

Politicians



& Religious Doctrine

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT



PETER GOLDRING

This article written by Peter Goldring Member of Parliament for Edmonton East, originally appeared in Ottawa's *Hill Times*, in response to concerns over Calgary Catholic Bishop Henry's comments on faith and politics.

There has been a controversy relating to the June election that has recently come to light. Calgary Roman Catholic Bishop Fred Henry became concerned as to how certain politicians were being portrayed in the media as devout Catholics, notwithstanding that their political actions were contrary to Catholic doctrine. Bishop Henry writes regular commentaries which are posted on the Catholic Diocese of Calgary's website. In his June, 2004 posting, "Political Twists and Turns" Bishop Henry reminded his readers of the concerns that some had at the time when John Kennedy was elected as the first Catholic President of the United States. The concerns were that President

Kennedy would end up taking his orders from the Pope, rather than being governed by the U.S. constitution. President Kennedy's successful election was due in significant part to his ability to persuade the electorate that he would not be governed by his religious beliefs, should those beliefs be in conflict with the U.S. Constitution.



Bishop Henry giving a homily and presiding over the ordination of new priests in the Calgary Roman Catholic Diocese.

Bishop Henry then went on to discuss the fact that presidential candidate John Kerry continues to receive Catholic communion, notwithstanding that most of his history as a politician has involved favouring legislation that is contrary to Catholic doctrine, such as on issues relating to abortion and same-sex marriage. In Bishop Henry's opinion, Catholic politicians who favour legislation that is contrary to Catholic doctrine should, at a minimum, voluntarily abstain from taking communion, because taking communion signifies living a life in accordance with Catholic teachings. John Kerry made this



an issue of public controversy, in that he had been admonished both privately and publicly by Catholic religious leaders concerning taking communion, yet chose to publicly defy them.

Bishop Henry indicated that John Kerry was not the only politician who, in his view, was “off side”. He cited “the Clarks, Chretiens and Martins” in Canada as being in a similar position. That was the substance of his reference to Prime Minister Martin. In Bishop Henry’s



Member of Parliament Peter Goldring speaking in favour of traditional marriage, to a group of concerned Albertans, holds his Alberta marriage license.

view, there are certain issues with respect to which a Catholic politician cannot broker: “abortion, physician-assisted suicide, homicide, the destruction of human embryos in artificial fertilization, stem cell research and cloning. In each of these, the issues are clear-cut. We cannot do what is wrong, even for good purposes.” Bishop Henry also pointed out that in the United States, Catholic bishops have established a committee to address possible disciplinary sanctions “for defiant Catholic politicians”. It was this direction that seemed to motivate Bishop Henry to write a separate pastoral letter, shortly prior to election day, in which he raised further issues with respect to Paul Martin personally. It was in

this letter, dated June 6, in which Bishop Henry pointed out that there is a doctrinal statement on the relationship between Catholic politicians and their faith. Bishop Henry referred to a November, 2002, “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life”, in which the view is expressed that there cannot be parallel lives of “spiritual life” and “political life”. In Bishop Henry’s view, this leads to the conclusion that “in undertaking any public initiative, it is morally incoherent

to leave out completely one’s own fundamental convictions, whether for noble or pragmatic reasons”.

The essence of Bishop Henry’s arguments seems to be more religious than political. There are limits to how one can live one’s life in contravention of a particular religious doctrine. Many would argue that when such conflicts arise, the individual must choose between political compromise and adherence to religious beliefs. For many, this is impossible, and so they may find themselves choosing to leave the political arena. This is because one must, as a politician, represent a diverse group of constituents, not all of whom adhere to

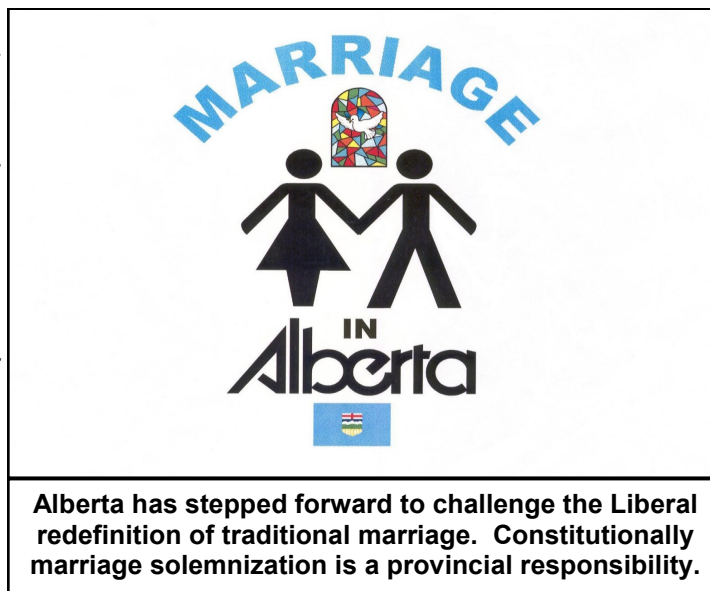


one's particular religion or its beliefs. It is for this reason that Catholic priests are no longer permitted by the Pope to hold elected public office. There are no more Member of Parliament priests, such as the late Fr. Sean O'Sullivan, a Conservative Member of Parliament, and the late Fr. Bob Ogle, a Member of Parliament for the New Democratic Party.

In terms of Bishop Henry's words, it seems to me that he was reminding those who seek or hold public office that there are limits as to what it means to be a devout Catholic. This is a reasonable position, in my view, applicable to followers of any set of religious beliefs. There are limits to how far those beliefs may be compromised. Instead, Bishop Henry found himself contacted by a certain Terry De March of the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency, who requested that the "Political Twists and Turns" pastoral letter be removed from the Calgary Catholic Diocese website. If it were not removed—and it has not been removed, the last time I checked—the charitable status of the Diocese would be called into question, on the basis that Bishop Henry was engaged in partisan political activities.

I believe that Bishop Henry's intention was to remind politicians that there are circumstances where religious doctrine must take precedence over political pragmatism, at least for those who claim to be devout religious adherents. This was the problem Bishop Henry has: no Liberal politician can call himself or herself a "devout Catholic" while at the same time voting in favour of redefining the word and institution of "marriage" to include same-sex unions. They may be representing the wishes of their constituents or adhering to a political doctrine, irrespective of constituent sentiments, but they have lost the right to any cloak of the religiously pious.

Should Bishop Henry's sentiments have resulted in a threat to the charitable status of the Calgary Catholic Diocese? Of course not. Bishop Henry is simply pointing out what should be obvious to adherents of any religion: at some point, a choice may have to be made between political and religious doctrines. That's an important reminder for Bishop Henry to convey, and he should be commended for the reasoned way in which he did so.



Alberta has stepped forward to challenge the Liberal redefinition of traditional marriage. Constitutionally marriage solemnization is a provincial responsibility.

AFTERWORD ON MARRIAGE

As you may be aware, five years ago, the House of Commons voted overwhelmingly to uphold the traditional definition of marriage as being a union of one man and a one woman. Since then, in six provinces and one territory, as a result of various legal actions, same-sex unions have been deemed to be legally defined as marriages, without a vote ever having taken place in the various legislatures. I strongly disagree with how law-making on such a fundamental issue is taking place and being implemented across Canada,

by an unelected provincial judiciary, without citizens' direct input.

On a matter of such significance to Canadian society, I believe that all Members of Parliament, after consulting with their constituents, should be allowed to freely vote, based on this input and their own conscience. Regrettably, not all Members of Parliament will be voting freely on this matter, regardless of constituent wishes. It is becoming apparent that the only way that the people of Canada may truly have a say on this issue is through a national referendum, where each citizen's vote may individually have meaning.

Update: Bill C-38, to change the definition of marriage to include same sex couples, is a result of a Supreme Court reference, which said that Parliament has the jurisdiction to change the definition of marriage, if it was felt that Canadians wanted to do so. The Supreme Court did not state that Parliament must do so.

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This brochure series is intended to highlight special issues that Member of Parliament, Peter Goldring, has been involved in. If you wish to comment, please take a moment to fill out the survey below, write or call to the address above.

Your Opinion Matters...

Question #1 Do you believe that the word "marriage" should remain defined as the union of one man and one woman?

Yes

No

Question #2 Do you believe that we should hold a national referendum on the issue of the definition of marriage?

Yes

No

Comments: _____

Name: _____
Address: _____
City: _____
Postal Code: _____
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