of the Church in the field of politics. In a pluralistic society like ours, the Church should know its own "competence".



It is “not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system” because it is “at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person”.

It has to respect the autonomy and independence of the political field. But right after that assertion, the Church has to “foster sounder cooperation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place” for more effective service to all citizens. “The Church should have true freedom to preach the faith, to teach her social doctrine, to exercise her role freely among men, and also to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it” (GS 76).

And when Gospel values are at stake, when people are killed by State forces, when the dignity of men and women are violated, when plunderers go scot-free and run for elections using the money they have stolen from the people, and when history has been revised to deny these atrocities, the Church has to speak up. Again, we have to remember: this is the whole Church both as an institution and as individuals—lay, religious and clergy. When we do so, we are not “crossing the line”. We are “holding the line”. We are following Jesus. We are doing our Christian duty.

Sometimes, a quotation from Pope Benedict XVI’s Letter to the Catholics in China (2007) is quoted by the other writers to prove the same point: “Likewise, therefore, the Catholic Church which is in China does not have a mission to change the structure or administration of the State; rather her mission is to proclaim Christ to men and women, as the Savior of the world, basing herself in carrying out her proper apostolate on the power of God” (No.4). The same case of “proof-texting”. The context of this text is GS 76 — which Pope Benedict XVI clearly quoted right before it. Another quotation from Benedict XVI’s “Deus Caritas Est” follows it, and the context is the same: “The Church must not replace the State.” The context of both quotations is still GS 76 which we explained above—the footnotes of that encyclical will tell us, if we care to read.

The “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life” issued by the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) on November 24, 2002 which is also used by some writers in order to reinforce this dualistic view of church and politics should be understood in the same spirit: “It is not the Church’s task to set forth specific political solutions—and even less to propose a single solution as the acceptable one—to temporal questions that God has left to the free and responsible judgment of each person.”

When the Church as a body like the CBCP, for instance, intervenes in the political life of the country, it is not intervening with a “political solution”. It is speaking from the perspective of its own competency, from the perspective of the values of the Kingdom and the message of the Gospel. The same document (Doctrinal Note) continues: It is “the Church’s right and duty to



provide a moral judgment on temporary matters when this is required by faith or the moral role.”

Even as the clergy is tasked to pass moral judgment on political matters, and the lay people engage in “active and direct partisan politics”, in real life, PCP II says, this role is not rigid and absolute. On the one hand, the lay people, not just the priests, also need to discern and teach the morality of our political situation. On the other hand, all Christians and the whole Church—priests, religious men and women, and laypeople—must be involved in the area of politics when the Gospel values are at stake. “The requirements of the Gospel in regard to human dignity, justice, charity, the common good, cannot be sacrificed on the flimsy pretext that ‘the Church does not engage in politics’. Concretely, this means both clergy and laity must be involved in the area of politics when moral and Gospel values are at stake” (PCP II, 343-344).

In short, Vatican II and other magisterial texts cannot be used to foster a rigid dualistic view of church and politics. We have shown that despite the respect for the competence and autonomy of each field (church and politics), these two worlds are far from being separate. On the contrary, these magisterial texts are an injunction towards the whole Church and its partisan role for truth, human dignity and justice.

The truncated use of magisterial texts in order to prove one’s position is called “proof texting” of which the medieval manualist theologies have been guilty of. We also know that it is doing a great disservice to the Church in our times.

These same texts cannot be used to fight against the “political partisanship” of the clergy. It is the height of clericalism for the clergy and religious to arrogate unto themselves the meaning of these texts, to think that these texts refer to them. No, these texts refer to the whole Church.

Maybe we need to look somewhere else, if we want to talk about the clergy’s “partisan political participation”.

4. Are the clergy prohibited from running for political positions?

Some pronouncements of the Popes also refer to this prohibition. The following text comes from Pope John Paul II in his address to the clergy and religious of Mexico in January 1979: “You are priests and members of religious orders. You are not social directors, political leaders, or functionaries of a temporal power.”

Many of the clergy during those times ran for elections or were appointed to political office in several areas of Latin America, for example, Ernesto and Fernando Cardenal, and in other places. This command not to run for elections or not to join the executive branches of governments is the proximate context of these texts. To use this (and other parallel texts) in



order to preach against clergy and religious “endorsing” political candidates today is to quote them out of context.

The Canon Law 285, §3 is already clear on this: “Clerics are forbidden to assume public offices which entail a participation in the exercise of civil power.” Canon Law sees that running for public office is “unbecoming” of and “foreign” to the clerical state. It needs to be said that the Constitution does not prohibit a priest from running for public office. This is a canonical prohibition; not a violation of civil law. And if the priest wants to run for public office, it is clear that he needs to relinquish his clerical state.

This is the sense of the CBCP Statement when it writes: “We have no ambition of appropriating for ourselves your distinct role as laity in the just ordering of society, nor do we intend to usurp the role of the government. We are here to provide moral and spiritual guidance, in accord with our mission of proclaiming the truth from our faith.” (CBCP, *The Truth shall Set You Free*, 2022).

5. Can the clergy “endorse” political candidates?

I have already answered this in a more detailed manner in another paper.¹ Some ideas here are taken from this article.

The crucial Canon Law provision which is 287 §1 writes: “Most especially, clerics are always *to foster the peace and harmony based on justice* which are to be observed among people; §2: They are not to have an active part in political parties and in governing labor unions unless, *in the judgment of competent ecclesiastical authority, the protection of the rights of the Church or the promotion of the common good requires it.*”

First, our present question only envisions the act of “endorsement” by the clergy, not even joining a political party. Canon 287, §2 even permits the clergy to join actively in a political party, if the reasons provided by the Canon Law are met.

Second, granted that the priest is the “center of unity” of the community, that peace can only be real if it is “based on justice”. When justice and human dignity have been grossly violated, the peace and harmony which the priest is trying so much to preserve is a sham and a concealed violence against the victims.

¹ D. F. Pilario, “Can Priests and Religious Endorse Political Candidates?” <https://svst.edu.ph/news/can-priests-and-religious-endorse-political-candidates-181?fbclid=IwAR2POBzSSmrjZUVxwfrxzF7oGJWhN1l9Ad7rXSisYILjou67hqt4fv6dRzg>



Third, this provision admits of an exception: UNLESS, in the judgment of competent ecclesiastical authority, *the protection of the rights of the Church or the promotion of the common good requires it.*"

When it has seen that thousands have been killed, tortured or detained during the Martial Law or on the War on Drugs being perpetrated by State authorities; when plunder and corruption are so blatant and obvious at the expense of people's lives both during the Martial Law and the pandemic, or when history has been revised through algorithmic "pandemic of lies" aimed to erase these atrocities in peoples' minds as the CBCP strongly condemns, it is demanded that we stand up against these atrocious crimes as prophetic Christians of our times.

It is not the "rights of the Church which are threatened", as one writer claims. The Church is standing up not to defend itself, but to defend the people of God whose lives are threatened. It is the Gospel values of human dignity, justice, truth and common good which are at stake and it is the "transcendent nature of the human person" which is violated — something which the Church needs to defend from politics, as the Vatican II calls us to do (GS 72). I do not know who among the members of the clergy and religious in their right mind can deny that these atrocities have happened or are happening.

Fourth, who is the "competent authority" who makes and/or confirms this judgement? The bishop of each individual diocese and/or the Superior of each religious congregation. That is why this decision to endorse should be a product of a common discernment process in the diocese or religious community, honestly confronting themselves with the concrete situation and the demands of the Gospel. We need to emphasize that we are in a very crucial and abnormal situation. Our bishops have been "appalled by the blatant and subtle distortion, manipulation, cover-up and abuse of the truth", "human rights abuses, the victims, the corruption, the grave debt and economic downturn of the country due to the dictatorship" which are all well-documented. "This is very serious!" they tell us. The "competent authority" and the clergy should confront themselves with these and take them into account in their discernment process.

Fifth, the criteria from the Gospels and the Catholic Social Teaching should be clear as basis of the discernment process. The criteria need to be clear, some of which we have enumerated earlier. People should level-off in the reading of the situation and the discernment process should be "synodal", open and honest enough.

After such discernment, some can opt to remain non-partisan and dedicate their lives to help their parishioners decide well on their political options based on the criteria of the Gospel. Or, they may decide to organize PPCRV in their parishes to ensure the honest counting of votes. This was the option of many religious during the 1986 Snap Elections. In fact, many clergy and religious placed their lives on the line by guarding the ballots.



However, some others may also decide to go all-out endorsing and campaigning. As we said, this is also contemplated by the Canon Law. There can be plural options on the ground depending on the result of the honest discernment process. And these options need to be respected.

What is not a Christian option is the stance of neutrality in front of shameless injustice, systemic lies, blatant abuse and violation of human dignity. Silence is complicity.

6. What about individual members of the clergy who decide to be open about their endorsement of political candidates?

The decision of these clergy and religious also needs to be respected. The Canon Law in fact provides for it. As CBCP body, the bishops decided to stick to their roles as “formators of conscience” of the faithful. But if some priests decide to endorse, the explanation of Bishop Pablo David, the President of the Conference of Bishops, in a press conference to explain the Statement is very clear: *“Kung humantong sa ganyan ang ibang kaparian, ibig sabihin they have reached the decision in conscience and that is to be respected.”*

“Endorsement” can take two forms. First, one can say: I do not endorse this candidates because his/her track record has violated the values of the Gospel, human dignity and justice. Second, another can say: I endorse this candidate because his/her track record would embody the Christian principles we hold important. A diocese or a religious community can also do communal endorsement after their discernment.

7. Can we use the pulpit for political campaigning?

Let me go back to Bishop Pablo David in the same press conference: “Ang pulpit ay para lamang sa pagpapahayag ng Mabuting Balita. Pero siempre kapag pinahayag mo ang Mabuting Balita, may implications siya tungkol sa political life. We cannot separate faith from our political life. Pero huwag gagamitin ang pulpit sa pangangampanya. This has a point. Kasi marami namang venues for expressing one’s political opinion. But in the pulpit, ang nangunguna ay ang Salita ng Diyos at ano ang implications ng paninindigang ito tungkol sa katotohanan, katarungan at kapayapaan.”

8. Does this injunction also refer to the members of religious communities like the sisters and religious brothers of Congregations?

We include the religious here even if the Canon 287 on which this topic is discussed directly refers to the “clergy”. Today, the same questions are asked by consecrated persons themselves. At this historical juncture, the religious also feel the same challenge towards partisan political participation. Canon 272 states that religious are bound by the prescripts of these canons (No. 277, 285, 286, 287, and 289).



9. Do the clergy and religious violate the freedom of the people to choose their leaders? Is endorsing a candidate a sign of “clericalism”?

What does an “endorsement” do? It is an act of sharing with the people the product of the clergy’s political discernment. It is to say that we have reflected on this seriously and this is what we have come up. It is not to arrogate unto themselves as clergy the right of the people to decide for themselves. It does not even impose their views on the faithful. Many of these statements end with an invitation to the faithful to do the same discernment themselves. In the end, it is still the individual Christian and his or her autonomous and free choice that has to be respected.

It is the “pastoral solicitude” of their shepherds to lead their faithful by example. In the Church, there is also such thing as “formation of conscience”. By sharing the fruit of their own discernment process, the priest and religious are helping their faithful discern in concrete — the how, the why and the what of it. In the process, they demonstrate that Gospel values are not abstract and detached realities; that Christians should not remain in the level of abstract principles. “Clericalism” happens when the clergy and religious separate themselves from the people; when they say “these are the principles, now apply them to your lives”. “But what about you, Father?” “It is up to you. I am non-partisan!” No, if the stakes are crucial today, personal decisions should have real consequences in our personal decisions and political options, even for the clergy and the religious.

10. What if those we have endorsed and their political programs do not deliver once they are elected?

On the one hand, we already know that there is no political program which is absolute. They are means to an end and they are not the only means. In theology, this refers to what is called the “eschatological proviso” — a provision that limits the valuation of the political realm. Any socio-political arrangement always falls short of the values of the Kingdom; thus, they always need to be continually critiqued and revised.

On the other hand, an all-out and absolute use of “eschatological proviso” (or a permanent “allergy” of political parties and ideologies in the Church) denies our authentic human political struggle of its necessary social vision and practical processes that furnish social agents with concrete ways toward human development and empowerment. “Faith without ideology is dead”, writes the Latin American theologian Juan Luis Segundo. To remain in the level of abstract principles and values renders the Christian vision impractical and incapable of incarnating itself in history. Beyond our principles, it is the well-thought of vision and programs of political parties that can incarnate the Christian vision in the world.

Having said that, it is also enjoined upon the clergy and religious to do continual criticism and demand for accountability from elected candidates and the political agenda they have



endorsed. The whole Church—lay, clergy and religious—needs to critically engage the government and its programs with the values of the Gospel and the Kingdom. They should not be afraid to criticize their previously endorsed politicians and parties, and ask them to be accountable to the people.

We are not a “fans club” but “citizens”. We are not fanatics but prophets.

The prophets of old anointed the kings but they also confronted them with their abuses. Nathan vs. David, Elijah vs. Ahab, Isaiah vs. Hezekiah. In the same way, we are called to be prophets who continue to speak truth to power regardless of who occupies the seat of authority.

For us, no political agenda is absolute. Only the Kingdom is. “We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

POST-SCRIPT

Reading all the positions on this matter in opinions found on mainstream media, FB posts, social networks, blogs, and even conversations among my friends, I have one observation:

Those who argue for non-partisanship today—some of them clerics and religious—have openly endorsed political candidates in the past or continues to do so at present.

I do not know if this newly argued position on the matter is an expression of remorse or a sheer lack of reflexivity.

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