

ARCHDIOCESE OF GLASGOW



A SIGN OF CONTRADICTION: REFLECTIONS ON CHURCH AND STATE IN A TURBULENT YEAR IN SCOTTISH PUBLIC LIFE ARTICLE BY CARDINAL T.J. WINNING FOR THE SPECTATOR

A few years ago, during a meeting with Pope John Paul II, I asked him why it was that some of the new religious movements in the Church are so successful. His reply was simple but memorable. He said: "Perhaps because they are a greater sign of contradiction."

I have never forgotten that answer. It reminded me of Chesterton's line in *The Everlasting Man*. "A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it."

"Sign of Contradiction" could be termed an appropriate description of the Church's teaching on the vexed question of human sexuality and the dignity of the human person. That sign of contradiction involves a combination of doctrinal rigour and humane insight.

That combination should be the hallmark of the Church's teaching on these subjects.

Contrary to popular opinion, moral rigour and human compassion are not mutually exclusive concepts. Indeed an imbalance between these tensions can lead to a deformation of the truth.

In recent years there has been a tendency among some Christians to view the Church's proclamation of the truth about human life and sexuality as somehow contrary to compassion and tolerance. To make any reference to the notions of right and wrong, is, they feel, an affront to those who might disagree with such assertions. Today society seems to prefer varied options to right answers.

Yet that mis-placed compassion is a dangerous mistake.

Granted, it is not the job of the Christian to judge his brother or sister. However it is the Christian's role to point out – as an act of charity – any error or wrong into which one's brother or sister may be falling. It is not intolerant or cruel if I point out to a friend who has had too much to drink that he or she should not drive a car. I am not judging the person when I say that I will not travel in a vehicle being driven by a drunk! I am simply helping the person understand the error of his ways.

Similarly when I, as a priest, advise someone that a particular lifestyle choice is neither healthy nor in conformity to their innermost good as a person, I am not acting as a heartless judge, but rather offering a fraternal correction, based on my respect and concern for my brother or sister.

In the recent debates over homosexuality, teenage pregnancies and euthanasia the reason for the Church's interventions has been overlooked by many.

The Church has been exalted by some for standing up for "standing up for what is right", and abused by others for "legitimising prejudice".

The latter accusation is not only groundless but offensive.

Just as the Church stood up for freedom against the evil of communism, so today it stands up for freedom against the snares of secularism, unfettered capitalism and egotism. It does so for one basic reason. It wants what is best for people.

It is because the Church *loves* the homosexual man or woman that it cares enough to say that gay sex is wrong, because such behaviour is not good for the human person. This is precisely why it is condemned in Sacred Scripture. Far from liberating a person it ensnares them to a lifestyle that can never respond to the deepest longings of the human heart.

It is because the Church *loves* the drug addict that we can say clearly that such behaviour is bad for the individual and bad for society. Once more it provides a delusory escape which is incapable of answering the deepest desires of the human heart.

In the public sphere it is the Church's *love* for humanity and concern for the common good which obliges it to speak out when human life and when marriage and family life are threatened.

Who could have believed at the start of the current debate on section 28 that within a few months we would have gone from a change in the law ostensibly being proposed to prevent bullying, to a situation where the Scottish Executive formally refuses to endorse marriage as something which should be encouraged?

The Church cares enough about society, to say that such a ducking of responsibility is wrong. It is wrong because it is bad for society, bad for individuals and bad for youngsters facing the prospect of growing up in an ideals-free moral vacuum.

To promote marriage and family life is not to despise or deprecate those who have lost a partner through divorce, death, abandonment or separation. Such an assertion is insulting and absurd.

It is not because the Church wants to encroach into the territory of secular powers that the Church speaks out on moral issues. It is because the Church *loves* that the Church speaks out.

And so when we criticise the loop-hole in law which we believe could allow back-door euthanasia; when we say that handing out abortifacient pills is wrong, we do so because we care.

People did not elect a Scottish Parliament to push through an agenda of political correctness which runs counter to the innate values and traditions of our people.

No pre-election manifesto declared war on the marriage-based family, yet that is exactly what has been done in recent weeks. We are lifting a ban on the promotion of homosexuality while at the same time imposing a de facto ban on the promotion of marriage!

Faced with these assaults on life and on the family the Church has a duty to speak out. On these priority issues, the politicians (with a few notable exceptions) have let us down badly.

Of course, in its first year of operation the Scottish Parliament has also achieved some positive results – most notably by lifting, at least to some extent, the burden of tuition fees from students. Other achievements have been made on land reform and easing the financial pressures on relatives of incapable adults.

But, as one commentator put it: "There has been so much emphasis on issues of political correctness that there was no time left for issues of political importance."

It would be very easy, in this situation, for the Church to ride along on the crest of a wave of political correctness, uttering mealy-mouthed platitudes on every subject under the sun.

Indeed many of the Church's most vociferous critics would like to see it reduced to such a pitiful parody of itself.

To follow the politics of the parapet – ducking every time an issue of concern is raised – is unworthy of Christians. For them it is simply not an option.

In recent months I have been very heartened by the support from people all over Britain, who write to me, and who remind me in their letters that they are not Roman Catholics.

I have been very, very aware that out there, in every corner of our land, there are people who have strong values, who are committed to building up a society with all the qualities that we usually associate with the great religions of the world... basic family life, marriage, respect for human life, the dignity of every human being and a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.

So I have hope for our country. But people of faith and of upright values need to become more involved in public life, prepared to play their part in shaping the future of the nation.

By responding to the great moral issues of the day, such people inadvertently become that sign of contradiction to which the Pope so often refers.

It's not an easy challenge that I lay down to such people. But didn't Jesus say somewhere that the world hated Him too, and didn't he warn His followers not to expect anything different?

In an age when standing up for His values is an increasingly hazardous occupation, I find consolation in that.

