12-1-07 - Rendering unto Caesar [Very thought-provoking article]
Stephen Wall, The Tablet (UK)

A former adviser to Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor explains why he is struggling with recent approaches to some of the conflicts between Church and State. Indeed, it is the State that exhibits the very tolerance that should be at the heart of Christianity

The journalist Malcolm Muggeridge used to say that he wished he could take Jesus on a tour of the Vatican to see if he would find his life and ministry in any way in evidence.

I do not imagine that Our Lord would find anything very relevant to his redemptive message in the change from lace frills to plain pleats in the papal surplice. He might think that the simplicity of the lilies of the field was not much on view either.

He might be surprised to find that the successor of St Peter, the fisherman, is the head of a political state. Is that what he meant when he said: "Render unto Caesar..."?

As Catholics, we have had to live with the fripperies and vanities with which the official Church adorns itself. Although they do not actively damage the lives of ordinary mortals, they do seem to me to be a potent symbol of a Church that is inclined to ignore the beam in its own eye while unfailingly pointing to the motes in the eyes of the rest of us. As a Church beset by scandal has become less authoritative, so it has become disproportionately more authoritarian. The God of reconciliation, whose Spirit imbued the Church at the second Vatican Council, has fallen out of favour and the God of retribution has been aggressively summoned to take his place.

Thus, in the United States, a Catholic candidate for president found himself threatened with excommunication because he chose to exercise his own conscience and political judgement on the issue of abortion. Compare that with the situation of Jack Kennedy who could only secure election as America's first Catholic president by promising to exercise the very independence of judgement which some bishops wanted to deny to John Kerry 40 years later. Is it the rights and wrongs of the issues that have changed, or the character and politics of the Church?

Last week, the Church in our own country was arguing that giving same-sex couples access to in vitro fertilisation (IVF) was wrong, because of the harm to be done by bringing fatherless children into the world. Yet this is the same Church which, by proclaiming the iniquity of artificial contraception, wills into the world millions of children who will never know true parental love of any kind. It sees in this no apparent inconsistency or injustice, any more than it sees injustice in denying to gay couples the right to adopt through its agencies.

In both cases, the Church makes a number of mistakes. It makes a mistake about its role in society. It is using, or abusing, its own moral absolutism to deny to people whose way of life it stigmatises the civil rights that a more generous state recognises as basic to their status as citizens under the law. I refer of course to the Catholic Church's objection to adoption by gay couples. This is a potentially dangerous blurring of an important boundary.

Instead of "hating the sin but loving the sinner", gruesomely patronising as that phrase is, the Church is attempting to use its application of the civil law to punish the sinner because of his or her sin. There seems to me to be nothing in Christ's teaching to justify such an approach. Indeed, the whole of Jesus' life, and even more so his death, point firmly in the opposite direction.

The Church makes another mistake by giving pre-eminence to its concept of law and disregarding its duty of love. In the case of IVF, we are talking about couples who would not go through the heartache of the process

unless they wanted, out of their love for each other, to bring a much-loved child into the world. The same is true for gay couples wishing to adopt. Do the Church's leaders stop to consider that the injunction to love your neighbour as yourself is as perfectly fulfilled as is possible in human life through couples who commit to each other and for whom the sexual expression of that love is its most intimate and binding manifestation?

These are not issues that should be decided by trading biblical quotations, or by recourse to claims of authority, which in my view have to be earned, not assumed. And, in any case, Christ's teachings on wealth, property and power seem to be much more categorical, and much more widely disregarded, including by the Church, than what he had to say on almost any other topic. These are, rather, issues that should be determined by recourse to what Jesus said, by following his own regard for the spirit of the law rather than its letter and by the application of the consciences and independence of judgement with which our creator endowed us.

Above all, the Church's approach should be rooted not in power, authority and threat, but in love and understanding and, dare I say it, in acknowledging that it can be wrong or that many of life's most poignant problems raise issues of right and wrong, love and duty, pain and suffering that are not susceptible to simple answers.

The Church portrays itself as the victim of an aggressive secularism. It looks to me, rather, as if the Church is itself in danger of adopting an aggressive fundamentalism and that the secular societies it excoriates demonstrate a tolerance that is often closer to the ideal of Christian charity.

As a lifelong Catholic, I continue to be inspired by the many excellent Catholic men and women, lay and ordained, who live the spirit of the Gospels. I find hope and communion in the celebration of Mass and I believe in striving for reform from within. It is in that spirit that I hope that the window of fresh air that was Vatican II can be prised open once again.