Catholic Social Thought and Policy Applications

It is important to understand how Catholic social teaching approaches the uses of, and distinctions between, principles and policy applications in Catholic social thought. Then we must consider how we bring these teachings into the public square. The first distinction, made thirty years ago by the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter on economic justice, is between principle and policy application. For example, there is a principle in Catholic social teaching about the right of workers to receive a decent family wage.¹ That principle is distinct from the question of whether to support a particular minimum wage bill at the federal, state, or local level, which would be a policy application. The bishops indicate that there are an important set of bridges, leading to prudential judgments, which guide us from principle to policy applications:

In focusing on some of the central economic issues and choices in American life in the light of moral principles, we are aware that the movement from principle to policy is complex and difficult and that although moral values are essential in determining public policies, they do not dictate specific solutions. They must interact with empirical data, with historical, social, and political realities, and with competing demands on limited resources. The soundness of our prudential judgments depends not only on the moral force of our principles, but also on the accuracy of our information and the validity of our assumptions.²

Then, the bishops conclude that because of the bridges from principle to policy applications, their “moral authority” for Catholics is different:

Our judgments and recommendations on specific economic issues, therefore, do not carry the same moral authority as our statements of universal moral principles and formal church teaching; the former are related to circumstances that can change or that can be interpreted differently by people of good will. We expect and welcome debate on our specific policy recommendations. Nevertheless, we want our statements on these matters to be given serious consideration by Catholics as they determine whether their own moral judgments are consistent with the Gospel and with Catholic social teaching.³

The second important distinction, also made in the pastoral letter on economic justice, is in the approach to the audiences whom we address as Church:

We write, then, first of all to provide guidance for members of our own Church as they seek to form their consciences about economic matters. No one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world. At the same time we want to add our voice to the public debate about the directions in which the U.S. economy should be moving. We seek the cooperation and support of those who do not share our faith or tradition. The common bond of humanity that links all persons is the source of our belief that the country can attain a renewed public moral vision.⁴

This distinction affects how we seek to persuade Catholics and others in this pluralistic society. It determines the use of moral reasoning, logic, data, life and ministry experience, official Catholic teaching, and even the Scriptures. With Catholics, we make an appeal to Church teaching and conscience, recognizing the distinction between principle and policy application, but urging careful consideration of the policy applications. With “people of the book,” the appeal should include references to Scripture. With other-than-Catholics, the Church often appeals to reason and human dignity, widely accepted values and principles, and a hope that the evidence compiled in the bridges to policy application are convincing in themselves.

ENDNOTES

³ Ibid., no. 135.
⁴ Ibid., no. 27.