

General elections 2020.

## The Taoiseach and the Pope.

The address that the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar gave in Dublin Castle in occasion of the Pope's visit in 2018 provides an ample opportunity for a serious reflection and a constructive dialogue during these General Election weeks and beyond.

In a crucial passage of his speech the Taoiseach said: "Holy Father, I believe that the time has now come for us to build a new relationship between church and state in Ireland - new covenant for the 21st century. It is my hope that your visit marks the opening of a new chapter in the relationship between Ireland and the Catholic church. Building on our intertwined history, and learning from our shared mistakes, it can be one in which religion is no longer at the centre of our society, but in which it still has an important place".

Fundamental questions emerge from this statement: what is the role of religion in society? And what is the pertinence of this issue during an Election?

We firmly believe that if "to be at the centre of society" means for religion and therefore the Church, to have an hegemonic role within society, this is not where religion should be, according to its very nature and essence.

Instead if "to be central" means to recognise at the very heart of any society the **irreducible value of the person as relationship with the Mystery** with all its consequences, religion cannot be anywhere but at the very centre of any society.

Since the very beginning of Christianity, the Church has advocated its freedom to exist within societies and to implement its real task. The proclaimed function of the Church in history is not to provide men and women with solutions to the problems they encounter on their way, rather it is to educate them to their religious sense. The defence of the freedom of the Church is an essential task for any state. This defence can no longer be understood as the preservation of a position of power but what it truly means: the recognition of the unique contribution the Church brings in dialogue with everybody.

Unfortunately history is full of dramatic examples of reductions and misunderstandings of the nature of the Church and therefore its relationship with the state. But today we have the possibility to learn from "our shared mistakes", as Leo Varadkar said.

Equally, societies all over the world can bear witness to the fruits generated by people of faith, Christian and other, in all fields of human life, as again the Taoiseach recognised in the same speech to the Pope.

### **What do we ask then from politics?**

First of all that, we ask that in the name of a just refusal of any hegemonic claim by any religious entity, politics with its protagonists and narrative will not end up creating and supporting a climate of hostility towards the religious experience. We need a society that "offers a space of freedom where different proposals of meaning can be in dialogue, so that truth seekers might encounter one another and together rediscover the meaning of their existence". (J.Carrón)

In this way the defence of the religious dimension is a good for everybody.

We ask that this dimension and in particular the Christian faith witnessed by men and women, can be allowed to inspire and generate works and initiatives within the society of

Modern Ireland. Let the “dark aspects” of the past and present not build an ideological wall which ultimately will deprive society of the essential contribution provided by the religious experience!

Election time is a special time first and foremost because it gives the opportunity to reflect on the type of society we want to live in. The big issues in this campaign touch the very basic fabric of society: Health, Housing, Homelessness, Childcare, Pensions, Crime, Climate Change, Rural Decline, to mention the hot-button topics in every household.

The approach to these issues must always start from a perception or vision of man and woman which one wants to affirm and defend. This is why this moment is a unique opportunity for a reflection on fundamentals and for an authentic dialogue. It is also a great provocation and an occasion for Christians whether they are directly involved in politics as candidates or member of parties or simply as voters. Christians are called to rediscover what is the real nature and form of their vocation in the world.

So not only is this period an invitation to rediscover what religion and Christianity in particular is all about but also it constitutes an opportunity to break down the many walls of fear and resentment between the Church and the Society/State.

The State today does not need the Church to provide those services and functions She had to provide at the dawn of the new Republic (although the Taoiseach himself, in addressing the Pope, recognises that “Catholic organisations and people inspired by their Catholic faith fill a gap in providing services”). But above all today more than ever the State needs the **religious experience**, in order to recognise, embrace and support an authentic understanding of the human being, which otherwise can be easy prey to manipulations and reductions and therefore exploitation.

**“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”**

The truth and relevance of Jesus’ words certainly are more evident now than ever especially after decades of misunderstandings. But this does not mean that we can conceive a Modern Ireland where the “religious sense” that is the fundamental need for happiness, justice, good, beauty, can be ignored or worse denied. Christians are called to find “a way of being present without a will to dominate or oppress, and at the same time with a commitment to living the faith in reality, in order to show the human benefit of belonging to Christ” (J.Carrón). An authentic religious experience nourishes the hope of a society and the energy to build it. It is not against it.

The way ahead of us is clearly mapped, it can only be a dialogue between two entities both certain of their particular nature and purpose: the Church, certain that what She brings is primarily the announcement of the Presence of God in our midst; the State certain that its ultimate reason and purpose to exist is the defence and edification of the common good.

The Taoiseach in his address to the Pope gave an impressive example of how such a dialogue is the way forward. When commenting on the visit to the Capuchin Day Centre he said:

“Your visit..reminds us of work we still have to do to ensure that the promise of the New Testament is fulfilled, that we rejoice with the truth, always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere. And never fail”.

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