

LEFT, RIGHT, PRUDENCE, PRINCIPLE, AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL DOCTRINE

J. Budziszewski

First Things (7 October 2014)

A long-running battle between the so-called Catholic left and the so-called Catholic right concerns which political issues the Church should speak about and which ones she shouldn't. One crucial distinction is that teaching the basic principles of Catholic social doctrine go to the heart of her charism, but she has no special expertise in prudential judgments about how to apply them.

For example, the Church rightly insists that the effect of laws and policies on the poorest and most vulnerable must be considered before their effect on other groups. This is a principle of social doctrine. But she is not qualified to say whether a high minimum wage would help the poor by raising their incomes, or hurt them by throwing marginally skilled laborers out of work. This is a judgment of prudence.

As my choice of example may suggest, I think the Church often blurs this distinction. After all, the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops thinks that it *is* qualified to analyze the effects of the minimum wage.

So when a friend told me about an article in *America*, which according to my friend denied that the distinction between principle and prudence has merit anyway, I expected to disagree with it.

Well, I disagreed with many things in the article, but to my surprise, it didn't deny that distinction. It was actually making a point about a different one, between social evils and intrinsically evil acts. But in the course of the argument, it came very close to a third distinction, and that one is crucial.

Could unraveling these three distinctions help Catholics who want to be faithful to the teachings of the Church but who disagree about governmental social policy come a little closer? I hope so. Let us try.

The article, originally titled "[A Church for the Poor](#)," is by the most rev. Robert W. McElroy, auxiliary bishop of San Francisco. He writes, "It is frequently asserted, particularly in election years, that issues pertaining to intrinsic evils do not necessitate prudential judgment, while other grave evils like war, poverty or the unjust treatment of immigrants are merely prudentially laden issues on which people of good will can disagree." But "the truth is that prudence is a necessary element of any effort to advance the common good through governmental action."

In other words, Bishop McElroy *accepts* the distinction between basic principles of Catholic social doctrine and prudential judgments about how to apply them. His complaint is not that we shouldn't distinguish them, but that we ought to apply this distinction consistently – not only when we are considering social evils such as poverty, but also when we are considering intrinsically evil acts such as abortion. *Both* kinds of issues involve core principles of Catholic teaching which cannot in good faith be denied and *both* of them involve prudential judgments about which reasonable persons may disagree.

Excellent point. The devil is in the details.

Concerning the former issue, the bishop says the principle which cannot be denied in good faith is that “Catholic teaching demands robust and effective legal sanctions against abortion.” Refusal to support legal restrictions on abortion is inexcusable, even if a legislator argues “that he is in fact doing more to reduce abortions by his support for aid to the poor and health care programs.” On the other hand, reasonable persons may disagree about questions like these: “Should the law criminalize abortion for the mother or for those performing the abortion? Alternatively, should there be noncriminal sanctions? What is the best pathway to outlawing abortion: a series of graduated proposals beginning with parental notification and prohibitions on late-term abortion, or an immediate full court press for comprehensive prohibitions?”

Concerning the latter issue, he says the principle which cannot be denied in good faith is that “In addition to promoting conditions that provide meaningful jobs for their citizens, nations must provide a humane threshold of income, health benefits and housing.” It would be utterly unjust to “systematically ... decrease governmental financial support for the poor,” “reduce development assistance to the poorest countries,” or enact “tax policies that increase rather than decrease inequalities.” But reasonable persons may disagree about “financial structures,” “incentives for wealth creation,” and “income support programs that enhance rather than undermine family life.”

The first difficulty with these examples is that the bishop's statement of the principle to be defended concerning abortion is far too mushy. He should at least have said that abortion should be discouraged *in every practical way, including* robust and effective sanctions, sanctions implemented with the greatest possible swiftness and urgency (conceding that since citizens both in and out of government have to be persuaded, the swiftest possible way *may be* a series of graduated restrictions).

More to the point is the second difficulty. Although the bishop complains that the distinction between principle and prudence ought to be applied consistently, he does not consistently apply it either. To keep the distinction straight concerning poverty, he should have said something like “governments must earnestly seek the most effective means to raise the level of meaningful employment at good wages, and to ensure that all citizens have access to decent housing and health care.” This would leave open just what the most effective means actually are. Instead he says the government should simply “provide” people with these good things.

It may seem a dubious proposition that the poor are really better off if governments simply hand over income with no strings attached, but whether dubious or not, it is a judgment of

prudence. If the bishop thinks it is not a judgment of prudence but a principle of “economic justice,” all I can say is that St. Paul disagrees with him: “If anyone will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (2 Thessalonians 3:10-11).

Notice too that the bishop wants to have it both ways. To say as he does that reasonable people may disagree about how income support should be structured is to say there *may* be strings attached. Yet his warning that such support may not be systematically decreased is to say there may *not* be. For what is it to enact, say, a work requirement, but to say that the income support of those who refuse to work shall be systematically decreased?

So far I’ve agreed with Bishop McElroy that the distinction between principles and prudential judgments should be applied to both social evils and intrinsically evil acts, but I’ve suggested that he is not consistently following his own advice.

But there is another way he might have made his argument, and I think it would have been stronger. Suppose we agree that the decision to press for an increase in the minimum wage, rather than, say, a change in vocational training, is a judgment of prudence. And suppose we further agree that the decision to press for a series of graduated restrictions on abortion, rather than an immediate comprehensive prohibition, is a judgment of prudence too. But notice: The Church *does* press for graduated restrictions on abortion. Why then may she not press for an increase in the minimum wage? If one judgment of prudence is within her purview, why not all judgments of prudence? Aren’t all judgments of prudence the same?

What this alternative argument gets right is that the Church does sometimes press judgments of prudence, and not just about abortion. Consider the run-up to the Second World War. She might have contented herself with restating the principles which Nazi ideology denied, but she went further. “With burning concern,” she judged that the Nazi regime had committed atrocities in violation of these principles, and condemned it for them.

What the alternative argument does *not* get right is whether all judgments of prudence are the same. Some are so urgent and obvious that no person of good will could deny them; they are inseparable from the defense of principle itself. But most are either not so urgent, not so obvious, or neither. Principle can be defended without insisting on them, and reasonable debate among persons of good will may even improve them.

The Church must ardently press the former kind of prudential judgment -- yes, though the heavens fall. She must *resist* the temptation to press the latter kind -- yes, though the fashionable condemn her.

Sadly, human beings are capable of dispute even over the question of which things are reasonably indisputable. It is sufficient to point out that this does not imply that they all really are.