

Everything is Connected

A Pre-election Message to Catholics in the Diocese of Elphin

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Kingdom of God is not just a future hope. It is a present reality and it is marked by attitudes such as gentleness and mercy, commitment to peace, hunger for what is right and commitment to the truth (Mt 5.). It is closely connected with our care for those who are hungry and thirsty, sick, homeless or in prison (Mt. 25). The Church recognises the importance of good government for the well-being of humanity. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that *"All citizens should be mindful of the right and also the duty to use their free vote to further the common good"*.

Catholics, as citizens, are entitled to participate fully in debating the questions that matter for our society. My purpose in writing to you at this time is two-fold. In the first place I want to encourage you to reflect prayerfully and to use your vote in the way which you believe will best serve the common good. A decision not to vote, unless you are physically unable to do so, would be an abdication of your personal responsibility for the common good.

My second reason for writing is to invite you to reflect on some of the key challenges facing Irish society, which I believe to be of particular importance for Christians. These are questions which I would encourage you to consider raising with candidates during the campaign. The basic needs of people, such as housing, poverty, education and healthcare are all connected.

The Care of the Sick

The health service, in spite of the hard work and dedication of doctors and nurses, is in a permanent state of crisis. This is connected with the failure to provide adequate step-down facilities for those who no longer need hospital care, but who are not in a position to care for themselves at home. Most people in rural Ireland will also be aware of the pressure on primary care, with elderly GPs retiring and not being replaced. We don't need promises from politicians; what we need is evidence of joined up thinking.

The Problem of Housing and Homelessness

The housing problem continues to place enormous pressure on families and on children who are trying to deal with the normal challenges of growing up and the demands of education. The provision of housing is urgent and cannot be left solely to the market. It is difficult to understand why the building of office blocks in our city centres has been allowed to take priority over this most fundamental of human rights. The over-development of urban areas and the under-development of rural Ireland are connected. A coherent policy for rural development needs, therefore, to be part of the long-term solution to the housing problem.

The Care of the Environment

The urgent need for action to protect the natural environment has come into sharp focus in recent years. Pope Francis reminds us that the earth is our common home and that, when the natural environment comes under pressure, it is the poor who suffer the most. Public policy on the care of our common home must be effective and realistic. Difficult decisions have to be made, as they were in the past with the levy on plastic bags and the ban on smoking in the workplace. Care must be taken to ensure that the measures taken are consistent with the survival of rural communities. Otherwise our society will become hopelessly unbalanced and the environment of our cities will become more and more polluted.

Summary

Our Response to Migrants and Refugees

The recent arrival in Europe of so many refugees from conflicts in the middle East and elsewhere poses a challenge to solidarity. Relatively speaking, the numbers coming to Ireland are small and, while their presence poses challenges in terms of the provision of services, they also bring with them many gifts which will be placed at the service of our society. In the final analysis they are people like us, with the same needs as we have. I am very concerned at increase in negative and even racist commentary about migrants on social media. I am also very disappointed that the state agencies which are responsible for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees have shown a marked reluctance to engage with local communities to help them prepare for their part in welcoming refugees.

The Education of Our Children

Irish children today are blessed in the quality of the schools they attend and the quality of the education they receive. Our Catholic schools are the fruit of positive cooperation between Church and State, with the active engagement of teachers and voluntary boards of management. They welcome children of all faiths and of none. I accept that, in a changing society, there needs to be greater diversity in the education system. Changes in patronage must, however, be planned in consultation with parents. Likewise, there needs to be a commitment that schools which remain under Catholic patronage are free to be Catholic in their ethos.

Concern for Our Young People

In towns and villages all over Ireland today, young people are being caught up in the drug culture. They are becoming the “mules” and they are being exposed to significant risks in the process. The drug cartels are being kept in business by the many apparently “respectable” people in our society who are prepared to buy and use cocaine and heroin, without a thought for the price that is paid by others. That connection needs to be made in our legislation and in the enforcement of the law without fear or favour.

The Protection of Human Life

The right to life is the foundation on which all our other human rights depend. Respect for every human life remains a core value of our Catholic faith. No seriously committed Catholic can simply accept that human life is disposable, at any stage. Our task at this time is to elect public representatives who are committed to the right to life, from conception to natural death. Whatever our traditional party loyalties, it seems to go completely against the common good for any committed Catholic to vote for a public representative who, in the outgoing Oireachtas, voted for abortion. It is also worth asking what exactly some elected representative intended when they abstained on such an important question as the right to life.

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