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CHRISTIANITY, CORRUPTION, AND DEMOCRACY

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As one who for more than twenty years wore the title "Professor of Political Ethics," I well know how much that juxtaposition of terms, political and ethics, strikes many folks as an oxymoron. It is therefore a special satisfaction for me to be invited to such a distinguished conference, the very purpose of which is to strengthen ethics in the conduct of government and international affairs.

Before I proceed to suggest some of the positive perspectives that Christian faith may contribute to our conversations, I believe some words of confession may be good for some of our souls.

We meet here to strengthen the integrity of democratic institutions. However, the historic record of Christianity in relation to democracy is, at best, ambiguous. Until the 18th Century, the dominant theologians and ecclesial institutions of Christianity tended to give priority to order over justice. But democratic thought and practice, in their most authentic versions, have always given priority to justice over order. Which is to say that human rights and principles of consent are essential to the legitimacy of democratic government. Democracy must ultimately rest upon such moral foundations.

Another confession: In practice, Christianity, as well as other religions, is implicated in some of history's most violent and bitter conflicts, both international and domestic. And that implication is all too present in many, if not most, of today's most serious conflicts -- whether in Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East, or South Asia.

Then, too, Christian institutions themselves are not strangers to the problems of corruption in their own life. They have held on to properties and investments that have exploited poor people -- and have often attempted to conceal such facts. And they have coveted special political privileges contrary to the integrity of democratic institutions. One of the most troubling defaults of too many churches is their tendency to camouflage their own conflicts, special interests, and -- yes -- corrupt practices by pious insistence on loyalty and harmony and devotion.

But there is a yet-deeper sense in which Christian faith itself knows a lot about corruption. It is our very creeds' seriousness about the reality and depths of human sinfulness. Modern and even post-modern persons may cringe at the mere mention of such notions as original sin and the depravity of human nature. But who can deny, at the end of this most terrible century of wars and totalitarianisms and genocides and violent economic crimes and oppressions, that we human types are capable of the most inhuman things?

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So: Democratic institutions must be structured with reference not only to the positive capacities of persons for self-government. They must take account of these propensities to greed, hostility, cruelty, and corruption. Reinhold Niebuhr, the most dominant American Protestant theologian of this century, well understood this double-edged, paradoxical truth about democratic institutions and sinfulness. One of Niebuhr's most-quoted aphorisms is: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

In short, it is not enough to say that corruption threatens democracy. We must also say that true democracy will soberly expect corruption -- but will design governmental structures and public strategies for coping with it. It is the sad experience of too many nations, having liberated themselves from the corruptions of colonial tyranny and celebrated the euphoria of freedom, that they have found themselves poorly equipped to cope with the corrupt practices of their very liberators and plunged into new forms of despotism.

All that I have said so far may seem terribly negative and downbeat -- but the subject of corruption in political and economic systems deserves more than platitudinous preachings from religious communities.

There are, however, some fundamentally positive perspectives deeply grounded in Christian faith that may help equip some democratic leaders in their efforts to combat corruption.

1. After all, what is the place of government itself in the providence of God? If government is viewed in essentially negative terms, as perhaps a necessary evil but not as the positive instrument of the common good, the citizenry are likely disposed toward cynicism and distrust. Such cynicism and distrust, in turn, tend toward temptations to the manipulation and corruption of government. Anti-governmental attitudes have long been shared by many Protestant Americans.

A long historical view, which I share with the American historian Richard Hofstadter, is that our political culture since 1800 has been largely shaped by a "business civilization." I believe American political attitudes are profoundly affected by what might be called a "business mystique," preaching a dogma that holds: Business is good, while government is bad. And, more and more, big business is good, but big government is bad. Of course, not all business leaders fully believe this -- and some business leaders, as we have heard at this conference, have been among the most committed persons in the international struggle against bribery and other forms of corruption. But millions of middle class Protestants, even with religious fervor, tend to share the antigovernmental posture of the "business mystique."

Such an orientation is the denial of the conviction that government is an institution grounded in God's good creation in which we are all created as political animals for our common-life-with-and-for-one-another and in which we are to share the exercise of power. The essential dignity of government -- at least to my mind -- is precisely that it is an "order of creation," a providential institution for the preservation, nurturing, and enhancement of life. (That term, "order of creation," was used and abused by some Christian apologists for Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany. It is a term that never again should be invoked to claim that any particular regime or form of government is divinely ordained.)

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What is positively at stake here is a deep fundamental respect for the rule of law and the unique responsibilities of government as the one institution authorized to act for the whole of society and to transcend any particular or special interest. Corruption is likely to flourish when either the leaders of government or the aggressors of special interests (or combines of the two) do not share this respect for the transcendent legitimacy of government.

2. A closely related concept, nurtured especially by Protestant Christianity, but much honored in practice by Roman Catholicism, is that of vocation: the sacredness of secular callings. That can mean celebrating politics and public service as vocations -- even daring to suggest that politics is holy ground. Here, too, the power of the concept is its challenge to the anti-political attitudes, whether of moralism or of cynicism, that undercut the public health of the civil society a democratic nation requires. Some churches, in their adult education and their lay academies, have also done much to lift up the potential dignity of business as a sacred calling. Political and business leaders nurtured with this conviction of the sacredness of their vocations, and supported by a citizenry educated to that same sense of sacredness of public responsibility, will have formidable defenses against temptations to corruption.

3. Of course, the core virtue of public responsibility is justice -- a word also at the heart of the sacred vocabulary of all three faiths In the Abrahamic tradition. But the many contrasting meanings of justice -- from the harshest of retributions to the fairest distribution of society's goods and services -- beg for clarity in public policy and discourse. The people's confidence in the integrity of government depends not only on impartial law enforcement and equitable criminal justice systems -- but also upon the assurance that public policy serves both the common good and the special needs of disadvantaged persons. When Martin Luther King regularly intoned the lyrics of the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like the waters!", he was clearly championing the poor and the victims of oppression.

There is no more important religious motivation for fighting corruption than this: doing justice to the poor who tend to suffer most from corruption. This conference is rightly struggling to bring political ethics and business ethics into articulation with social justice, especially in the world's poorer countries.

4. Finally, justice itself is absolutely dependent upon the personal and public virtue of truthfulness. In Christian faith, the lack of truthfulness is the essence of corruption. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." In the Bible's book of Genesis and its story of Cain's murder of brother Abel, the lie is portrayed as "the first and most poisonous source of injustice" (André Dumas). The hard violence of dishonesty is that it destroys communication, trust, and confidence -- and tends to generate hostility and even death. Truthfulness is thus more than a principle of personal morality: it is fundamental to the life, integrity, and security of any political community. It is the cornerstone of democratic government.

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