

Conference on “Faithful Citizenship”
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There is much violence in our country today. Murder rates are up. There have been destructive riots. There’s been evidence of police brutality. We hear of violence by white nationalists and by their opponents in so-called “antifascist” groups. There’s violence at our southern border. And there is the silent violence of abortion and euthanasia.

But so often, depending on our particular preferences, we downplay the violence, couching it in a softer vocabulary:

- “Mostly peaceful protests.” That “mostly” is doing a lot of work in that phrase.
- “Law and order.” We need both, but are we making sure that we protect innocent lives – and the consciences of those who seek to protect us?
- “America First.” But whose America?
- “Choice.” But few people ever ask whether some choices are harmful, not only to others but also to the person making the choice.
- “Freedom.” But freedom to do what? To build up, or to tear down? To wound, or to heal?
- “Rights.” But do we have a right to do wrong?

We are blessed to live on a very peaceful campus. But can we say that our society is peaceful? St. Augustine defined peace not as the mere absence of conflict, but as the “tranquility of order.” We seem far away from that. Our society seems ready to erupt over our differences, and there are even some who relish the prospect.

John Adams, our 2nd President, famously said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” As faith seems to fade in our culture (sometimes due to our own inability to live up to the standards we proclaim), we are becoming less able to engage in self-governance under our Constitution, because as individuals we can’t govern ourselves – our passions rule us. We have difficulty making reasoned arguments, because our emotions lead the way.

We are therefore susceptible to sloganeering, the bumper-sticker assertions of our partisan views, the meme-driven approach to outwitting our opponents. “Black Lives Matter” is a true statement, but it has also been used as a cover for

radicalism. And it draws a response: “Blue Lives Matter.” “All Lives Matter.” Many pro-lifers would add, “Unborn Lives Matter.”

And they all do matter. Because beneath all the slogans there is a real argument going on: Who truly belongs to our society, and who is shut out? The Catholic view is, essentially, *everyone* belongs, no matter their race, color, ethnicity, country of origin, sex, income level, ability, or age – newly conceived or at the point of death. And, we should add, no matter their religion. As Catholics, we should remember that there was a time when we were not considered to be “real” Americans, that we had dual loyalties – with our greater allegiance being to the Pope.

Our first Catholic President, John F. Kennedy, sought to overcome this bias by attacking it directly. Speaking to the Baptist ministers of the Houston Ministerial Alliance in 1960, he made it clear that he believed in an absolute separation of Church and State, and that his faith would have *no* impact on his decisions as President.

It seems to me that he won the battle – or at least the election – but lost the war. He accepted the notion that any view thought to be based on religious faith should be kept out of political debate. His brother, Senator Ted Kennedy, would take this to heart when, despite his original belief that abortion was a grave wrong, he decided for reasons of political expediency to change his view of the matter in public. This approach was taken up by others, including Governor Mario Cuomo, who in a famous speech at Notre Dame in 1984, claimed that while he was “personally opposed” to abortion, he could not “impose” his views on others through legislation.

Here we see the withdrawal of reason from public debate: An issue – the question of when human life begins – that can be evaluated *on the basis of empirical science* is referred to as a merely private opinion held due to the irrational dictates of religious faith. I imagine that we will have an opportunity to see this strategy in action as the pro-life Catholic Amy Coney Barrett goes through the confirmation process for the Supreme Court in the coming weeks.

The result of this process is that, sadly, a party which has many policy priorities that appeal to Catholics has declared that one class of human beings, the unborn, is not entitled to the protections of the US Constitution. This situation has posed a terrible dilemma to many people of faith as even the few remaining pro-life officeholders in the party are more or less shown the door.

The novelist William Faulkner once wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” We’ve been down this road before, refusing to recognize the full humanity of one particular segment of society, in this case based on the color of their skin. And despite the undeniable successes of the Civil Rights Movement, despite the election of a President of African descent, this summer has shown that the wounds of centuries of racism have not yet been healed. And so the argument about who fully belongs to our society continues, the question “Whose America?” continues to be asked.

Last year, the *New York Times* proposed that the year 1619, the year that the first African slaves arrived in what would become the United States, should be considered the moment that this country was truly founded, rather than 1776. This is a claim that the legacy of slavery has made the American “project” irredeemably corrupt. Others in our history, as the British philosopher Bertrand Russell once quipped, believed that the world was created in 1492 and redeemed in 1776 – in other words, that the greatness of this nation should not be challenged because of the ideals that led to its formation and have inspired it ever since. Still others, perhaps closer to the truth, view this country as a flawed but invaluable experiment in seeking both freedom and equality for all. In this understanding, the Declaration of Independence’s assertions that “all men are created equal,” and that we have “unalienable rights” that come from our Creator, including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” have been imperfectly applied in the past but have gradually been broadened to include women, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, indeed all who have come to our shores. From this perspective, there is still work to do, but we have come a long way.

So given this fierce debate about who truly belongs to our community, what are we to do, as Catholics called to serve the Church in the United States? How can we be instruments of peace while seeking to broaden appreciation of the dignity of each and every human person – born and unborn, of whatever race, sex, or class?

In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops of this country have made some recommendations:

First, we have to recognize not only the dignity of the human person, but the reality of sin, which affects all of us.¹ In St. Paul’s words, “*All have sinned and fallen*

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States, with New Introductory Letter* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2019), §§9-10. Hereafter this document will be referred to as *Faithful Citizenship*.

short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, emphasis added). As St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, though, we tend to sin under the aspect of *good*; that is, no one does evil for its own sake. What often happens instead is that a true but limited good that we desire can blind us to other values worth protecting.² We should therefore avoid demonizing our opponents and rather seek to reason with them, even if we need to correct a mistaken understanding – while recognizing the limitations of our own perspective. By refusing to see those who disagree with us as *persons* first, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, we risk contributing to the poisonous tone of our politics.

Second, we are indeed a people whose convictions are based upon both faith *and* reason.³ Because of this, we have both a right to engage in debate in the public square *and* the ability to do so calmly, charitably, and with an appeal to all people of good will. This points to the importance of our intellectual formation to help us develop sound arguments that can persuade those who have very often never been exposed to the solid foundations underlying our beliefs. As St. Peter tells us:

Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence. (1 Peter 3:15)

This points as well to the importance of defending the right to religious freedom, not just for our sake as Catholics, but for the protection of everyone’s conscience. As the bishops point out, “the right to free expression of religious beliefs protects all other rights.”⁴ Unfortunately, there have been challenges to this right in recent years; indeed, the bishops note, “the longstanding tax exemption of the Church has been explicitly called into question at the highest levels of government, precisely because of her teachings on marriage.”⁵

Questions about marriage and sexuality, of course, are at the heart of many of our contemporary divisions. One reason, for example, why the movement to legalize same-sex marriage was successful was that the debate was driven by sentiment; we failed to offer the compelling arguments demonstrating that the Christian understanding of the family is rooted in an authentic understanding of human nature. The result has not only been a tendency to view our position on the matter as somehow “bigoted” or rooted in “animus” (as a Catholic Supreme Court Justice

² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 29, a.4.

³ *Faithful Citizenship* §10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, §49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, §72.

claimed), but a deepening confusion in our culture about what distinguishes men and women, exemplified in the ascendancy of gender ideology.⁶

This confusion has its source in the instability of the family over the past several generations. Both law and culture have undermined the value of the stable two-parent family, despite overwhelming sociological evidence that this is the best environment for raising children. It has also led to the view that the individual, not the family, is the basic unit of society, leading to a sense of alienation and the fraying of the bonds of community.⁷ In addition, the frequent absence of fathers creates difficulties in drawing people to the life of faith: how can people understand the love of God the Father if they've rarely known the presence of a loving human father in their lives? And as the sociologist Christian Smith has pointed out, it is the religious practice of the *father* which most consistently predicts whether children will remain committed to Christ when they leave home. The challenge for us then is how to encourage family formation and a culture of marriage when so many people, having experienced the pain of broken families, avoid commitment out of fear.

The loss of the sense of security that family breakdown has engendered has led as well to people seeking meaning through various forms of tribalism and identity politics – here at least they seem to discover meaning and a sense of self, at the cost of further divisions in our society. This process has been exacerbated by a concern among the working classes that an elite composed of members of both political parties has pursued a policy of globalization that has forgotten those left behind. When a factory is closed or small farms and local businesses are displaced by multinational corporations, those who have lost their livelihoods are told that everyone is better off overall, and that they can always move and seek opportunity elsewhere. While it is true that the global market system has lifted millions of people out of poverty, nothing in this fallen world is an unmitigated good. Here in this country, the result has been increasing inequality, the hollowing-out of once prosperous communities, a massive opioid epidemic, and the rise in what are now called “deaths of despair.” The massive changes in our society created by the “creative destruction” of contemporary capitalism present us with many challenges, which we, as members of the faithful and future pastors, will have to respond to with creativity in our particular communities.

⁶ Ibid., §70.

⁷ Ibid. The dictates of our economic system have had an important effect on the focus on the autonomous individual as well.

Which is why I have not spent much time talking this morning about how to vote in the upcoming election. As the US Bishops make clear, our first task is forming our consciences about what our political system needs to address: “We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.”⁸

The key words here in relation to conscience, of course, are “properly formed.” Too often, Catholics are told to vote their conscience but are not given a correct understanding of what that entails. Quoting the *Catechism*, the bishops’ document states:

“Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one’s passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church’s authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1792).⁹

We must first see it as our duty to form the consciences of the faithful in what the Church actually teaches, and the *reasons* for it.

In addition, the bishops remind us that politics is about more than elections – it is ultimately about our ongoing life as a community. Too often, we only look at these questions when Election Day draws near. In my life as a priest, parishioners have asked me every 4 years whether they can vote for someone who supports abortion rights. The answer, the bishops tell us, is that, no, we typically cannot:

As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. A candidate’s position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter’s support. Yet if a candidate’s position on a single issue promotes an intrinsically evil act, such as legal abortion, redefining marriage in a way that denies its essential meaning, or racist behavior, a voter may legitimately disqualify a candidate from receiving support.¹⁰

There are occasions, however, when a Catholic who rejects an intrinsic evil can support such a candidate, but only if there is a *truly grave* moral reason for doing so.¹¹ The question of what other reason could justify abortion or acts of racism is

⁸ Ibid., §7.

⁹ Ibid, Note 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., §42.

¹¹ Ibid., §35.

certainly open to debate. It also raises the issue of the degree to which one is thereby cooperating in evil.¹²

There is also the possibility, the bishops tell us, that a “voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods.”¹³

But if politics is about more than elections, perhaps we need to reframe the debate: Why, rather than agonizing every 4 years about supporting a party that claims abortion to be a fundamental right, do we not try to change the party? In this regard, the bishops state:

As citizens, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help transform the party to which we belong; we should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths or approve intrinsically evil acts.¹⁴

That, perhaps, is where we need to challenge the faithful. This means getting involved *locally*, not just focusing on national politics. The presidential campaign tends to so dominate our political culture that we forget that future national leaders are even now being formed in local and state offices – the city council, the school board, the state legislature. We need to pay more attention to these things, which often have more direct impact on our lives than what happens in Washington, DC – but it is also where we can have a greater impact on the future of our politics.

Finally, we should remember the wise words of Psalm 146: “Put not your trust in princes.” There is a strain of messianism in our politics which verges on the point of idolatry. Every election now is presented to us as “the most important election in

¹² Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion — General Principles,” Memorandum to Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, June 2004: “A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate’s permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia. When a Catholic does not share a candidate’s stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons.” (Source: <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=6041>, accessed 10/1/20, 9:43 am.)

¹³ *Ibid.*, §36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, §14.

our lifetime,” as the parties try to whip us into a frenzy in which we cast our reason aside and allow our passions to lead us into further division and anger.

We need to remind ourselves that the first thing to know about politics is that *politics is not the first thing*. God is. We need to pray, to learn to trust in His Providence and in His Lordship over history. We need to deepen our understanding of our own faith so as to properly form the consciences of those who will look to us for guidance. And we should recall the words of one of our wisest Presidents: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds.” To act without malice, and with charity, means that we should see those who disagree with us, even on the most vital of issues, as brothers and sisters who, like us, are in need of the mercy and love of God – and who, like us, are continually offered the gifts of grace and conversion.

While holding always to the truth, we are meant to be instruments of peace and reconciliation, primarily by drawing as many people as possible to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. For He “is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . . , that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God” (Ephesians 2:15-16). May He now work through us to help bind the wounds and heal the divisions of our nation, and so unite us as beloved children of our merciful God. Amen.