

Recognising and Calling Out Demagoguery

Dr John Kleinsman

'What is demagoguery?' The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "the action of winning support by exciting the emotions of ordinary people rather than by having good or morally right ideas."

Put simply, it is an approach adopted by those who use their powers of persuasion to appeal to people's passions rather than their reason. It includes tactics such as scapegoating, exaggerating of dangers and the use of rhetoric to arouse prejudices so as to drown out reasoned deliberation and exploit social divisions. Demagogues prioritise emotional appeal over honest, constructive and evidence-based rhetoric.

One of the recognisable characteristics of demagoguery is to create a distorted focus on identities; labelling people as either 'good' or 'bad' while simultaneously demanding un-thinking loyalty to the in-group. In some cases, this also involves scapegoating particular groups – playing upon people's fears and/or resentments to create an 'us versus them' narrative.

Another strategy of demagogues is to treat complex issues as if they result from one, simple cause that can be solved by one, simple cure. The political catch cry 'Getting tough on crime' is a classic example of this.

A further example of demagoguery at play in Aotearoa is the assertion that 'we are all born equal and we should never be treated differently by the law'.

This notion was to the fore recently in debates about the merits of special Māori wards for local body councils, with some describing them as reflecting a corrosive obsession with people's race and others describing attempts to remove them as a racist targeted attack on Māori. How, as Catholics, do we respond to these radically different perspectives in a reasoned way while avoiding simplistic, emotive responses that exacerbate social divisions?

In 2023, the New Zealand bishops released a teaching document titled *Te Kahu o te Ora – a Consistent Ethic of Life*.¹ In that document, the bishops reinforce the key Catholic belief that God has endowed every human life with an inestimable and innate dignity that is unconditional and inviolable, *regardless of a person's background, abilities or circumstances*; "**te tapu i te tangata**". This belief, one of the key principles of Catholic social teaching, is regarded by the bishops as "the most important principle because it is from our dignity as human persons that all other rights and responsibilities flow".²

At the same time, however, *Te Kahu o te Ora* states that while the intrinsic dignity conferred by God is our moral stepping-off point, "human sacredness and dignity are endowed not only by what is intrinsic but also by what is extrinsic to us. That is, it is endowed in and through the lived experience of our physical relationships – **te tapu o te tangata** ... the tapu we enjoy because we are embodied social beings." What this highlights is that *respect for personal human dignity must infuse every aspect of our lives and world*.

In other words, intrinsic dignity and equality have a social dimension. This insight is so critical to Catholic social teaching that it is embodied in another key principle of Catholic social justice, the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.

For Catholics, therefore, there is no inherent contradiction between maintaining belief in the 'equality' of all while, simultaneously, adopting policies and laws that give 'preference' to some in *the name of establishing equality* – that is, as a 'means' to furthering the equality that belongs to all.

Looked at like this, we can understand that the good of society as a whole – the common good, to identify a further key principle of the Catholic tradition of social justice – *requires* that we look at public policy and political structures in terms of how they impact those who are impoverished.

Critically, as Pope Leo XIV wrote in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Dilexi te*, poverty takes many forms:

... the poverty of those who lack material means of subsistence, the poverty of those who are socially marginalized and lack the means to give voice to their dignity and abilities, moral and spiritual poverty, cultural poverty, the poverty of those who find themselves in a condition of personal or social weakness or fragility, the poverty of those who have no rights, no space, no freedom. (n.9)

That Māori, as an ethnic group, are overwhelmingly worse off according to a range of measures – in areas such as health, education, socio-economic well-being, addiction and incarceration – than other ethnic groupings in Aotearoa is beyond dispute. The statistics do not lie.

A key to overcoming these disparities is to ensure that the voices of the marginalised are present at the tables where policy decisions are made. (See *Dilexi te*, n.81) As Pope Francis wrote so eloquently in *Fratelli Tutti*, equality is not achieved "by an abstract proclamation that 'all men and women are equal'. Instead, it is the result of the conscious and careful cultivation of fraternity." (n.104)

As we reflect on the social and structural causes of societal inequality, we must both recognise and call out the over simplistic, emotive and divisive rhetoric of demagoguery. Equally, we must strive to implement structures that will meaningfully address poverty with its many different faces, including the introduction of 'preference', where necessary, as a means to bringing about equality in real life.

Dr John Kleinsman is kaitohu/director of the Nathaniel Centre for Bioethics – Te Kupenga

References

- 1 Available at: <https://www.catholic.org.nz/assets/Consistent-Ethic-of-Life-booklet-26-September-2023.pdf>
- 2 See <https://www.catholic.org.nz/social-action/principles/#:~:text=Every%20single%20person%20is%20created,and%20its%20stability%20never%20undermined.>