

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2021
Pages: 156–173

TOWARDS A RESPONSIBLE ENGAGEMENT OF ORDAINED MINISTERS IN SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

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Abstract

This essay seeks to investigate the involvement of the Church's ministers in socio-political issues. In particular, it seeks to answer two questions: why must ordained ministers speak about socio-political issues? And how should they engage in socio-political issues? In the course of answering these questions, I argue that because of their special share in the prophetic mission of Christ, ordained ministers cannot remain indifferent towards socio-political issues. At the same time, because of their power to define reality and their being "symbolic representatives of the holy" and "officers of the Church," they must engage these issues responsibly. Three virtues were proposed as helpful for this task: courage, humility, and prudence.

Keywords: Authority in the Church; Ministerial Ethics; Power in the Church; Social Ethics; Virtues

Lito Zulueta, a journalist, opined that with the *Walk for Life* initiated by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to express disagreement against violence and the return of the death penalty, the bishops have "thrown down the gauntlet at President Duterte and set the stage for another classic church-state confrontation."¹ Even before the *Walk*, members of the clergy were

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¹Lito Zulueta, "Stage Set for Classic Church-State Clash," *News, Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 19 February 2017.

already vocal against the said issues which earned the ire of the Philippine president and his supporters. There are those who point out that the Church, specifically ordained ministers, should just stick to spiritual matters. Some believe that the Church has the right to speak but is doing so in a wrong manner.

In light of these as well as the tensional relationship between the Church and the government in the Philippines, this essay seeks to investigate the involvement of the Church's ministers in socio-political issues. In particular, it seeks to answer two questions: why must ministers speak about socio-political issues? How should they engage in socio-political issues? In the course of answering these questions, I argue that because of their special share in the prophetic mission of Christ, ordained ministers cannot remain indifferent towards socio-political issues. At the same time, because of their power to define reality and their being symbolic representatives and officers of the Church, they must engage these issues responsibly.

The paper will be divided into two parts. The first one provides the theological bases for involvement in socio-political issues. The second part proposes approaches towards an ethical involvement of ordained ministers in socio-political issues, particularly in terms of preaching and attending assemblies. This essay will not address the matter of ordained ministers seeking or holding public office or a share in the exercise of civil power in which Canon Law is clear already. Furthermore, the essay will focus on the clergy. In no way does this focus denigrate the role and involvement of lay ecclesial ministers in socio-political issues. Rather, clergy, because they are members of the Church hierarchy, are more closely associated with the Church and consequently generate more reaction with their involvement.

Theological Bases for Involvement

The ultimate basis for involvement in socio-political issues is the example of Jesus. The Gospels are replete with accounts of Jesus drawing the ire of society's powerful because of His association with sinners and outcasts. He refused to be stopped by established social taboos. This stems from Jesus' basic conviction that God is a God of justice and love who loves everyone. Jesus held on to this principle even though it challenged the socio-political orders of His time.² As the teacher of an ethical Kingdom of God, Jesus continually challenged these orders even as He accepted the authority of the State

²Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, New and Revised Edition, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1992, 120-21.

and its legitimate functions. Eventually, this prophetic witness of Jesus became one of the key factors that lead to His death.³

The Church, following Jesus' mission of proclaiming God's Kingdom, also follows His prophetic office. The whole People of God—both the ordained and the laity—share in Christ's kingly, priestly, and prophetic ministries.⁴ Ordained ministers, being called to serve the community, are especially called and expected to share in a greater way in the *tria munera Christi*.⁵

In light of the Church's share in the *munus triplex* of Christ, Marvin L. Krier Mich maintains that Christian discipleship includes a prophetic ministry which entails rousing the faith community when it does not live according to God's covenant and when its members do not live fully the command to love God and neighbour. Moreover, the prophetic ministry also necessitates willingness to take difficult positions, such as when defending the dignity of life and criticizing injustices. Even though no one can perfectly manifest all three ministries, every Christian disciple is called to be prophetic, responsible, and sacramental even as one is emphasized.⁶

Thus, the mission of the Church and her ministers is spiritual and social (LG 1). This gives them the right and duty to speak on socio-political issues. The social dimension of the mission of the Church is given a firm theological foundation by *Gaudium et Spes*. Kenneth Himes expresses this foundation in four steps. First, the Church has a commitment to safeguard human dignity since it has a religious significance; it is rooted in the Genesis' account that human persons are created in God's image and likeness. Second, in fulfilling the task of being a "sign and safeguard"⁷ of human dignity, the Church must not become another humanitarian organization. The Church's primary mission is not political but religious. Third, having a primarily

³Joe Trull and James Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Being a Good Minister in a Not-So-Good World*, Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1993, 158–59; Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, 121.

⁴Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] (Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), nos. 1, 5, 12, and 31. Henceforth LG. See also, John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* [Encyclical Letter on the Mystery of Redemption and the Dignity of Man] (Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), no. 19; 1983 Code of Canon Law, no. 204 §1.

⁵Richard Gula, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers*, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2010, 17.

⁶Marvin Krier Mich, *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching*, rev. ed., Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2012, 18–20.

⁷Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965, no. 76. Henceforth, GS.

religious mission does not mean downplaying or dismissing earthly realities. God's reign is not something otherworldly; it reaches to transform all aspects of human life. Therefore, fourth, there will be political consequences arising from the Church's religious mission. There are specifically four areas where the religious mission spills over to the political and social: defending human dignity, promoting human rights, fostering unity among the members of the human family, and discerning the deeper meaning of human work and activity (GS 40–43). In summary, while the Church must transcend every political system, she must still engage the social order because of the implications of her religious mission.⁸ As the pastoral constitution puts it, the Church has the freedom and duty "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).

Benedict XVI, however, cautions that even as the Church cannot and must not "remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice," she also cannot and must not "...take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible." The Church's proper role with regards to socio-political issues is to purify reason and reawaken, through rational arguments, spiritual and moral energies without which justice cannot be attained.⁹ In practice, this means that ministers as part of their prophetic ministry, can and must teach moral doctrine concerning politics and pass judgment thereto when the fundamental rights of a person and the salvation of souls necessitate it. However, ministers cannot involve themselves actively in partisan politics. Such a task belongs to the lay faithful who must not privatize their faith and thus bear witness to it in their active and direct participation in politics.¹⁰

Towards an Ethical and Responsible Involvement of Pastoral Ministers in Socio-Political Issues

Any proposal for an ethical involvement of pastoral ministers in socio-political issues would have to take account of the power which

⁸Kenneth Himes, *101 Questions & Answers on Catholic Social Teaching*, 2d ed., Makati City, Philippines: St. Pauls, 2014, 18–20.

⁹Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* [Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth], Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, nos. 28–29. Direct quotations from no. 28.

¹⁰CBCP, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 1992), nos. 340 and 348–53. Henceforth PCP-II. See also, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, nos. 565–74. Henceforth CSDC.

ministers possess. Before giving specific approaches, we would first look at ministers being a symbolic representative of the holy and their power to define reality.

Pastoral ministers hold power; they have the capacity to influence others. It is what enables ministers to make things happen or not. The capacity to influence is relative to one's resources; while ministers hold power, not all of them have the same degree of it. We must examine our sources of power for we are at risk of acting unethically when we either ignore or downplay it.¹¹

An important and most obvious source of power is official appointment coming from an institution, in this case the Church. We speak of having authority when a public validation legitimizes our personal power. Authority institutionalizes personal power. This can take place through ordination, commissioning, installation, or election. When these take place, the community recognizes the minister as someone with religious authority and with the power to act on their behalf.¹² For example, priests, being ordained and appointed as pastors of a community, have authority. They have power over their flock and can influence them. This is all the more with bishops.

Pastoral Ministers as Symbolic Representatives of the Holy and as Officers of the Church

Aside from institutional legitimization, another source of power is *symbolic representation*. Ministers bring "something more" to the ministry than just themselves and this is that they act as symbolic representatives of the holy. This means that ministers represent to others "the church, a religious tradition, a way of life, and...even God." Quite simply, when people talk with ministers, they feel like talking with God. People see ministers not just as speaking for themselves but for the Church and even for God.¹³

Related to this is that ministers are also viewed as officers of the Church. When serving as ministers, they are not simply acting as private individuals. It includes the duty to represent the Church in "faithful and loving ways" through the different ministries they carry out. This certainly entails a limitation of a minister's personal autonomy, but it does not erase "pastoral discretion" in how ministers will represent the Church. Overall, this means that ministers must consider how their actions will affect the total well-

¹¹Gula, *Just Ministry*, 123.

¹²Gula, *Just Ministry*, 123.

¹³Gula, *Just Ministry*, 30.

being of the community. Being officers of the Church, ministers are especially responsible to witness on behalf of it. This means that the public can justly expect that ministers will give witness, worship, preaching, teaching, direction, and pastoral care in conformity with the Church's tradition.¹⁴

This puts a "sacred weight" in what ministers do and this is perhaps the reason why there is little questioning of a minister's preaching and teaching. People trust ministers to be truthful when speaking about the Church and about God even if they have not done anything to earn this. Ministers are cautioned that because of their representative role, they should be more careful to represent the Church fairly, not to exploit the vulnerability of those who trust that ministers will act in their best interests, and to interpret the world correctly.¹⁵ This last point brings us to another dimension of a minister's power, the power to define reality.

The Power to Define Reality

Precisely because they are symbolic representatives, ministers have the power to construct reality for others. Because of their specialized knowledge about theological reflection, people trust them as they define "how some aspect of society is to be thought of..."¹⁶

Karen Lebacqz maintains that the social construction of reality is at the heart of the minister's vocation. As she writes, "The minister does not simply heal or help or console. *She defines reality by offering a new language, a perspective or hidden meanings, a transformation of ordinary symbols, a hope in the midst of seeming hopelessness.*"¹⁷

In short, ministers interpret the world. They provide a framework by which stories of others can be judged and interpreted. Ministers have the power to make people see things differently as they read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel (GS 4). They can do this particularly in the context of preaching. Combined with the minister being a symbolic representative and an officer of the Church, we would realize that ministers hold a substantial degree of capacity to influence others. The challenge then is to use this power responsibly, to liberate and empower and to release the goodness in others.¹⁸

¹⁴Gula, *Just Ministry*, 35.

¹⁵Gula, *Just Ministry*, 126-28.

¹⁶Karen Lebacqz, *Professional Ethics: Power and Paradox*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992, 116-18.

¹⁷Lebacqz, *Professional Ethics*, 120.

¹⁸Gula, *Just Ministry*, 123.

With the aforementioned in the backdrop, we now turn our attention into the different ways ministers engage socio-political issues and propose how they should do so responsibly. Due to the constraints of space, I shall limit myself to two visible ways in which ministers engage socio-political issues, namely, preaching and joining assemblies.

Preaching Responsibly on Socio-Political Issues

A visible way in which a minister exercises his power to define reality and in which he is seen as a symbolic representative of the holy and as an officer of the Church is through preaching, whether in the homily or outside of it. I shall focus my discussion on the homily because of its significance as a liturgical action and it is the moment when most people are present to hear God's Word.¹⁹ Nevertheless, proposals for ethical preaching during homilies proposed here are also meant to extend to preaching outside the liturgical setting.

Preaching can be considered the most demanding ministry that ministers will ever undertake. Preaching can draw people into or push them from the life of the Church. It is where ministers interpret tradition and apply it. It is the moment for catechesis, guiding behaviour, and moral exhortation. Ministers define reality when preaching. Hence, it requires knowledge of many things: scriptures, theology, spirituality, and communication skills among others. All these makes preaching an immense responsibility which cannot be taken lightly.²⁰

The homily demands no less; indeed, it demands more because of its unique nature. The homily is not simply an instruction but, being an integral part of the liturgy, it is an act of worship which has a sacramental significance: "Christ is present in the assembly gathered to listen to his word and in the preaching of his minister, through whom the same Lord who spoke long ago in the synagogue at Nazareth now instructs his people."²¹

This is not the place to make a detailed exposition of the nature of the homily. But given these cursory definitions, it is apparent that ministers, who possess authority and the power to define reality and who are seen as symbolic representatives of the holy and as officers of the Church, have a great responsibility to preach. This responsibility is heightened when they are to preach on moral and

¹⁹Gula, *Just Ministry*, 220.

²⁰Gula, *Just Ministry*, 219–20.

²¹Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Homiletic Directory*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014, no. 4.

socio-political issues. The need to preach on these issues may arise due to current events and when people need to hear moral exhortation about these. Preaching and passing moral judgment on such issues can be sensitive and divisive as people hold different stances. However, this task of preaching should not be avoided when the need arises. As the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II) emphasizes, the Church's prophetic mission has an implication on preaching: the Church is tasked to preach prophetically by speaking about society (PCP-II, 346-47).

Gula provides helpful guidelines with regard to this delicate task.²² These guidelines for an ethical preaching on moral issues will be provided below supplemented by further propositions in light of what we have seen so far.

Recognizing the Limitations and Temptations of the Pulpit

The pulpit is not a classroom. In the pulpit, there is no place for immediate feedback and for engaging the audience in a healthy and lively discussion. Therefore, the pulpit places ministers in a position of great power. This is especially true in the homily which is a liturgical action that can only be carried out by the clergy.

Given these and the fact that ministers are seen as symbolic representatives of the holy and as officers of the Church, there is a great temptation to misuse and abuse power, particularly the power to define reality. The absence of immediate feedback can give rise to a temptation to moralize in a "heavy-handed, judgmental way that pushes us to the edge of spiritual abuse." There is, in the words of canon lawyer Archbishop Emeritus Oscar V. Cruz, a "propensity to pontificate."²³ In fact, Fr Joaquin Bernas, SJ notes that many react negatively to clergy speaking about socio-political issues and push for the relegation of the Church to spiritual matters because of the way ministers preach and their aggressive stance.²⁴ The recognition of the inherent limitations and temptations of the pulpit is a necessary first step in preaching responsibly.

Respecting the Parish's Regular Rhythm of Social Involvement and Social Preaching

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* specifies that the homily should take into account the particular needs of the community. The

²²The following guidelines are from Gula, *Just Ministry*, 225-27.

²³ Oscar Cruz, *Churchmen & Politicians*, Manila: CBCP Communications Development Foundation, 2010, 130.

²⁴Joaquin Bernas, "Fundamentals of Church-State Relations," *Opinion, Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 8 March 2010.

homily should be suited to the needs of a specific community and in fact draw inspiration from it. To precipitously preach about socio-political issues to a community which does not have clear commitments to social ministries and which have not established the practice of drawing out the implications of the Gospel to socio-political realities in its regular pace of preaching may be taken negatively. It may be seen as an indictment rather than a call to conversion or an effort to inform consciences. Thus, the minister has the task of discerning what to say, how to say it, and when to say it.

It will also be helpful if ministers would not only preach about socio-political issues but also cultivate attitudes of social awareness and gradually introduce the community to the social dimensions of the Gospel even outside the homily. David Hollenbach suggests that preaching about social issues should become an integral part of the whole social mission of the community to be supplemented by other parts.²⁵ All these will help prepare the community to be more receptive to preaching about socio-political issues.

Modesty in Proposing Prudential Judgments

When ministers recognize that the power they have is heightened in the pulpit, they are called to be humble. While clearly stating the Church's teachings on socio-political issues, ministers must also avoid a "know-it-all" attitude. In the creative words of Hollenbach, "[p]astorally, sounding like a pundit is a kiss of death."²⁶ Humility would also mean that ministers must be willing to learn, especially from the insights and knowledge of the laity who are directly involved in socio-political realities. This includes being modest before empirical data and being ready to accept mistakes and constructive criticisms. Finally, ministers must carefully discriminate the Gospel and the Church's teachings about fundamental moral principles from prudential judgments about what these mean for specific policies or actions.²⁷

Respecting the Experience and Competence of the Congregation

The community to which the minister preaches is a wellspring of wisdom; it is not a community which knows nothing. Indeed, because of its diversity, the congregation has a wealth of knowledge and expertise which no preacher can match. They have the ability to make prudential judgments and ministers ought to encourage and

²⁵David Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights: American Catholic Social Ethics in a Pluralistic World*, New York: Crossroad, 1988, 210.

²⁶Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 210.

²⁷Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 210.

support them and to draw from their knowledge and experience. This is not only a way of promoting moral maturity but also showing the respect that is due to the conscience. Pope Francis teaches the same when he writes that “Christian preaching thus finds in the heart of people and their culture a source of living water, which helps the preacher to know what must be said and how to say it.”²⁸ Responsible preaching on socio-political issues means respecting the experience and capacity of persons to decide.

*Additional Insights from PCP-II*²⁹

Aside from the four guidelines given by Gula, I wish to add some insights from PCP-II. The council stresses the way Christ preached, “powerfully” and by practicing what He preaches. This sets an example of how the Church should go about its preaching. In light of its mission to society, the Church’s preaching must be supported and preceded by its actions and be thoroughly and genuinely prophetic.³⁰ Personal witness of life is a form of preaching in which the minister does not even need to speak.³¹

Furthermore, PCP-II makes clear that the Church should not only criticize and condemn evil in society; it should also enhance, encourage, and support what is good. Too often, ministers forget about the latter and simply focus on the former. Such an attitude is prone to generate negative reactions from society and, if persistently carried out, is not helpful in building dialogue. Finally, PCP-II provides ways on how criticizing and condemning what is evil in society can concretely take place: the Church must serve as a conscience to society, encourage and support what is good, and help to heal its wounds. Even in criticizing, ministers are called to act positively and not in a judgmental and condescending manner.³²

Participating in Organized Assemblies

Participation of ministers in the *Walk for Life* held in the Philippines brings out another question: is it responsible for ministers to participate in organized protests?

Terry Muck exhorts Christians in general and ministers in particular to ask four crucial questions before participating in organized protests. These are:

²⁸Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* [Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World], Vatican City: Libreria Editrice, Vaticana, 2013, no. 139.

²⁹Nos. 346–47.

³⁰PCP-II, no. 346.

³¹Gula, *Just Ministry*, 219.

³²PCP-II, no. 347.

1. How serious is the issue?
2. How reasonable and clear are the goals of the protest?
3. How effective will the protest be and with what side effects?
4. What will be the long-range consequences?³³

Trull notes that Christian social action often fails because these questions are not asked.³⁴ Apart from these questions which address the issue and the protest at stake, in view of pastoral ministers being seen as symbolic representatives, it is also necessary to ask: being an officer of the Church, how will my participation in this protest be perceived by the community of the faithful? Is my participation even necessary in the first place? Will it advance the mission of the Church to serve the need for salvation which should be the defining reality for my ministry? If I participate, how will I do so?

The bottom line is that pastoral ministers should be careful before participating in organized protests and in actual participation in them. This includes what will they say and how will they say it. They are enjoined to exercise prudence which is necessitated by the minister's power to define reality which is accentuated by his authority and being seen as a symbolic representative and an officer of the Church which gives a "sacred weight" to the things he does and says.

At this point, Bernas' insights are helpful. He maintains that while it is not constitutionally wrong for ministers to be involved in socio-political issues, this does not mean that they should do so always. In ordinary circumstances, ministers are expected to devote full-time to the special mission which pervades the totality of their priestly existence. Engaging in a role of leadership or active militancy should be ruled out, unless in concretely extraordinary circumstances, this is really required by the good of the community, and should have the consent of the bishop after consulting with the presbyteral council.³⁵

Virtues for Pastoral Ministers Seeking to Responsibly Engage Socio-Political Issues

Virtue is "an habitual and firm disposition to do the good" (CCC, 1803). As stable dispositions, virtues enable persons to be all that they can be and to actualize the best kind of life they ought to live. A virtuous person is someone considered good or possesses the skills and qualities of character to be what a human person is meant to be. Thus, while there is virtue in behaviour, virtues primarily refer to

³³Terry Muck, "Holy Indignation," *Christianity Today* (21 October 1988) 14-15.

³⁴Trull, *Ministerial Ethics*, 166.

³⁵Bernas, "Fundamentals of Church-State Relations."

qualities or strengths of character. Virtues are favourable to developing our potential. They lead to actions that express us at our best. They connect the person to her actions.³⁶ However, in their primary meaning, virtues are concerned not with the goodness of actions but of the person. These stable dispositions determine the moral quality of persons as agents and are the pathways to actions. As Aristotle would put it, virtuous dispositions make persons as well as their actions good.³⁷

Virtues are important for ministers for three reasons.³⁸ First, because of their nature as habits, virtues, once acquired, give stability to character and momentum to moral living that does not get reversed easily. Persons become what they do. The kinds of habits that ministers form before entering ministry and those that they acquire therein have a great degree of influence on the kind of ministers they will become and the shape their ministry will take.

Second, virtuous dispositions aid ministers to express the goal of ministry in all circumstances most especially in complex and ambiguous ones in which rules and principles do not apply clearly or in private ones where no one is watching. During these times, a minister must be virtuous if he is to strike a balance between his interests and those of others and between acting at the extremes of “always” or “never.”

Finally, virtues make it possible for ministers to fulfil duties or what principles require as true expressions of one’s self. Acting out of a virtuous disposition gives a different quality to actions than simply acting out of duty. The virtuous are dedicated to act as excellently as possible. Minimalism and mediocrity have no place in the virtuous minister for living morally and fulfilling one’s ministry.

In light of these, I suggest three virtues for ministers seeking to engage socio-political issues so that they may do so responsibly. These are courage, humility, and prudence. Rather than treating these virtues extensively, I would like to draw attention to what they mean and what their implications are for ministers seeking to engage socio-political issues.

Courage

Courage is the virtue of a brave heart. It gives the necessary energy, creativity, and strength to appropriately face those things

³⁶Gula, *Just Ministry*, 60.

³⁷Gula, *Just Ministry*, 62.

³⁸For these, see Gula, *Just Ministry*, 64–67.

that threaten us especially those that we would rather not face but know that we must in order to be true to ourselves.³⁹

These threats are not only physical ones but include facing difficult persons, dealing with malicious rumours that threaten to ruin the minister's and the Church's reputation, tackling the temptation to give in to the intimidations of someone more powerful, the threat of social disapproval, compromising personal convictions that leads to loss of self-worth, and the fear of losing one's reputation and job. In these cases, what is needed is "intestinal fortitude" or moral courage.⁴⁰

Conviction anchors courage. It is the "...ability to be our own person and to stand up for what we believe." The courageous minister remains steadfast in the face of threat or loss. This does not mean being unafraid but not letting fear lead to paralysis. This brings us to another defining feature of courage. Beyond a strong conviction, courage moves people to act. In the words of James Keenan, "the courageous rush in and reach out." Standing firm and reaching out are complementary aspects of the same reality: "...the courageous person is unwilling to abandon the person or principle endangered."⁴¹

Courage is a very important, indeed foundational, virtue for pastoral ministers seeking to engage socio-political issues as they are certain to face mixed reactions, including negative ones ranging from civil to contemptuous ones. The examples of the prophets and Jesus Himself show that being a "sign of contradiction" is not easy. Ministers who intend to stand with threatened persons and principles by engaging socio-political issues would need a lot of "intestinal fortitude" as they proclaim God's Word prophetically amidst oppositions.

Consequently, ministers who wish to engage socio-political issues must be prepared; they should not just jump into the situation recklessly or look for trouble.⁴² Courage is a reactive virtue which arises in the face of threats. It does not seek to fight but to protect and rescue when someone or something is threatened.⁴³ Courage, however, is not enough for ministers seeking to engage socio-

³⁹Gula, *Just Ministry*, 111.

⁴⁰Gula, *Just Ministry*, 111-12.

⁴¹James F. Keenan, SJ, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*, Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1996, 83-84.

⁴²Gula, *Just Ministry*, 114 and Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*, 87-88.

⁴³Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*, 86.

political issues responsibly. It is the starting point, but it has to be accompanied and ordered by humility and prudence.

Humility

With *humus* (earth) as the root word of “humility” and “human,” we are reminded that we have been destined for humility from the beginning.⁴⁴ Simply put, humility means being down to earth about one’s self. It is the authentic acceptance of one’s powers and limitations and the willingness to be who we are. Consequently, this involves accepting the fact that we are gifted to do some things but do not possess all the gifts to do everything.⁴⁵

For ministers, this means that they should not “run ahead of their graces” and undertake tasks which are beyond their capabilities. The minister with a humble disposition knows when to say “no” to requests without feeling ashamed and when to ask for help without feeling embarrassed. Lastly, the humble minister is also willing to do what he can. All these would need a healthy dose of self-esteem and honest self-knowledge.⁴⁶

Humility is important for ministers seeking to engage socio-political issues for it directs them to do so responsibly. It tempers their courage to rush in and reach out. In dealing with socio-political issues and living out their courageous convictions, ministers must be reminded that “[s]ecular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to laymen... Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission” (GS 43).

In this significant passage, the Church takes the humble stance of recognizing the limits of its knowledge specifically in the case of its pastors. This stance should be seen and embraced by ministers. This fundamental humble attitude can take two forms.

First of all, they must be willing to listen and to learn, especially from the laity, in order to preach and teach.⁴⁷ Ministers are enjoined to ask for the help of others who have more knowledge without feeling humiliated.⁴⁸ Recognizing their limitations, ministers must also adequately prepare before preaching about or tackling socio-

⁴⁴Gula, *Just Ministry*, 106.

⁴⁵Gula, *Just Ministry*, 107.

⁴⁶Gula, *Just Ministry*, 108.

⁴⁷Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 207.

⁴⁸Gula, *Just Ministry*, 108–9.

political issues. This involves substantial research.⁴⁹ Finally, the humble minister will recognize that he is an “earthen vessel” and so not be afraid to make mistakes. As Hollenbach puts it, “If God is leading the church and its ministers to tackle this new and very challenging form of proclaiming the Word, then God is surely ready to deal with the fact that we are only beginning to learn how to do it.”⁵⁰

Second, the humble disposition espoused by *Gaudium et Spes* can be lived out by ministers by avoiding a “know-it-all” attitude which can lead them to exaggerate their importance and put down others in order to feel superior.⁵¹ In engaging socio-political issues, this can take the form of preaching in a heavy-handed and condemning manner. Preaching or speaking as if the congregation knows nothing should be avoided. Lastly, it is not the function of ministers to give detailed and authoritative solutions for all policy questions that society deals with in its public life.⁵²

In sum, while ministers are called to stand firm with their convictions and to rush in and reach out to persons and principles by courageously engaging socio-political issues, they should do so with humility. Balancing courage and humility is a demanding task; however, the virtue of prudence is there to help the minister.

Prudence

The CCC calls prudence as the “charioteer” of other virtues (no. 1806); it is not just a virtue among others but the executive virtue through which all the other virtues are guided. All acquired virtues are expressed through it since acting virtuously is neither blind nor ignorant but involves the use of freedom and knowledge.

Given this important function of prudence, Keenan, drawing from Aquinas, describes prudence as having absolute priority. Indeed, prudence enjoys virtually the same function and authority over the cardinal virtues that charity does with the theological virtues: “[a]s charity unites the infused virtues, prudence unites and connects the moral virtues.” In short, the “whole matter of moral virtues falls under the one rule of prudence.”⁵³

⁴⁹Trull, *Ministerial Ethics*, 170.

⁵⁰Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 210–11.

⁵¹Gula, *Just Ministry*, 108.

⁵²Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 207.

⁵³James Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2004, 148. Keenan cites *Summa Theologica* I-II, q.65.1, ad.

Prudence is the most important virtue for the minister who seeks to balance courage and humility as they venture into socio-political issues. Prudence brings goodness to life by putting the other virtues into practice “in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reason.” Prudence is the virtue which helps ministers navigate through complex, ambiguous, and unpredictable circumstances where moral rules and principles cannot clearly tell the best way to proceed. The best course of action cannot be reduced to a formula made up of rules and principles due to our morally, socially, and politically complex world. Preaching about or engaging such issues will already generate a plethora of mixed reactions which will further complicate the situation. Prudence is there to help the minister be courageous yet humble at the same time and leading him how to best proceed and exercise good judgment about what is appropriate.⁵⁴

Ministers may know and represent properly what the Church teaches but this does not mean they know how to say it, when to say it, and why should they say it. The prudent minister will examine these and other relevant aspects of the situation to courageously, humbly, and responsibly engage socio-political issues in the best or most fitting way possible according to the context of what is really happening. Prudence in engaging socio-political issues may take several forms.

First, in light of ministers being viewed as symbolic representatives of the holy and as officers of the Church in whatever forum, but most especially the liturgical and public fora, he must be careful about what he says. As an officer of the Church, he must represent the Church’s teachings faithfully. No matter how prophetic or charismatic he is, the minister is representing something more. Consequently, when the minister is giving his personal or private opinion, he must clearly state that he is not speaking on behalf of the Church. Ministers must also be circumspect about context. For instance, discussing one’s personal views with close friends is still different from doing the same with a small group of parishioners. Hollenbach suggests that serious moral reflection on socio-political issues is often best done in the context of adult education, parish reflection and study groups rather than in the pulpit.⁵⁵ Since ministers are called to responsibly witness on behalf of the Church, they must be aware of how their actions and words will affect the common good of the community.⁵⁶ This is especially important when

⁵⁴Gula, *Just Ministry*, 93–94.

⁵⁵Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 215.

⁵⁶Gula, *Just Ministry*, 35.

dealing with socio-political issues which can be a source of scandal, confusion, and division.

Second, the minister must also preach and use his power to define reality prudently. In preaching, ministers should carefully discriminate between the Word of God and the Church's teachings about fundamental moral principles from prudential judgments about the consequences of these for policies. Furthermore, the prudent minister will set forward proposals in ways which stimulate dialogue and recognize that they do not hold the status of dogmas and that Christians of goodwill can legitimately disagree with them. Ministers should also avoid the use of "proof-texting"; scriptures should not be used to condemn others and justify certain actions and realities. The preacher must know the actual meaning of the scriptural passages being preached and have interiorized a holistic theology and spirituality of the totality of the Gospel message, including its social and political implications.⁵⁷

Third, a prudent minister will recognize that not all socio-political issues or moral problems require pastoral comment.⁵⁸ Only those that involve the fundamental rights of persons or the salvation of souls necessitate such a comment (GS, 76).

Finally, ministers who wish to rush in and reach out should not do so recklessly. Before engaging socio-political issues especially through the form of teaching, preaching, and joining in organized protests, the prudent minister will take time to be still and quiet and reflect on what he will say⁵⁹ to avoid saying the wrong things in the wrong place, for the wrong reason, and in a wrong way.

Conclusion

Ordained pastoral ministers cannot remain indifferent towards socio-political issues because of their special share in the prophetic office of Christ and because of the social and political implications of the Gospel. Ministers are enjoined to engage and pass moral judgment on socio-political issues when the need arises, such as when the community seeks their pastoral guidance and when the fundamental rights of persons and the salvation of souls require it.

Nonetheless, just because ministers have this right and duty does not mean that ministers should always involve themselves in socio-political issues and proceed in an arbitrary fashion. Rather, because

⁵⁷Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 209-11.

⁵⁸Trull, *Ministerial Ethics*, 170.

⁵⁹Gula, *Just Ministry*, 95.

ministers have authority and the power to define reality which flows from and is accentuated by them being seen as symbolic representatives of the holy and as officers of the Church, they should engage socio-political issues responsibly. As a general rule, the Church cannot take upon itself the political battle. Instead, the role of the Church and its ministers is to purify reason and reawaken, through rational arguments, spiritual and moral energies.

We have specifically looked at two ways in which pastoral ministers engage socio-political issues: preaching and joining organized assemblies of protests. Both of these practices were seen through the lens of the minister's authority and power to define reality as symbolic representatives of the holy and officers of the Church. In both of these, ministers are not to proceed in an impulsive manner.

In both of these cases, rules, principles, and guidelines may be unclear as to how to best proceed. Thus, ministers who wish to engage socio-political issues should also cultivate virtues to guide them as they seek to navigate through these circumstances. Moral courage is there to help the minister become steadfast in his conviction as he strives to rush in and reach out in defence of threatened persons and principles. Humility directs the minister to use his power to define reality in a humble and responsible manner. Finally, prudence helps the minister balance courage and humility. It assists ministers in determining the right and best thing to do, for the right reason, in the best way according to concrete circumstances.

Ministers who strive to engage socio-political issues should discern well and exercise due prudence. Pastoral discretion is always welcome as ministers represent the Church and its teachings and as they define reality in socio-political matters. They should be reminded to make room for the consciences of the faithful who "are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations." Above all, they should be reminded that ministers "have been called to form consciences, not to replace them."⁶⁰

⁶⁰Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family], Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016, no. 37.