

Engaging the Moral Issues of our Time

Reflection 1: The Times in which we Live

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Over these weeks, as a community of Christian faith, we are being confronted with very significant social issues that touch upon some of the core principles of our understanding of life and of our religious practice. The period is perhaps particular given that it is not a single issue with which we are dealing, but multiple matters:

- The Australian Government has announced its intention to conduct a postal survey on the matter of same-sex marriage, such that legislation for this might be introduced before the end of the year;
- A Private Members Bill is to be introduced into the NSW State Legislative Council in September with the intention to provide the possibility of legalizing voluntary euthanasia and assisted dying. Similar bills are being introduced on other State parliaments;
- Through the month of September, we are being invited as a Diocese to consider the importance of safeguarding in our community of children and vulnerable adults, and as a parish community we will also consider the experience of domestic violence;
- The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse has on the 14th August recommended the removal of the legal privilege associated with the Sacrament of Penance, so that clergy, in the exercise of that Sacrament, would not be exempt from the requirement of mandatory reporting.
- And underneath all these lies the question of the exercise and protection of religious freedom within our Australian society.

It is difficult to think of another recent period where such significant moral and religious issues have presented with such immediacy and urgency.

Given this, over the next five or six weeks I would like to share with you a series of reflections which I hope might guide us through the complexity of the matters into which we are being drawn. Therefore, I would like to propose to you that, in place of the homily which I ordinarily base on the Gospel of each Sunday, I seek to open to you a way through these issues. I would like to do this for you step by step, so that you might have the most comprehensive means to consider the issues before us, and to act in the most effective way possible for the sake of our social future, informed by the principles of our Christian and Catholic perspective.

To achieve this I would like to propose the following reflections.

- Today, I would like to detail for you some of the social assumptions that characterize our contemporary context, and from which the various positions that we have to consider are based.
- Next week, I would like to share with you how I consider we as a community of faith might best engage these assumptions and the issues that are derived from them.
- On the weekend of 2nd/3rd September, I need to reflect with you on the issue of voluntary euthanasia and assisted dying, especially given that the Petition about the proposed legislation, which we have now made available at the entrance to our church will require finalization.
- Through the weeks that follow, I intend to reflect with you on the issue of same-sex marriage, given that it will be then that we will begin to receive the postal survey to complete. However, at the end of Mass today I need to read to you a letter from Bishop Peter that seeks to initiate our consideration about this matter.

- As indicated earlier, we also wish to reflect together on the pain of domestic violence in our community, and on the need to nurture a culture of safeguarding for our children, and those who are vulnerable;
- Finally, I want to open with you the question of religious conscience and freedom, which underscores all the above, and which lies at the heart of our capacity to practice the Sacrament of Penance with the legal privilege it has always enjoyed in our nation.

For some of us, these reflections may be a little heady! However, I would be failing in my duty as your Pastor if I were not to explore the matters that are being presented to us in the fullest way that I can.

Given this introduction, I apologize that my presentation today may be a little longer than normal. Notwithstanding let us begin this journey together step by step, week by week, considering on this occasion the social and political climate in which we discover ourselves, and the various assumptions which lie beneath the issues presenting themselves for our decision and action.

There can be no doubt that we live in one of the most exciting times in human history. Never have we had as much access to our past. Never have the possibilities for the future been as extensive. The rate of change in the last fifty or sixty years has outpaced any period earlier. The digital revolutions have changed the way in which we engage our world and one another. Technology has made possible advances unimaginable only a few decades ago. Notwithstanding, the enormous challenges of mass migration, climate change and geo-political instability, we stand on the cusp of a new era of opportunity.

This possibility, however, is not presented with cohesion and focus. With the eclipse of the philosophical project of modernity by the middle of the 20th century, we enter the future without a unifying narrative. Everything now claims attention for legitimacy; every claim has value, even though experience demonstrates that where everything is tolerated, intolerance bounds. This is what we might call the paradox of postmodernity.

Within this context, the Canadian philosopher of religion, Charles Taylor, especially, has highlighted for us the way in which meaning today is derived almost entirely from personal experience. The self has now become regarded the repository of truth. How I feel determines the rightness of something. Unless I feel something has value, it has none. This, we might label 'the tyranny of affect', and it is particularly endemic in the way that most of us think and speak today. Most of us may not be aware of it, but if we listen for it, we hear it everywhere. The outcome of this evolution in consciousness, particularly in the West, is that Truth becomes entirely internal, something wholly subjective. The idea that Truth exists outside of ourselves, that it is something objective, something we receive, and to which we are accountable, has become increasingly foreign. It is not the collective wisdom forged through the Tradition of a people to which I am accountable, but that which I have determined to be personally authentic according to how I feel, as we see evidenced in certain claims for equality.

The loss of the Transcendent in a secular society exacerbates this self-reference, which has perhaps become epitomized in the narcissism of leadership today. The secular itself is something about which we should not be afraid: it is the domain of civil and political life created on the principles of sound reason. However, a secularist agenda seeks to banish any reference to the Transcendent in life in favour of that which is entirely empirical and immediate. It cannot admit of the religious word, the religious gesture or the religious symbol, all of which it regards as an affront to what is rational, even though the most beautiful moments in human history have most often been inspired by the flourishing of the religious imagination. And above all, it cannot admit of the religious conscience, asserting the demands of moral responsibility as a higher category of discernment, as we see in the recent recommendation of the Royal Commission regarding the seal of Confession.

The religious imagination has been replaced by the technological. We cannot but marvel at the possibilities of technology across so many aspects of our existence. And yet, we can also be unwittingly seduced into a fantasy by technology – everything is possible. And if it is possible, why can't we do it? And so, possibility and prosecution become thought of as without distinction.

If something is possible, I have a right to pursue it if I feel that it is good to do so. However, with the banishment of the Transcendent from social consideration, this appeal to rights takes on an absolute character. It is not human rights as such to which we appeal. It is 'my' rights that we demand. I have a right to choose; I have a right to decide. I have a right to do anything that I feel to be right for me, so long as it does not adversely affect anyone in a way that is immediately visible. This primacy of personal rights, as distinct from a community's rights, erodes our sense of a social conscience – that something should be followed not because it might be good for me, but because it might be good for the community at large.

There is a second fantasy into which we can be seduced by technology, however. This is the illusion that we are in control, and that life itself can be controlled. It translates into what we might call an antiseptic mentality which cannot engage the inevitable reality of human suffering, and which seeks to sedate difficulty and hardship – all that is perceived as negative in life. Worst, and in line with what we have outlined earlier, life is evaluated primarily through the pleasure principle, through the "feel-good" syndrome. If something does not feel good, then something must be defective, inadequate, wrong. Suffering is not to be redeemed; it must be anaesthetized, literally – as we see in the demand for the right to end one's life neatly, and with complete control.

All of this might sound unrelentingly pessimistic. However, I am not pessimistic by nature. I am an optimistic person. This, however, does not entail abandoning a critical faculty that seeks to name things for what they are, and to discern in that is good in our world and our society the threads of social thinking which weave together to bring forward new trends in our community, and which because of their momentum are indeed difficult to counter and resist.

We have so much to celebrate in our world. We have also much to confront: the primacy of individual rights in opposition to the rights of a community; the assertion of the self and its perceived rights as the arbiter of truth and rightness without attention to the social wisdom of centuries experience; the dissolution of the Transcendent into the technological illusion of limitless possibility; the assumption that the 'feel-good' determines the value of our experience. From these very frameworks of thinking, spawn the various issues with which we are confronted today. And I dare say, that we will increasingly be confronted by yet similar issues in the years ahead. How can we not be, when the thinking I have sought to outline here has become so ingrained in us today.

From the perspective of our Christian faith and from the perspective of our long 2000-year Catholic Tradition of rational reflection we cannot but resist those trends which we consider rob us of our humanity which we proudly assert is not simply discovered in how we feel personally, but how we relate as a community. The Christian is not interested in what is good for them individually; the Christian is passionately concerned with the world and the type of society which might promote genuine human flourishing or otherwise.

Engagement with our world is not an optional extra for the Christian. The question is not whether, but how, to engage our world, and especially when it is imbued with a way of thinking that runs antithetical to our Christian perspective of what best makes for human flourishing.

To this question, we will turn next week.