Is Conscience King?

Amelia J Uelmen
Science in public life is the reasoning behind Planned Parenthood v. Casey, the 1992 U.S. Supreme Court decision reaffirming a woman’s constitutional right to choose to have an abortion. According to the plurality opinion, one of the reasons for upholding this right was that “the abortion decision may originate within the zone of conscience and belief … The destiny of the woman must be shaped to a large extent on her own conception of her spiritual imperatives and her place in society.”

As Justice Stevens explained in a separate opinion, “a woman who has, in the privacy of her thoughts and conscience, weighed the options and made her decision cannot be forced to reconsider all, simply because the State believes she has come to the wrong conclusion.”

Public disagreements about questions of conscience are also invoked as reasons for keeping religious principles in a “private” sphere, walled off from conversations about politics and public policy. During the election of 1960, for example, then Senator John F. Kennedy responded to suspicions about how a Catholic president might face a crisis of conscience between allegiance to his country and allegiance to religious authority by assuring citizens: “I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair … I do not speak for my church on public matters—and the church does not speak for me.”

In his unsuccessful run for president in 2004, Senator John Kerry also drew a sharp distinction between his personal beliefs and his role as a public official. As he described in one interview, on one hand he opposed abortion: “I believe life does begin at conception.” But on the other hand, “I can’t take my Catholic belief, my article of faith, and legislate it on a Protestant or a Jew or an atheist … We have separation of church and state in the United States of America.”

What is wrong with this picture? One of the problems at the root of the argument that an unborn fetus should not be

Helping the political order open up to broader and more humane horizons

BY AMY UELMEN

“Conscience is inviolable, and no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to conscience,” explains a 1971 Vatican document. But what does this mean for political life and political choices?

In our society today the inviolability of conscience is frequently invoked, taking complete priority over religious teachings and guidance. In politics you often hear that no one should impose their “personal morality” on others, since doing so would interfere with decisions that others have made according to their own conscience.

One example of this vision of conscience and politics is helping the political order open up to broader and more humane horizons.
accorded the rights and legal protections of a human life is a mistaken understanding of “conscience.” As Pope John Paul II criticized in the 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), “The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment, which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil.” Thus one arrives to the point of claiming that “one’s moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience.” The reasoning in the *Casey* decision noted above is a good example of this mistake.

The warning in Cardinal John Henry Newman’s famous 1874 *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* is quite timely: “Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations.”

What is the problem with the understanding of “conscience” as applied to discussions of law and public policy? First, the law often steps in, even when decisions originate within “the zone of conscience and belief” or on the basis of one’s own “spiritual imperatives”—especially when one’s action poses a substantial threat to public safety, health or order. For example, when there is a serious risk of harm or death, courts have consistently rejected claims of conscience in cases where parents refuse medical treatment, such as blood transfusions, for their children.

This very limited understanding of conscience also runs the risk of fostering a culture in which individuals are completely closed within themselves. As then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained in an insightful and penetrating 1994 essay, *Conscience and Truth*, this limited understanding of conscience functions as a justification for social conformity and a “protective shell into which man can escape and there hide from reality.”

How can we recover a sense of conscience that leads not to closure within ourselves, but opens us to the broader dimensions of truth and human community? Perhaps the first step is to understand conscience as a place in which one converses not only with oneself, but with God, in order to discover God’s loving guidance for all aspects of human life.

As John Paul II explained in *Veritatis Splendor*: “Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. In this, and not in anything else, lies the entire mystery and dignity of the moral conscience, in being the place, the sacred place, where God speaks to man.” It is in openness to this conversation, John Paul II explained, that we find the source of true judgments of conscience.

What role might a well-formed conscience play in public discussions about politics and public policy? Pope Benedict XVI’s recent encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, provides some insight into possible connections.

Like all individuals, those entrusted with the political task of achieving justice are always in danger of a certain “ethical blindness.” Here, according to Benedict, is the place where “politics and faith meet.” “Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God—an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason.... From God’s standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself.”

Understood in this way, religious values and teachings are not an obstacle but a gift for political reflection. It is not a matter of the Church taking over political functions and roles, but of helping, as Benedict explains, “to form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act...
accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.”

What are our duties when the political order is out of harmony with moral law? Writing from a prison cell after protesting segregation laws, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail offers an eloquent example of conscience as a witness to the profound link between the society’s laws and the moral law. “How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust?” King wrote. “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”

King went on to set forth criteria for protesting against segregation laws: “One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.”

St. Thomas More, the patron saint of statesmen, is perhaps the example par excellence of a readiness to pay the price for witnessing to the convictions of conscience, the result of a life-long conversation with God. When King Henry VIII manipulated his power to assume control over the Church of England, More resigned from his post as chancellor and was eventually imprisoned and executed for refusing to sign an oath that recognized the king’s supremacy in spiritual affairs. More’s last words are often quoted as a deep and even defiant tension between political life and conscience: “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.” However, careful scholarship reveals that the actual words were “and God’s first.” Perhaps the “and,” more than the “but,” captures the thrust of More’s life, in which his conversation with God, in the depths of his conscience, informed his service to humanity through politics.

Heroes such as Martin Luther King and Thomas More help us to see that conversations with God in the intimacy of one’s conscience are not only a guide for individual decisions and choices but a gift for the political community as a whole. Both were able to bring the light of faith and—in the words of Pope Benedict—their own “encounter with the living God” into a world suffering from “ethical blindness.” Doing so, they challenged the political order to open up to broader and more humane horizons. Both continue to shine as beacons of light and hope for the struggles of our political order today.

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second, make universal brotherhood the inspiring motivation of politics.”

“Begin to live in this way among yourselves,” she explained, “loving one another, respecting your diversities, appreciating them as riches for the benefit of everyone.” When the group fully agreed to adhere to her guidance, the Movement for Unity in Politics was born.

The growth of this movement has been rather extraordinary during the past decade. It has been called “an international workshop” in which politicians work together among citizens, officials and scholars who represent different political parties. They choose to give brotherhood the priority, then make their political decisions.

Currently this movement is active in 15 nations. Its main characteristics are its work to fill in the distance between citizens and institutions, and its internationality. The problems of the environment, communication, the market economy and

the 10 new nations, we had to compare our own standards for noise pollution to those with the rest of Europe.

Prior to 2002, there had been no common legislation in Europe regarding noise pollution. The European nations each had different provisions for the level of pollution according to their own ways of protecting the environment, and the data was not always consistent with reality.

In the course of my work, I realized that it was common practice to base our reports on mutual distrust. I told myself: “If we want to build a united Europe, we should not base it on mistrust, but on sincere openness and mutual exchange.”

The original idea of the founding fathers was that the European Union—as the name indicates—be a community, not a consortium of interests. These values were sometimes or often lost in practical applications. What could I do?

Working on technical agreements with experts in the European Union, I sincerely tried to highlight problems that still existed. As head of the Hungarian delegation, I constantly chose to consult

with my colleagues during our meetings in order to respond to questions together. This new style was appreciated by everyone, and during the first break after our report they proposed that the next meeting be held in Hungary.

We prepared to welcome them and make them feel part of one European family by—in addition to imparting technical information—providing visits to the cultural highlights of Budapest. Thanks to this hospitality, different matters were addressed with mutual understanding during the sessions that followed. We collaborated in drawing up new regulations on noise pollution for the European Union, and a solution emerged that truly reflects the thoughts and aspirations of all member states.

I tried to actively participate in the legislative process, taking advantage of all opportunities and keeping the idea of brotherhood in mind. The final outcome emphasized that member states hold mutual responsibility for each other paramount. The new regulation, in fact—which keeps in mind each nation’s characteristics and allows each nation full autonomy—prescribes a uniform way to measure, gather and present data results. In this way, it is possible to verify and evaluate the level of noise pollution everywhere in Europe.

On the basis of this method, applied on a European level, we are now ready to seek a solution as a community for our nation, which is becoming more and more polluted. It is a new and important step in building a truly united community.

—Mihály Berndt

May 2, 1996: Italian politicians with Chiara Lubich when the Movement for Unity in Politics was founded. Below left: Mihály Berndt from Budapest
Politics Calling

A South Korean housewife finds herself an intermediary for politicians and promotes values

After hearing about the Movement for Unity in Politics, I asked myself: “Where do I begin? What can I do as a housewife, as mother of three children?”

I found the names of newly elected Korean politicians on the Internet—each had their own website—and I read about their thoughts and programs in order to discover the positive elements of each. I also prayed for each of them. Then I personally contacted some of them, inviting them to participate in the Focolare youth festival held in Korea in 2004.

Then, together with others who share my ideal of unity, we went to the parliament building to visit several politicians and let them know about the Movement for Unity in Politics.

In September 2004, we had our first meeting. It was attended by members of parliament from both the current administration and the opposition, as well as other government officials. There were Catholics, Protestants, and one Buddhist. It was a moment for positive exchanges among everyone.

One congressman stated that Chiara Lubich’s words—“Politics is the love of all loves because it is true service that unifies the efforts of all for the common good”—were a shock for him. He had always viewed politics as a struggle between parties. At the conclusion, the politicians agreed to meet every two months.

Subsequently, a Buddhist congressman decided to organize a forum in parliament titled, “How to Achieve Coexistence in Politics.” It was open to political officials of all religions and political parties, and he invited Focolare representatives, whom he introduced as “people who love politics.”

On the first anniversary of this initiative, along with 15 of the closer congress members, we decided to invite all members of parliament to meet. This time an additional 40 politicians attended and discovered a new way to work in politics, a politics based on respect and love for each other.

—Angela Joo

The Other Paraguay

A consultant for farmers and municipalities gets politically active

Paraguay is a nation like many others—a mosaic made up of a wide variety of people in a nation divided in two: the city and the countryside, development and poverty, culture and ignorance.

In my own life, I have gone through different stages. The first was “passion.” I got my first job when I was 14, participating in marches against the dictatorship and taking my first steps in a political party.

Then came the second stage, “disappointment.” There were betrayals, inconsistencies and my own political inability, along with the feeling that it wasn’t really possible to change anything.
The third stage was fundamental: “choice”—the choice to love always, according to the Focolare’s spirituality of unity. I had met young people of the Movement in the past, and what I learned from them now led me to view political activity as a means of transforming society.

In the year 2000, after a long, troubled period, I established an organization with a group of friends who were already involved in the field of sustainable development. This was the beginning of “Fundación yvy Porã” (the beautiful land foundation), which has promoted the development of dozens of projects in the past six years throughout Paraguay that sustain communities of small entrepreneurs, farmers, craftsmen, women and indigenous people in urban and rural centers.

I was still unsatisfied. I wanted the whole national and international socio-political reality to be clarified by the light of the spirituality of unity. Together with other politicians in the Movement for Unity in Politics, I started preparing for the Latin American meeting of mayors, which was held in Rosario, Argentina (see Living City, January 2005). We felt it was the opportune moment to present brotherhood as a political doctrine to Paraguayan society. A widely read national newspaper devoted a page to this meeting with the headline “The Other Paraguay.”

More than 1,000 politicians participated in the meeting, including 119 mayors, 168 council members, parliament members, and national and local government officials from 14 countries. The 16 mayors from Paraguay who participated were very impressed with the meeting and proposed a collaborative project among the various municipalities. On July 30, 2005, “Paraguay Friendship Day,” they established a protocol of understanding and “fraternal twinning” in order to support and promote an exchange of local development policies. This agreement was signed by 22 municipalities—an unprecedented event in Paraguay.

We then started meeting periodically to examine the idea of brotherhood among politicians. We are now developing a school of civic and political formation for young people in Paraguay.

—Cesar Romero

A Prayer for Global Harmony
Annual service for the U.N.’s 61st General Assembly

BY MARY K. BARILE

Whilst events in the city of New York marking the fifth anniversary of 9/11 were winding down, people gathered uptown for the annual prayer service marking the opening of the 61st General Assembly of the United Nations. A fine September afternoon accompanied the many diplomats, delegates, staffs and other guests to Holy Family Church. A Russian Orthodox bishop and Russian Orthodox priests, Maronite and Armenian Orthodox priests, a Greek Melchite Archimandrite, Lutheran, Episcopal, Anglican ministers, a rabbi and an imam were present. The pastor, Father Robert J. Robbins, lead the clergy procession as Buxtehude’s Praeludium rang out. In his opening words, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the U.N., Archbishop Celestino Migliore, commented on the many friends and acquaintances who had told him, “We want to come and pray, too, because we believe in the U.N. We want God to change our hearts so that all of us will work passionately for the betterment of humanity.”

The message of Pope Benedict XVI, read by the Archbishop encouraged those gathering for the General Assembly that they be “sustained in their efforts to build a future of justice, freedom and peace for the whole human family.”

Bishop Gerald Walsh represented Cardinal Edward Egan, Archbishop of New York. Throughout the world, he noted, there are cries of poverty and pleas for peace and dialogue. “It is the hope of many,” he said, “that the United Nations will continue its efforts to respond to the pleas of the poor and through honest dialogue will produce a world with peace and justice for all nations.”

In his final year as U.N. Secretary-General, Kofi Annan was once again present at this annual event. He graciously thanked all for the prayers of the last 10 years and commented, “Spiritual and religious practices differ widely, but at heart we are dealing in universal values: to be merciful, to be tolerant, to love thy neighbor.” He concluded, “Let us pray that whatever challenges confront us, we may make this indispensable instrument as effective as it can be, in the interests of the people it exists to serve.”

The choir broke out with “Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies.” Evening had come and the service drew to an end with a final blessing on this anniversary of 9/11. The hymn continued, “Abide with me: fast falls the eventide.” Abide with us, Lord, for all of humanity.