

CHURCH AND POLITICS

Introduction

I was requested to discuss the topic: Church and Politics. This is a very wide topic to discuss in the limited time available. We shall give some few highlights to stimulate our minds for our further discussion even after this session.

Aim of the discussion

My aim is: 1) to foster mutual cooperation and respect between the Church and State since we all serve the same human person. Both the Church and State have a complimentary role to play. To use the analogy of St. Paul in 1Corinthians 3:6, if the State plants the seed of peace, the Church waters it and God makes it grow. 2) We also seek to encourage you the lay Christians to join politics and animate it with the Christian values; do not shy away.

The roles of the Church and State

In Church tradition, some people like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin believed that the Church and State are mere sides of the same coin; that Church leaders are officials of the State. For others like Pope Boniface, the Church is supreme and places the State in a subsidiary position. There are still others, especially in the modern times who believe that the Church and the State must be completely separate, with no interference.

I wouldn't like to engage myself in the discussion of who is greater or smaller. Service to the people is the most important thing. Both institutions – the Church and the State were willed by God for the service of the human person with the aim of forming a fully human society that respects the rights and freedom of its citizens. While remaining separate and independent of one

another, the Church and State should live in cooperation and mutual respect of each other in service to humanity.

The Church owes its origin from Christ. It was instituted to bring the mind of God to humanity and to contribute to the building of values upon which a sound human society (State) should be built. Enlightened by God, the Church seeks to find the best way to live and practice the law of love. If it preaches and promotes justice, love and unity, what will automatically follow is peace and development of the State. Where justice is tampered with, chaos and violence will erupt.

The State on the other hand is also a divine institute established by God to keep law and order and to promote development of the human society by providing social services. Citizens need to get the services they deserve from their taxation. These include provision of drugs in hospitals, prevention and treatment of diseases, improvement of education and infrastructure like roads, protection of the environment from destruction by human activity, only to mention a few.

The Church and State as complementary institutions

Very often, the relation between the Church and the State goes sour/bitter and yet both institutions aim at serving the same humanity. This is due to differences in principles, ideology and political policies they believe in; or differences due to individual temperaments, greed for power, and greed for wealth, malice and hatred.

There is a wrong perception that the Church's duty is solely that of caring for the soul! That it has nothing to do with the social and political life of the people. Many good and able Christians are discouraged to join and influence politics because they always have been cheated, mishandled and made to

suffer to the extent of leaving politics to others. They regard politics as a dirty game and a sin of the first order!!! This is an extreme position we should never embrace. We should never lose hope due to political instability and uncertainty. Stability is possible through good Christians joining politics. It is through you the good Christians that the desired political stability can start taking shape. The Church has to fight against manipulation, corruption, escalating embezzlement and tribal/ethnic discrimination in civil services. This is where the influence of Christians deeply grounded in their faith is highly needed to fight these vices.

Some people think that Christianity has nothing to do with social and political life; that it is to convert the pagans and to care for the souls of the Church members. The trend at times is to desire to separate “spiritual” matters from those considered “worldly.” We forget that Jesus came that we have life in its fullness (John 10:10). The human life has to be considered in its entirety in the spiritual, political, social and economic spheres. The Church is constantly called upon to take an active part in development, in caring for the body and mind of human being. The human person is much more than just his/her soul; he/she has a body which as well needs to be cared for.

The Church must take part in shaping the destiny of the country. It must avoid being merely reactionary; it has to stand out and act in time to guide and build the right kind of human society based on values. Silence is not enough where the image of the human person in society is being disfigured!! It will be interpreted as an approval! It is not enough to say “we will pray.” Practical action should accompany prayer like a Samaritan man who came across a wounded person on the road and helped him (Luke 10:30-37).

As the Church fulfills her prophetic role of being the conscience of the nation, some leaders strongly oppose anybody who uses the pulpit to make a comment on the political and social affairs of the human being!! The Church plays a role of correcting, admonishing and censuring by appealing to peoples' hearts and consciences. It is therefore not interference in politics on the side of the Church when it warns the State that lack of justice and righteousness on public matters leads to disharmony and leads to the disintegration of society. The Church does not deliberately go out to insult people. It is called to point out the wrong and sin, even though people do not like it. The Church cannot soften its message to make it more palatable to those who do not welcome its teaching.

To promote cooperation and harmony, the government should resist the temptation to curb the freedom of the Church to exist, to expand and to preach God's righteousness. It would be hypocrisy on the side of the Church to keep silent when there is lack of justice and peace; when society finds itself face to face with the challenges of power, wealth, corruption, relation between races and tribes; problems of unemployment, prostitution in nation building.

We may ask some questions: who is to guide who; God or Pharaoh? Besides, who is Pharaoh without God? Must Christians obey their rulers without question? If so when? Is the divine right of the rulers absolute? God guides the rulers through the Church as it fulfills its prophetic role.

The Church and the state are both in service to humanity. It would be wrong to make a distinction that the Church is concerned with spiritual affairs per se and the state is concerned with the material governance of the people. The truth is: no demarcation can be made indicating where the Church starts

from and ends. All that the Church does is for the good of the whole human person who has a soul and the body.

Both the Church and the State play a complementary role in service to humanity. The Church has a duty to guide politics in order to realize God's plan in creation. For instance, a lot of destruction due to wars is going on in the world as a result of bad politics. Couldn't a more civilized and better way of discussion be employed instead of wars to save lives and property? In this situation, the Church cannot forget her prophetic role to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. She should continually sustain the human values not to get rotten. The Church and all people of good will should never allow the life of the people to become unbearable.

The God of humanity whom the Church proclaims is the same God and Supreme ruler of all the politicians and the people they subjugate. He is ready to hear the cry of his people. At times God comes down with a mighty hand to rescue the people from their sufferings and hardships which the mighty politicians cannot resist. Take the example of how God intervened in the life situation of the Israelites using the leadership of Moses to confront King Pharaoh. While in Egypt, the Israelites were subjected to hard labor and many other hardships even to the extent of killing the male children so as to control their population growth. When God heard the suffering and pain of the Israelites at the hand of King Pharaoh, He did not look on. He decided to intervene. He said, "I have heard the cry of my people; I will go down and rescue them" (Exodus 3:7). God raised up Moses who stood daily before king Pharaoh asking him to let the Israelites go home, but Pharaoh was not ready to listen until God stepped in with wonders and signs which Pharaoh could not resist.

The Church has the role of being the State's conscience in championing moral issues but also in being able to say where and how a particular State has failed in its God given function. For instance, a wicked ruler, who suppresses the essential freedom of the people, imprisons their mind and denies them liberty to think and act freely has to be guided to realize the truth. It is not in the sense that Christians have the right to impose their standards on the State, but seeks to build and form a Nation based on values and has a conscience which is alive.

Since the Church embraces all people of different beliefs without discrimination, it should not adopt the position of an opposition party or a pressure group. While giving guiding principles, its leaders have to maintain a neutral position. It should not look as if it is fighting for a certain political party but must sufficiently remain independent of all political and economic systems. Its role is to uphold principles, values and attitudes rather than systems. It provides checks and balances on government policies for the good of the people.

To warn Church leaders to only pray and keep out of politics because it is a dirty game would be telling them to abscond from their prophetic duty of proclaiming the gospel; that the Church should maintain the status quo even when humanity is suffering. Such a scenario is tantamount to saying that God does not care about our social and political problems, and that he is only interested in the salvation of souls. God is not a God of souls only, but of the body as well. A true Christian is the one who is truly in the world without being of the world; one who is truly holy and truly in the world.

What needs to be stressed is the friendly relationship and mutual respect between the Church and State. These two institutions have a lot of important common ends towards the human person. They should work

together to build a healthy and viable society and foster moral and material development of the people.

The Church and the State consist of the same individuals and officers they serve. They should be allowed to perform their duties both to the Church and the State. This is only possible when there is harmony and mutual respect. Such a relationship will depend on each recognizing the other as an independent and distinct body in their entire office and function. The State must recognize that the Church has a divine right from God to correct and admonish without threat and interference. The Church has the right to expect legal recognition and protection from the State. The Church too should recognize that the administration of public affairs belongs to the State. What is done, however should not contradict the will of God.

Today, it is unfortunate to note that due to political mismanagement, funds are always diverted to personal needs. We have the minority who control the country's resources while the majority languishes in abject poverty. The Church cannot afford to sit back and relax without giving guidance. It has to give correction and direction.

However, what is noted on the side of the Church is that at times some of its leaders are slow in giving the guidance needed under the cover of taking care and being prudent. Some individual Church leaders find themselves being driven by opinions advanced by politicians in their favor! And yet it is clearly the Church's duty to teach the eternal truth and not to repeat the popular slogans advanced by politicians.

In the spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, attention should be paid to how correction and guidance to the State is given. Arrogance, pride, seeking popularity especially through the press should all be avoided. We should mind what we say, how we say it, where we say it and to whom we say it.

This is intended to avoid being misunderstood and engage in uncalled for confrontation with the State.

Vatican Council II in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) nn. 5, 44 says that with the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire people of God, especially its pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, interpret the many voices of our time, in the light of the plan of the creator, so that humanity can come to solutions that are fully human.

Mwai Kibaki then a minister for Finance and Economic Planning challenged Church leaders that *“A modern Church is expected to be outspoken because other groups in society must be cautious. We must have at least some organization which speaks up for the right of man regardless of what happens tomorrow ... an active organization which speaks of our problems which we face today. I cannot think of any other organization better placed than a Church to play that role.”* (Refer to the Annual General Meeting of the National Christian Council of Kenya in May 1971 held at Limuru Conference centre).

Conclusion

I want to conclude by identifying some two issues that need consideration in order to enhance the cooperation between the Church and the State.

1. There is the issue of the Church becoming too comfortable with the State when the citizens are suffering. The Church loses its prophetic mission of being the conscience of the nation. It becomes a mere government department with the responsibility of offering prayers for the leaders. The Church has a mission of being the voice of the voiceless. It should always come out to defend and protect the vulnerable. Unfortunately, sometimes Churches and some Church leaders deliberately fail to adopt a critical

approach to State matters that subjugate the citizens and give a blind blessing to every action. This must change.

2. Concentrating too much authority in the hands of the minority leads to authoritarian rule. When power is concentrated in the hand of a few people, they freely use it for their own benefits. Other interests in the country that are economic, cultural, scientific and even religious become dependent on the favor of the powerful minority. The electoral system may equally become deceitful when it is used to confirm those in power. Free discussion is also curtailed. The only valid opinions are those held by those few in authority. This calls for a regular change of power at defined intervals.

Fr John Baptist Kaganda
Executive Secretary
Pastoral/Liturgy department
Uganda Episcopal Conference