

## Presidential Address

### THE CHURCH IN THE PUBLIC FORUM: SCANDAL OR PROPHETIC WITNESS?

On 12 March 2000, the first Sunday of Lent in the Jubilee year, Pope John Paul II prayed, in the name of the church, for forgiveness. He acknowledged, deep in the church's history, Christian wrongs against co-believers and against those who stand in other religious traditions; against those who search for truth; and against the rights of ethnic groups and peoples. He asked, in particular, for forgiveness of sins against the people of Israel. This last expression of sorrow and contrition reverberated around the world when on 26 March the Pope placed within a crack in the Western Wall in Jerusalem a piece of paper inscribed with the words he had prayed earlier, asking for forgiveness and offering new friendship toward the People of the Covenant. This may have been the most important and most effective word spoken in the public forum by a representative of the Roman Catholic Church in a long time.<sup>1</sup>

My topic this morning is, as you know, "The Church in the Public Forum: Scandal or Prophetic Witness?" It suggests that not every word spoken by representatives or members of the church has been either so positively significant or so effective as was the word and symbolic gesture of John Paul II in the days preceding Holy Week. Today, Pentecost Sunday of this same year, I begin with that event, and will return to it in the end, in order to place the critique I will offer of some aspects of the church's role in the public forum in the context of better achievements and greater possibilities.

My topic is not as broad as my title suggests. To clarify this, some preliminary comments are in order. First, my central concern is with the role of the church in the contemporary public forum of the United States. Second, I assume certain things in this regard—namely, that there *is* a legitimate role for the church (and more broadly, for religion and religious traditions) in this forum; that this role includes offering reasons and arguments in support of positions on specific issues and policies; that religious arguments can be made broadly (publicly) accessible, intelligible, not only to co-believers but to others who participate in the public forum; and that religious appeals made on grounds particular to a tradition have a place in public discernment and debate only insofar as they are at least partially meaningful to those outside the tradition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See John Paul II, "Service Requesting Pardon," *Origins* 29 (23 March 2000): 645-48; "The Depths of the Holocaust's Horror," *Origins* 29 (6 April 2000): 677, 679.

<sup>2</sup>For particularly useful defenses and formulations of these and other relevant assump-

Third, while there are many meanings for the terms "scandal" and "prophetic witness," my use of them is limited in important ways. For example, I am not using the term, "scandal," in the New Testament sense of a "stumbling block" to those who refuse to believe—as in the synoptic reference to the scandal of Jesus. Nor do I mean by "scandal" simply something that causes "disgrace." Rather, I use it in its morally negative sense to refer to something that "offends" in a way that raises an obstacle to faith or that leads someone else to sin. I will not be focusing here on well-known recent scandals of this sort such as sexual misconduct on the part of church-identified personnel or current reports of financial improprieties in dioceses and parishes—though the term applies quite well. My particular concern is, rather, the effects in the public forum of certain church actions and words as political strategies. I hope this will become clear as I proceed.

"Prophetic witness" can also mean many things. In contemporary theological and ethical discourse it sometimes refers to a very particular way of attempting to influence public policy and action, a way often identified with more sectarian approaches to society and culture.<sup>3</sup> For example, if one believes society to be so sinful, and human reason itself so damaged, that there is no way for churches to participate effectively in the public forum through appeals to rational argument or any shared discourse, then one might nonetheless hope to affect society by the prophetic witness embodied in the example of the life and action of the community of faith. I do not use the term, "prophetic witness," in this limited sense. Rather, I understand the term more expansively to include a religious tradition's possible use of argument in the secular public forum as well as its provision of images and symbols and of concrete examples of life and action by which meaning is conveyed both to believers and nonbelievers. As I use the term, then, it can include the church's efforts to build consensus in the public forum, however this is done: The church is "prophetic" insofar as it offers a word of healing or a word of challenge spoken out of and in continuity with the community of faith; and insofar as what it says or does constitutes or incorporates a call to all persons to live together in peace, justice, freedom, and love.

The general aims of the church's participation in the public forum in this country have been aptly articulated by the United States bishops on several occa-

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tions, see *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>This position is often attributed to writers such as John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. Their positions are, in the long run, much more nuanced than this; and both are at least ambivalent about the label "sectarian," and sometimes reject it altogether. Neither wants to identify with a position that asks the Christian community to withdraw from the world or even to condemn it. See, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1974) chaps. 11–13; *Against the Nations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 1–19. See John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 1–5.

sions. Even groups and individuals in the Catholic community who disagree strongly with positions taken by the bishops on specific questions of policy tend not to disagree with these goals. In a statement issued prior to the 1996 elections, for example, the United States Catholic Conference Administrative Board insisted that what the leaders of the church seek to provide is "not a religious interest group, but a community of conscience within the larger society,"<sup>4</sup> bringing to it the central values, principles, and broad experience of the community of faith. "Public life should be a place of civil debate and broad public participation,"<sup>5</sup> the bishops wrote, and what the church works for is a reorientation of politics "to reflect better the search for the common good . . . a clear commitment to the dignity of every person."<sup>6</sup> Again in November, 1999, the bishops approved a pastoral message saying, "No man or woman of good will should stand as an idle witness to the complex social problems of our day."<sup>7</sup> Hence, the bishops challenged "all people of faith and people of good will to greater solidarity with the poor and with those prevented from fulfilling the unique dignity that God has given to all women and men."<sup>8</sup> The bishops have here and elsewhere described the church's longstanding concern for compassion for the "poor and the weak,"<sup>9</sup> for "telling the story"<sup>10</sup> of human needs and human dignity, and for articulating the responsibilities of neighbor-love and of good and just citizenship.

Given these overall aims for church participation in the public forum, my primary thesis in this address is a simple one—namely, that there are presently two serious obstacles to the realization of these aims. The obstacles I have in mind are these: (1) the church's overwhelming preoccupation in the public forum with the issue of abortion; and (2) the scandal of repression of thought and discourse within the church itself. My concern here is not centrally for the substantive issues involved in these two church policies, but for the strategic problems they represent—problems serious enough to undermine the effectiveness of much of the church's work in American society. There are remedies for these problems that I will suggest, but let me first try to clarify the problems themselves.

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<sup>4</sup>United States Catholic Conference Administrative Board, "Political Responsibility: Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least among Us and Pursuing the Common Good," *Origins* 25 (16 November 1995): 374.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* 371.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* 372.

<sup>7</sup>National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "In All Things Charity: A Pastoral Challenge for the New Millennium," *Origins* 29 (9 December 1999): 423.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>9</sup>"Political Responsibility," 374.

<sup>10</sup>"In All Things Charity," 422.

## THE SCANDAL OF COMPROMISED CREDIBILITY

There is a sense in which both of the problems I have identified represent a kind of scandal of unnecessarily compromised credibility. The aims of the church in the public forum are to build consensus so that this society will care about the marginalized and the vulnerable and will, as a society, promote the freedom and well-being of its own people and people around the world. The church's approach to abortion policies, on the one hand, and its effort to control internal church discourse on the other, serve frequently to undercut its political agenda in the public forum rather than to advance it. Political action regarding abortion is more directly a part of this agenda, so that it may be useful to consider it first.

### Abortion: Problems of Credibility and Focus

There are no doubt many arguments to be made in support of the church's strategies in relation to the issue of abortion. The profound moral questions involved, the perceived pervasiveness of the problem, its symbolic significance in relation to many other problems, the sheer strength of political support for freedom regarding abortion, and so forth, may all provide a rationale for exactly the church's approach to date. There are counterarguments to be made, however, and I want to consider them here. The heart of the problem, I want to argue, is the strategy of placing opposition to abortion at the center of the church's political agenda, a strategy that has understandably entailed an overwhelming preoccupation with this issue above all others. My critique of this strategy is threefold: (1) On the issue of abortion as such, the Roman Catholic Church suffers from an inevitable lack of credibility. This credibility gap is attributable to longstanding tensions in the Catholic tradition, but it is ironically reinforced by present efforts of the church to try to overcome some of the traditional tensions. (2) The extreme politicization of the issue of legal abortion has led church leaders to downplay or to oppose other approaches to this issue, and to condemn a whole range of policies by absorbing them into the abortion issue without adequate consideration. (3) Preoccupation with abortion has overshadowed all other issues important to the church's political agenda. The consequences of this are visible not only in the strategies of the church's leadership but in the responses of a vast majority of church members.

*The Credibility Gap.* An obvious problem that the church faces in its efforts to oppose abortion is its insistence on opposition to most forms of contraception. This is understandable, and for those who share a moral opposition to contraception it is an inevitable tension (which perhaps must simply be borne) in the practical sphere if not in the theoretical. That is, from this perspective even if abortion is judged to be a much more grievous moral evil than the blocking of conception, we cannot prevent abortion through the use of contraceptives. Even to forestall the paramount evil of taking innocent human life, the lesser evil of contraception cannot be condoned—since it remains a serious (indeed, intrinsic) evil nonetheless.

This tension is heightened, of course, for the many members of the Catholic church who do not agree that contraception must be absolutely prohibited. Since this view—namely, that contraception can be justified for sound reasons—is apparently shared by the majority of Catholics in the United States, there is at least something of a credibility gap among Catholics themselves regarding the primacy of place that the abortion issue holds in the church's political agenda.

But there is an even more serious reason (than tensions with beliefs about contraception) for a lack of credibility regarding the church's opposition to abortion. This is the less than happy record of the church in relation to women. Indeed, it might be argued that for no other reason than desired effectiveness in the battle against abortion, a moratorium should be called on political action regarding abortion until the church can improve its record regarding women.

Documentation of failures in the church's relation to women has been provided for so long and from so many sources—scholarly and pastoral, historical and contemporary—that it is unnecessary for me to repeat it here. Wrongs against women were in fact acknowledged along with other wrongs in the March 12 "Service Requesting Pardon," conducted by Pope John Paul II.<sup>11</sup> One need not subscribe to any particular view of the nature and roles of women in order to recognize the ways in which they "have suffered offenses against their human dignity," had their rights "trampled," and been "all too often humiliated and emarginated," with the direct action and "acquiescence" of the church.<sup>12</sup>

Today, there are efforts on the part of church leaders to correct the record and improve it. Yet the problem only seems to get worse. While it is true, for example, that the church has been in some political arenas a major voice for the inclusion of women's rights and needs in considerations of the common good and in programs for the development of peoples, it is also true that the church's worries about contraception and abortion (and, one might add, the church's refusal to allow women full participation in church ministry and governance) have undercut its best efforts in this regard.

More than this, the gratuitous condemnations of what church leaders call "radical feminism" have struck many women as grievously uninformed and one more example of the failure of the church to take women seriously. Attempts on the part of the church to show sympathy to women's concerns have most recently taken the form of coopting the "feminist" label, distinguishing "radical feminism" from "Christian feminism."<sup>13</sup> On 20-21 May 2000, for example, an International Congress was held in Rome to identify a "new feminism," one constructed to oppose what the participants identified as the "old feminism." According to those invited to the Congress, old feminism placed "women in confrontation with the

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<sup>11</sup>"Service Requesting Pardon," 648.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 647-48.

<sup>13</sup>For an excellent analysis of the issues involved here, see Mary C. Segers, "Feminism, Liberalism, and Catholicism," in *Catholicism and Liberalism*, 242-68.

love of their husbands and attention to their children."<sup>14</sup> In the view of the Congress, a new feminism should be based on the central premise that a woman becomes fully a woman only when she is fully a wife and fully a mother.<sup>15</sup>

Feminism is, of course, today everywhere (especially among feminists) a contested concept. There are diverse forms of "feminism," multiple feminist theories, and more than one Christian feminist theology. The accuracy, therefore, of the Rome Congress's rendering of what feminists in general have believed is problematic; as a rendering of what the majority of feminists have believed, it is simply wrong. No wonder, then, that it may be received as one more attempt to control what women think about themselves. A church-supported effort to construct a new version of Christian feminism, undertaken without any concern to dialogue with (but only ultimately to "evangelize") Christian women who have been working on feminist issues for a long time, sounds anything but "new." It is difficult to see how it will respond to a situation described by Mary Segers: "Since most secular and religious feminists regard Catholic tradition as deeply patriarchal, they view the church hierarchy's attempts to define 'true Christian feminism' with irony and skepticism."<sup>16</sup> The credibility gap grows.

Once again, my point here is not to argue that opposition to abortion should be removed from the church's political agenda. It is, rather, that it should be removed from the center of the agenda—even or especially for its own sake—until the credibility gap regarding women and the church is addressed. It is a political misjudgment, and a failure in ethical analysis, to think that the moral high ground on this issue belongs to those concerned solely with potential human life.

*The Problem of the Expanding Absolute.* The second part of my critique of the centrality of abortion in the church's political agenda addresses the politicization of the issue as a question of law. A number of concerns can be raised here, but I have in mind two that are especially relevant to what I have called the scandal of compromised credibility. An obvious one is that preoccupation with recriminalizing abortion has meant focusing on the legal protection of fetuses to the neglect of other forms of moral persuasion. While it is true that campaigns to make what is hidden in the womb more visible, to give it a more human face, have been effective—perhaps moreso in the public forum than in the personal contexts where decisions must ultimately be made; they have not allowed much room for more careful pastoral approaches, or more nuanced ethical analysis. This may not be the fault only of the political strategies of those who oppose abortion; politicization and absolutization of moral norms have characterized both sides of the current debate. Yet one might hope that the church's efforts to protect human life would extend (as

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<sup>14</sup>Lucienne Salle, "New Feminism Offered by New Evangelization" <<http://www.zenit.org>> (22 May 2000).

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. Correlated with the emphasis on this kind of theory of the "eternal feminine," is a theory of male/female complementarity that translates into a theory of gendered role differentiation.

<sup>16</sup>Segers, "Feminism, Liberalism, and Catholicism," 243.

they have in other contexts) to the protection and maximization of human freedom. Freedom and life need not be opposed in the moral situations where abortion becomes an issue; but there is very little wisdom coming forth from the church in this regard. And without attention to the whole of the moral situation, credibility gaps form and have a tendency to grow.

In a similar vein, many persons, including many Roman Catholics, are convinced that abortion is ordinarily morally wrong. They are not always convinced, however, that the remedy is to make abortion once again illegal. There are lots of reasons, some of them well entrenched in the Catholic tradition, why some matters of morality are not best handled by making a law. In the case of abortion in a contemporary context, worries about the enforceability of such a law (and what it would entail in terms of coercion of individuals' most intimate embodied selves) and about the imposition of a law in a context of basic moral pluralism (where persons of recognizable wisdom and good will do in fact disagree) are sufficient to justify being both against abortion and against its prohibition as a matter of law.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, even for many of those at peace with an absolute moral prohibition against abortion, it begins to stretch the imagination to include under this prohibition the ending of every vestige of life defined as beginning with a "moment of conception." The quick expansion of the concept of abortion (and its prohibition) to questions of certain forms of chemical contraceptives, and to issues of research on human embryos, stem cell research, and so on, seems almost too easy. For those who take seriously the results of contemporary embryological studies (those who, for example, are serious about natural law as an approach to ethical discernment), it makes a difference that we now know that there is no "moment" of conception (but a twenty-four hour fertilization process). It also makes a difference that an embryo, in its earliest stages (up to approximately fourteen days of development, or to the stage of implantation in the uterus) is very likely not sufficiently individualized to have achieved the status of even potential personhood.<sup>18</sup> Thoughtful persons who take account of these findings can lose confidence in a strategy that brooks no nuances, no new insights, no clarifications regarding the issues at stake. Slogans are effective political tools, but when doubts arise about their application, a political strategy may come upon hard times.

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<sup>17</sup>This position is not as contradictory as many church leaders have claimed (especially when they are condemning it as an irresponsible position attributed to Roman Catholic legislators). As it stands, it is coherent and able to be rationally defended—which, of course, does not mean that everyone must find it persuasive.

<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., Thomas A. Shannon and Alan B. Walter, "Reflections on the Moral Status of the Pre-Embryo," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 603-26; Richard A. McCormick, "Who or What Is the Pre-embryo?" *Corrective Vision: Explorations in Moral Theology* (Kansas City MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994) 176-88; Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Embryo and the Fetus: New Moral Concerns," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 124-42. See also Joseph Donceel, "Immediate and Delayed Hominization," *Theological Studies* 31 (1970): 76-105.

*An Agenda Overshadowed and Burdened.* The third part of my critique of the pride of place that abortion holds in the church's political agenda is that it overshadows and places an unfavorable burden on other urgent issues that belong to this agenda as well. In their statement on "Political Responsibility" in 1996, the United States bishops identified eighteen issues of great concern.<sup>19</sup> The first was abortion (the issues were listed in alphabetical order). But it went on to include arms control; capital punishment; the ethical uses and regulation of telecommunications systems; racism and other forms of discrimination; economic justice (in employment, fair wages, taxation, etc.); rights to adequate education (and its necessary conditions, such as fair wages for teachers, the inclusion of moral education, the rights of private school students); environmental justice; euthanasia; families and children; food security for all people; health care system reform (including a concern for persons with AIDS and the "nationwide problem" of substance abuse); housing needs; human rights issues (especially for immigrants and in international affairs); refugees; concerns with particular regions of the world (such as Eastern and Central Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa); violence (the first concern being abortion); and welfare reform.

The record of the church regarding all of these issues is in many ways impressive. There is no doubt that significant political initiatives have been launched and sustained in their regard. Yet one cannot help wondering what would have happened to any one of these issues had they been given the kind of attention consistently awarded to abortion. The problem here is not simply a problem of finite resources and time, as in "There is only so much a church can do." Indeed, priorities must be set; no political agenda can pursue all issues at once. Still, to pursue one issue with as great energy as the church has pursued the abortion issue is inevitably to overshadow the others and to invite charges (however unfair) of "one-issue" politics. More than this, when the one issue is burdened with a serious credibility gap, this burden transfers to other issues as well.

Salutary efforts are being made to escalate concern for issues that can be tied to abortion—issues embraced in what we now know as a "consistent ethic of life." Hence, important new initiatives are in place regarding capital punishment, welfare rights, environmental justice, and other matters of great urgency. Concern for these issues must be applauded and supported. Appeals to consistency, however, are not sufficient to overcome the credibility gap that haunts the issue of abortion on this agenda. Whether intended or not, the gravity of the agenda continues to go in the direction of this one troubled issue, and its troubles transfer to the ineffectiveness of efforts regarding other issues.

A sign of these difficulties is the lukewarm response of ordinary Catholics to the initiatives that church leaders do take on issues of, for example, welfare rights, racism, and immigration. The political agenda of the church has succeeded in the

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<sup>19</sup>"Political Responsibility," 376-82.

past when official church teachings were matched by movements among the people of the church.<sup>20</sup> Movements in today's church to combat racism, save the environment, preserve the earth, are alive but limited. Astonishing levels of racial intolerance still exist in Roman Catholic parishes and dioceses. Problems are covered over with assumptions of "solidarity," but the church goes on, segregated in lamentable ways. Without a challenge to their own "slumber" in this regard, Catholics continue to be as much a part of the problem of racism as they are part of the solution. What would happen if the church placed antiracism at the heart of its political agenda, so that all other issues were connected with it, in a consistent ethic of life and respect for persons whose gravity had shifted?

What would happen if the church's political agenda regarding welfare rights were understood and supported by the members of the church? As Mary Jo Bane, former United States Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, reported regarding the lobbying that went on during the 1996 debate on the welfare reform bill: Roman Catholic bishops and agencies "were articulate, well-prepared and grounded in the social and moral teachings of the church. . . . They were by and large respected and listened to by members of Congress. . . . But they were not seen, or feared, as speaking for forty-five or so million potential voters."<sup>21</sup> On issues such as these, there are no cards passed out in parishes before the collection, and no petitions to sign on the way out of church. Whatever one thinks of the methods used to mobilize the faithful against abortion (and many of these methods need critical assessment), few mobilizing efforts of any kind are employed when other issues are at stake. This is why the refrain is sometimes heard (as I have heard it recently) from Catholics who work with problems of urban education, or with the thousands of immigrants incarcerated on the borders of this country, or among countless other publicly invisible persons on the margins of our society: "Where is the church? Pharoah has hardened his heart, and the church is nowhere to be found." Those who, in the name of the church, do the works of justice, the works of mercy, the works of peace, need and deserve better support from the church's political commitments and action.

The unfortunate truth is that the "consistent ethic of life" works best when an unnuanced concern for abortion is extended to unnuanced concerns for issues such as euthanasia or the structure of the traditional family. As it now functions, consistent steps of progress on issues like capital punishment are not matched by opposition to violence against lesbians and gay men or by serious concern for the complex fears of persons regarding how they must die. But I can only repeat: The lack of credibility surrounding the center of a political agenda allows all too many persons, both in the church and outside of it, to avert their eyes from the agenda as a whole.

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<sup>20</sup>See the important study in this regard done by Marvin L. Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998).

<sup>21</sup>Mary Jo Bane, "Discipleship and Citizenship: Poverty, Welfare and the Role of the Churches," unpubl. ms. (4 April 2000).

### Internal Discourse and the External Arena

I turn now to the second obstacle I have identified in the realization of the overall aims of the church's political agenda (the second source of the "scandal of compromised credibility"). Here the obstacle is not within the agenda itself or an explicit part of its political strategy. It is, rather, the obstacle presented by an aspect of the church's own life. That is, current efforts within the church to repress internal discourse (and therefore, also, thought) have an effect on the church's participation in the secular political arena. The public perception of the Roman Catholic Church as prohibiting a free and responsible exchange of ideas within its own boundaries weakens the effectiveness of the church's voice in the public political arena. It awakens old fears (whether fairly or not) of nondemocratic organizations overly influencing a democratic society. It raises suspicions (whether legitimately or not) of hidden agendas, manipulation by external powers, and loyalties not appropriate for participation in a democratic process. Once again, the credibility of the church's political agenda, and its calls for justice, are compromised.

Any policy of repression of discourse within the church has consequences both for the church itself and for the church's relationship with other churches, organizations, and the wider society. The most obvious case in point today is the kind of discipline exercised by church leaders in regard to Catholic theologians. My use of this example, especially in the context of a gathering of the Catholic Theological Society of America, risks sounding self-serving. Theologians are not alone, however, in noting actions taken against them, or in observing the ongoing struggle in the church to reconcile authority with freedom of conscience, concern for the truth with conditions of creative thought, responsibilities to orthodoxy with the risks of genuine search for fuller understanding. This struggle is inescapable, and it need not be destructive—either of persons or of the truth. But attempts to resolve it by the sheer invocation of authority or exercise of power have shown themselves to be counterproductive in the past, and they promise to be no less so in the present.

In order to see how the present tension between church leaders and theologians compromises the credibility of the church in the public forum, it is necessary to look first to its consequences within the church itself. However one interprets or evaluates present efforts by church leaders to discipline the work of theologians, it is obvious that trust has become fragile or has completely broken down between members of the hierarchy and theologians. This is, of course, not a wholly new development, since it marks all too often the history of the church. Yet this kind of breakdown of trust is, in important ways, significantly new for this generation of theologians; and it is pervasive, if not total (there does remain genuine trust between some theologians and some members of the hierarchy). What may be legitimate concerns on the part of church leaders to challenge developments in theology, to call for integrity and faithfulness in the doing of theology, have all too often in recent years taken the form of silencing theologians, condemning whole

schools of thought, and requiring one version or another of orthodoxy and loyalty tests. The net result is arguably not stronger and more orthodox theology, but suspicion, repression, and the choking off of possibilities of deeper understanding of the church's faith.<sup>22</sup>

Without being an alarmist, one can nonetheless observe in the present church context (or "culture") for doing theology some trends that are reminiscent of, and certainly not immune to, the most corrosive elements of repressive secular regimes. For example, the longest term consequences of the Cultural Revolution in China are not the memories of bloodshed and hardship (though that, too), but the scars of suspicion. Here for a time was a way of life in which family members, neighbors, and students were forced to report on one another, investigate one another, turn one another in to authorities. What was done originally through coercion became customary; what was first a means of survival became an accepted, though hazardous, way of life. This is no doubt too strong an analogy, but an instructive one nonetheless. For there are signs of this kind of pattern, this kind of suspicion and fear (and the cynicism that follows) in relationships between theologians and bishops, and between theologians and particular self-appointed groups of lay and clerical monitors of Catholic orthodoxy.

The consequences for the church are potentially grave: demonization of some theologians, limitations on serious new work in theology, reluctance of the young—the best and the brightest—to pursue a vocation in theology, real confusion among believers (confusion that meticulous control is ironically designed to avoid). These consequences include divisiveness in the theological community itself. In the recent past, efforts have been made by the Catholic Theological Society of America to foster diversity among its members—not only age, gender, racial, ethnic diversity, but diversity in theological perspectives. This is necessary for the development of a living theology—for its creativity, its credibility, its self-critical edge. But in a climate of suspicion within the wider church, diversity of theological perspective can become counterproductive, turning into scandalous battles and a fragmentation of the best theological insights and work. We can dismiss this because we know it has characterized every period in the history of the church—Augustine's fourth century, Aquinas's thirteenth century, the struggles with the Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century, the crisis of modernism in the nineteenth century, pre-Vatican II twentieth century, and countless examples

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<sup>22</sup>In a 1989 address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, Archbishop John May of St. Louis spoke of a similar context:

It is one thing to experience and recognize inevitable tensions and problems. It is quite another thing to stigmatize theologians as a group who menace the episcopal office or sound belief. The effect of such wanton accusations upon theologians has been a growing fear. These attacks themselves come out of fear and they engender an atmosphere of greater fear. A climate of suspicion so harmful to the church as a whole is fed by casual remarks about the fidelity of others, by ungrounded accusations. . . .

John May, "Theologians and a Climate of Fear," *Origins* 19 (22 June 1989): 88.

in between. If this history tells us anything, however, it is that while dispute and disagreement, given a context of charity and mutual respect, can contribute to theological creativity; they can, in a context of suspicion, diminish theological discernment and development, with losses the repercussions of which continue for years to come.

What are the likely consequences of repression and division within the church for its political ministry in the larger public forum? As John Courtney Murray and others have noted, Vatican II brought a turning point in the life of the church and in its participation in the world. "It affirmed, in act even more than in word, the positive value of freedom within the People of God. [This] is the principle of doctrinal progress, of the growth of the church toward more perfect inner unity, and of the widening and strengthening of relations between the church and the world, both religious and secular."<sup>23</sup> This change in the church's own self-understanding, and in the life of the church, was received outside of it with a new trust and confidence in the church's willingness and ability to participate in contemporary society as a constructive sharer in public discourse and public responsibility. It takes no leap of logic at all to assume that insofar as the church contradicts its own developed self-understanding in this regard, there will be a corresponding loss of confidence and trust on the part of those in the world with whom the church wants to collaborate.

More than simply a matter of public perception, insofar as the church acts in a way that is destructive of its own community, it is simply less able to participate in society. And insofar as its theological community is injured, the church will be further incapacitated in terms of the social criticism and religious interpretation it can offer to the society at large. Limited in the word it has to offer, and limited in the confidence it can assure in others, the credibility of the church's political agenda is compromised and the effectiveness of its political action impaired. This is a scandal of serious proportions.

#### EARNED CREDIBILITY: PROPHETIC WITNESS A POSSIBILITY

I have spoken more of scandal than of prophetic witness. My own approach to these questions needs as much decentering, perhaps, as I have been advocating for the church's political agenda. That is, I have not really wanted to speak about abortion, not even about the problems of the theological community in relation to church policies. I have wanted to speak about freeing the voice of the church so that it can accomplish in the public forum what are its most serious aims—the awakening of all of us, and of our whole society, to the imperatives of justice and

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<sup>23</sup>John Courtney Murray, "Freedom in the Age of Renewal," in *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular: Selected Writings of John Courtney Murray, S.J.*, ed. J. Leon Hooper (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994) 185. See also John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Lustre of Our Country: The American Experience of Religious Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) chap. 13.

the respect and care of those among us who are wounded or ignored. The task of "prophetic ministry" is, no doubt, "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture" in which we live.<sup>24</sup> This does not require a wholesale condemnation of our society, nor a standing apart. It has been thought to require, by those of us in the Roman Catholic tradition, that we speak not only in judgment (though sometimes that, too) but with suasion, that we act to remind ourselves and all the people of responsibilities and of rights, and that we engage tirelessly in the political processes available to us. If I am right in analyzing the church's preoccupation with abortion, and its tendencies to repress thought and discourse, as obstacles to this, what are the ways to more credible participation in the public forum and even to prophetic witness?

The answer may be simple: decenter abortion in the church's political agenda, allow more nuanced attention to issues heretofore attached to abortion, revise priorities for political action; and identify the ways in which trust can be restored between those whose vocation is theology and those whose vocation is church leadership: let the sign of the church be more clearly "how much they love one another." All of this, of course, is more easily said than done. The first step may be a new assessment—such as I have tried to propose—of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the church's political agenda as it stands. More than this, however, we can look to the considerable resources in our tradition for fashioning a more effective strategy in service of this agenda's general aims.

There are indeed resources in this regard. Ours, after all, is the strand of the Christian tradition that—against many others—has never despaired of the possibilities of human reason and never rejected the essential gift of human freedom. At almost every juncture, we have ultimately resisted a view of original sin that would see reason so damaged and freedom so twisted that they cannot be counted on at all, even under the healing power of grace.<sup>25</sup> Every tradition has its historical ironies and contradictions, of course, and the Roman Catholic tradition is no exception. But however much the commitments to reason and to freedom

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<sup>24</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 13.

<sup>25</sup>This is why the rise in so-called "Augustinian" interpretations of human life and society, as over against "Thomistic" interpretations, is ironic and in many ways inconsistent with the mainstream Catholic theological tradition. For the meanings given to these terms, see Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism," in *Catholicism and Liberalism*, esp. 86-88. Augustine himself, of course, lived long enough and wrote enough to provide diverse theories of human freedom that have fed two very different Christian traditions (on these issues) in the West—the "Augustinian" views of Luther and Calvin, and the "Augustinian-Thomistic" views of Thomas Aquinas.

have been compromised through the centuries,<sup>26</sup> no other Christian tradition has held on to them, at least theoretically, more strongly than the Catholic tradition.

Hence, there are resources in the Catholic tradition for affirming the importance of intellectual inquiry, theological search, and spiritual discernment.<sup>27</sup> We have also learned the lesson that there is too high a price to be paid for insistence on certain kinds of uniformity in thought and in practice—the price of isolation from the surrounding world and from other Christian churches.<sup>28</sup> And there is, deep in the Roman Catholic tradition of moral thought, an acceptance of the contingency of human insight into specific moral norms and their concrete application.<sup>29</sup>

How can all of this shed light on the problems I have identified regarding the ineffectiveness of the church's political agenda? First, it suggests that contingencies in the application of moral prohibitions can be acknowledged without fearing fundamental compromise of integrity or courage. The abortion issue can be relativized on the church's agenda, at least until issues of credibility regarding respect for women are addressed. Specific policies regarding abortion—such as insisting on its total recriminalization—can be renegotiated in favor of alternate strategies of moral persuasion. Restraint can be used in the unnuanced expansion of absolutes (in this case, the prohibition against abortion) to matters that may be significantly different (for example, the use of other forms of fertility control). In determining priorities among issues to be addressed in a given political agenda, pragmatic concerns can count (such as breaking a pattern which the media can dismiss as "single-issue oriented," or assessing anew the feasibility of political action on new issues as well as old). A political agenda, especially on the part of

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<sup>26</sup>One irony is that, while the Reformed and Lutheran traditions rejected the possibility of human free choice in the face of, on the one hand, divine causality, and on the other hand sin, it was nonetheless out of the Protestant Reformation that political freedom, and freedom of conscience over against institutions (whether the church or the state) began to be taken seriously. Another irony is that, while the Roman Catholic tradition has all along been optimistic about the strengths of human reason (with correlative general access to natural law), it has nonetheless introduced a kind of "divine command" theory. This latter takes the form of a (sometimes highly individualized) special "grace of office" given to hierarchical authority for the determination of specific norms of the natural law. It is this that is at the base of earlier attitudes of "popes, bishops, apologists" in their judgment of "liberalism" as the result of original sin. But the overwhelming Catholic historical choice on the side of Thomas Aquinas's optimism regarding reason and freedom stands consistently in contrast to a general Protestant choice on the side of Augustine's pessimistic writings (in particular, the later Augustine, fighting against the Pelagians). See Komonchak, *Catholicism and Liberalism*, 76-99.

<sup>27</sup>See Murray, "A Will to Community," *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, 222-24.

<sup>28</sup>See, e.g., Walter Kasper, "The Council's Vision for a Renewal of the Church," *Communio* 17 (Winter 1990): 475.

<sup>29</sup>See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II.91.3-4; 94.4-5; 96.1 ad 3. See also Murray, "Doctrines at the Cutting Edge," *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, 174-77.

the church, need not be caught in a "competition of miseries," but it can set priorities in terms of people's needs and people's pain.

I return, finally, to where I began—namely, the effectiveness of Pope John Paul II's words and actions in Lent of this Jubilee Year. Embodying vulnerability in the expression of truth, never was the church more strong. Acknowledging not only mistakes but real evil, never was the church more prophetic in its commitment to justice. Respecting those who differ from the church—not only in belief but in policy, never were the church's own hopes for peace more clear. I know that the whole of the church's word and action in the public forum cannot be symbolic gestures. It has to include the hard work of many forms of participation in public life. It has to include the many members of the church as well as its leaders. But whatever word is spoken, whatever action taken, it needs to be formed with this same spirit: of humility, respect, and the deepest compassion. Only so will it be effective. Only so will it move us from scandal to prophetic witness.

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