

“STAYING IN YOUR LANE”: EXPERTISE AND THE CHURCH

More than 40 years ago, then Presidential advisor Edwin Meese disclaimed any notion of him being an **expert**, stating: “You know what an expert is? That’s somebody who is more than **50 miles away** from home, has no responsibility for implementing the advice he gives and shows slides.” I have been pondering, perhaps admittedly “too much” about **expertise** as it relates to the Church. Being a firm believer in “say what you know and know what you say,” I intentionally stray from opining on matters about which I have **insufficient** knowledge or expertise. Why proffer an opinion **beyond** my area of knowledge or responsibility? Why risk looking foolish? People look to the Church for sure **guidance** in spiritual and theological matters. I’ll cite just one recent example.

At the end of the 2022 **U.S. Supreme Court** term— missed amid the attention given to the *Dobbs* decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*— the Court ruled 6-3 in a case (*West Virginia v. EPA*) that limits the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in its power to regulate greenhouse gases. The incredibly complicated case (at least from **my** perspective) asks whether the EPA has the authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions in virtually any industry, so long as it considers cost, non-air impacts, and energy requirements? The salient point has to do with the **degree of authority** Congress granted to the agency. As a most [helpful summary](#) of the case explains: “The EPA has admitted that issues of electricity transmission, distribution, and storage are not within its traditional expertise, yet it claims that Congress implicitly tasked it with the regulation of how Americans get their energy.” While the Supreme Court disagreed, its ruling took no side on the merits of greenhouse gas regulation. It merely ruled that it belonged to Congress, not a federal agency, to do so.

So, what’s my beef here, you say? In short— “**Stay in your lane!**” I’d be hard pressed to cite an issue about which I have **less** to contribute as a Catholic priest than this. And yet, the chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development released a statement saying: “We are, therefore, disappointed today that following the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Clean Air Act the EPA will have significantly restricted authority to regulate greenhouse gases from power plants.” Ought the Church be **concerned** about the care of the environment? “You betcha!” No doubt about that. Yet, I honestly believe the statement misses the mark by equating general principles about caring for the environment with the specific limits of the **statutory authority** granted to federal agencies. Talk about getting tangled in the legal weeds!

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an expert as “one with the special skill or knowledge representing mastery of a particular subject.” That seems quite reasonable. The word derives from the Latin verb *experior* meaning “to put to the test.” Experts are those who, when put to the test, stand out for their experience and knowledge. Though it has been more than 33 years, I cannot recall a single **seminary class** in which we discussed the scope of the Environmental Protection Agency vis-à-vis individual states. Okay, I am being a bit facetious. But I do so respectfully and out of concern for what I believe is **wasted moral capital** on the part of Church leadership. We **lose credibility** when we delve into certain issues beyond our competence. Even more importantly, I sense that the “people in the pews” are thinking to themselves: “Aren’t there other issues that need their attention?” “Does the Church have its own house in order?”

Irrespective of one’s view with respect to aspects of climate change, there are key principles about which we ought to be able to **agree**. Our Sunday Creed professes that God is “creator of heaven and earth,” of all that is “seen and unseen.” The Catechism (para. #340) states: “God wills the *interdependence of creatures*. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.” Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si* echoes this ideal: “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.” (#14) The Church is on **solid foundation** when teaching about our role in protecting God’s creation. We’re on much **shakier ground** when opining on the precise scope of an agency’s regulatory authority.

Today, most people instinctively **recycle**. Our recycling bin often fills up more quickly than our trash bin, reflecting just how **second nature** recycling has become. I recall when the environmental movement picked up steam in the mid-1970's. Curbside-recycling began in earnest, people stopped **burning** their **trash** in the alley, etc. More recently, in 2012 McDonalds finally replaced their Styrofoam cups with paper ones. (But I still abhor paper straws, sorry!) Our National Park system is the envy of the world. Locally, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area is counted among the most **pristine places** I have ever visited in Minnesota. May it **remain** that way! The Church is strongest when teaching **general moral principles**, leaving the **minutia** of complex legal statutes to the real experts!

- Speaking of experts and “50 miles away.” All three finalists for Minneapolis **Police Chief** are outsiders. Hailing from Southfield, MI (suburban Detroit), Charlottesville, VA and Newark, NJ, respectively, the candidates reside 693, 1,151 and 1,187 miles from Minneapolis City Hall. No **local** candidates made the final cut. Police officers today perform difficult and thankless tasks. May St. Michael the Archangel guard them and guide their daily interactions.
- Geography aficionados may be interested in a project to map all the geographic **center points** of the nations of the world. **Which state** in the contiguous United States do you believe is closest to the geographic center? **Bonus** question: Which city (>50,000 pop.) is closest to our nation's center? See the answers below.
- Unsurpassed dignity and grace. The world lost a remarkable woman in the person of **Queen Elizabeth II**. It is unfathomable to me that a monarch could reign for seventy years. I am **not** an expert on royalty, but in Europe, only Louis XIV's (the “Sun King”) reign of 72 years as King of France was longer. But hers was much less controversial than his! Just days before her death, she received Liz Truss, her 15th Prime Minister! Her first was **Winston Churchill!**
- Check your grandpa's attic! The sales record for a baseball card was shattered when a pristine Topps **1952 Mickey Mantle** baseball card sold for **\$12.6 million**. That is **not** a misprint. Rated a MINT 9.5 on a scale of 1 to 10, it is the finest Mantle rookie ever put up for sale. **Economics 101**– “things are worth what people will pay for them.”
- This Thursday (September 22) marks the 160th anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln signing the **Emancipation Proclamation**, marking an official close to one of our nation's darkest chapters. But slavery still exists across the globe in the form of forced labor, human and sex trafficking, even forced early marriage.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector

A: Kansas;
B: Manhattan, KS (home of Kansas State University)