

POLITICS AND RELIGION

The individual rights of all citizens guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States are often compatible with the inalienable rights of each person endowed with human dignity by our Creator. The teachings of the Catholic Church on natural rights and duties can be found in various Papal Encyclicals throughout the ages and were summarized by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical, *Peace on Earth* (1963). He states that a person has rights pertaining to life: food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and social services. Consequently persons have the right to be looked after in the event of ill health, disability stemming from work, widowhood, old age, enforced unemployment or whenever one is deprived of the means of livelihood through no fault of their own. Pope John XXIII also spoke of rights to moral and cultural values, to worship God according to one's conscience, to choose freely one's state in life, economic rights, rights of meeting and association, rights to emigrate and immigrate, and political rights. He further states that these natural rights and their corresponding duties are universal, inviolable and altogether inalienable. We are responsible to be our brother's keeper.

Secular Governments are responsible for protecting these universal rights by law for all its citizenry. Governments must also create an environment in which the means are available for its citizens to exercise their rights. Is the government therefore responsible for actually providing its citizens with the means as well as the rights? Not necessarily. Let's take the example of healthcare. Provisions by the government and how much provision will depend upon what the people vote to provide its citizenry. If we do not like the vote, we have the right to protest it. This is the political side of the question. We have a government of the people, by the people and for the people. On the religious side of this question, the Church teaches that we all have the right to medical care. But if the government does not provide healthcare, how will the people access the means to this right? We must not forget that it was first of all through the charity of the Catholic Church and her people that she provided hospitals and social services to care for the public without regard to race, religion or social status. The government, the Church and other private institutions can provide healthcare.

Difficulties may arise however when secular government violates the universal rights of its individual citizens. There was a time in our history that government was very much aligned with the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. You could almost always depend that the Judicial, Legislative and Executive branches of Government would protect the rights of all its citizens. This is not the case today. Let's take the example of individual religious freedom. Religious freedom is a political issue and protected by the Constitution of the United States. It is also a moral right for Catholics and for all people. When government can decide for us that insurance companies must pay for medical procedures to which some medical personnel conscientiously object, the political issue is also a moral issue. We Catholics object on moral grounds as well as Constitutional grounds. We do not accept it and we have a right to protest it on both grounds. Neither will we relinquish our right to make moral decisions on our jobs and in our lives. The role of Bishop and priest in the Church is to teach, govern and sanctify. We do not advise the Catholic population on the person to vote for in elections. We do have the right and the responsibility to publically exercise our role as religious leaders when moral issues surface in the political arenas that violate the moral teachings of the Catholic Church.