

Topic:	Ecclesial Participation in Public Policy
Convener/Moderator:	Kenneth Weare, St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park CA
Presenter:	William J. Levada, Archbishop of San Francisco
Respondent:	John P. Langan, Georgetown University

Within the context of the new evangelization, and living as a dynamic People of God in the world, Catholics are called to become proactive in public policy. As Archbishop Levada noted: "As American Catholics, we do no service to the Church or nation to remain silent." The ideologies, agendas, and actions of political leaders proposing, establishing, and implementing public policy constitute a form of cultural activity that produces and uses concepts, artifacts, and systems decisive in contemporary life, which must be anticipated, analyzed, and critiqued. Historically and contemporaneously, active ecclesial participation in the public policy process remains a uniquely delicate, complex problematic in which moral and religious issues and cultural, social, political, and economic value systems are deeply implicated, often eliciting emotional as well as reasoned intellectual responses.

Archbishop William Levada, in his presentation "The Church and the Bishop in the Public Policy Arena," first addressed the role of the bishop in public affairs, citing the caveat of John Courtney Murray advocating for the civil discourse of reasonable conversation. He then offered a detailed narration of the San Francisco controversy over spousal benefits for domestic partners. In 1996, the Board of Supervisors adopted a new ordinance requiring health coverage for employees' domestic partners by businesses or agencies with city contracts, including Catholic Charities which has \$13 million in contracts and provides the largest AIDS housing program in the western United States. However, the real intent was the movement toward eventual legal recognition of same sex unions. After much private and public debate, the Mayor and Board of Supervisors agreed to Levada's solution that a business or agency which "allows each employee to designate a legally domiciled member of the employee's household as being eligible for spousal equivalent benefits" would be in compliance with the law.

Archbishop Levada identified four underlying issues for the Church in the public policy arena: (1) the popular use of the slogan "separation of church and state" as a justification for the "delegitimization" of religion from the sphere of public dialogue; (2) the impact this privatization or exclusion of religion from the public arena has on the discussion of "public morality," rendering the traditional Catholic appeals to reason and natural law virtually incomprehensible to our partners in the "civil dialogue"; (3) the worrisome tendency to transition from the privatization of religion and morality to a coercive stance on the part of government authority that can inhibit the freedoms of conscience and religion; and (4) the appeal to personal liberty or autonomy as the "trump" card which increasingly frames the state of the question in public discourse.

John Langan, in his response, represented the view of many colleagues in characterizing the Archbishop's health benefits solution as "pragmatic, conciliatory,

inventive, and sensitive to the key values at stake," while being "judicious, dialogical, and attentive to the theological and political communities." He then identified three factors in the social and intellectual context which he sees as shaping public policy controversies today. First, the "cultural wars," which create a highly polemical atmosphere between contending parties and sharpen divisions within religious groups. Second, the rise of exclusionary liberalism, which exists in both theoretical and political forms, and which rules out religious considerations in the public forum and renounces religious voices and broad coalitions in favor of specific causes. Third, the paradigm established by the civil rights movement, which has provided advocacy groups with patterns of organization and interpretation and with stories of struggle in which existing cultural practices are seen as oppressive and morally retrograde. In this paradigm, which is readily understood by the media, the church and other defenders of traditional values are put at a serious disadvantage.

In the face of "the cultural wars," Langan argued for the need to cultivate a less polemical stance, which combines the manifestation of Christian charity within a certain wariness about movements that are incompatible with Catholic teaching. He stressed that an alternative paradigm needs to be developed, a paradigm built on stories which affirm the values of community, compromise, and conscience through appeals to shared social experience. Archbishop Levada's "San Francisco solution," he concluded, is one example of such a story.

An energetic discussion period with all participants completed the afternoon session. Issues considered included: further conversation about the Archbishop's health benefits solution; the role of the primacy of conscience; the prioritization of values; relativism in the public education system; processes for dialogue; the relationship between civil law and Christian morality; and the consistent life ethic.

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