

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Pastor's Column

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Faithful Citizenship— The California Primary Election on Tuesday, June 7, 2016



We now find ourselves at the end of a very long, and very ugly, primary election season with the California Primary taking place this Tuesday.

After Tuesday, the nation's attention turns toward the General Election on November 8, 2016.

As Bishop McElroy has said, "The contrast between the beautiful vision of politics that Pope Francis presented to the United States and the political campaigns that have unfolded in the past several months could not be more heartbreaking."

Despite this reality, we are reminded that, as Catholics, we have a responsibility to be active participants in the political process.

The ugliness of this political season should not repel us from being involved, but should, instead, motivate us even more to faithful citizenship:

Responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation...

By our baptism, Catholics are committed to following Jesus Christ and to be "salt for the earth, light for the nations."

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, "It is necessary that all participate according to his position and role, in promoting the common good."

This is inherent in the dignity of the human person...As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life." (nos. 1913-1915)

—(Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship – United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

In exercising "Faithful Citizenship," we are mindful that in the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation.

As Catholics, we never endorse any specific candidates nor do we endorse any specific political parties. And we are mindful that neither major party, the Republican Party nor the Democratic Party is fully "Pro-life" in the Catholic Church's understanding of "Pro-life."

Our participation in the political process is about reclaiming our national politics for the protection of the human person.

As we vote then for specific candidates, we need to take into consideration all the issues that the candidate agrees with or disagrees with in terms of the Catholic Conscience, of our understanding of what it means to be "Pro-life," and in terms of how we are called to be committed to the common good of all people in our society and being in solidarity with them.

Always be mindful that no one can tell you how to vote! The Magisterium of the Church will inform you of what is the Catholic position, and encourage you to vote accordingly, but when you are in the voter's booth, you, in the presence of God, with an informed conscience, must vote according to the direction of your conscience.

Conscience is supreme, and it holds a most sacred place within Catholic Tradition.

Each of us is called to take seriously the challenge that lies before us in choosing leaders who will embody our beliefs.

To help in this process, not only for Tuesday's Primary, but more importantly, for the General Election in November, I have inserted in today's Bulletin an article by our Bishop, Robert W. McElroy, which appeared in *AMERICA* Magazine on February 15, 2016.

Please take time to read the article and reflect upon it, and allow his thoughts and reflections to help you in your effort to exercise "Faithful Citizenship."

F. Mike

The Greatness of a Nation

Most Rev. Robert W. McElroy

Reprinted from America Magazine, February 15, 2016

Reclaiming our national politics for the protection of the human person

The contrast between the beautiful vision of politics that Pope Francis presented to the United States and the political campaigns that have unfolded in the past several months could not be more heartbreaking. In his address to Congress, Pope Francis began by comparing the fundamental responsibilities of America's political leaders to the role of Moses, emphasizing that the first call of public service is "to protect by means of the law the image and likeness fashioned by God on every human face."

Recalling the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln, Francis pointed to the foundational role that freedom plays in U.S. society and politics and noted that "building a future of freedom requires love of the common good and cooperation in a spirit of subsidiarity and solidarity." Citing the figure of Dorothy Day and her thirst for justice in the world, the pope emphatically demanded that the economic genius of the American nation must be complemented by an enduring recognition that all economies must serve justice comprehensively, with special care for the poor. Finally, invoking the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., Pope Francis urged the nation's political leaders to deepen America's heritage as a land of dreams: "Dreams which lead to action, to participation, to commitment. Dreams which awaken what is deepest and truest in the life of a people."

In Francis' message he made clear that the core of the vocation of public service, and of all politics, is to promote the integral



THE AMERICAN WAY. People participate in the Democartic caucus at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, Iowa, Feb. 1, 2016.



development of every human person and of society as a whole. It is a vocation that requires special and self-sacrificial concern for the poor, the unborn, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. It is a commitment to pursue the common good over that of interest groups or parties or self-aggrandizement. It is a profoundly spiritual and moral undertaking.

This same spiritual and moral identity is also emblazoned upon the most foundational act of citizenship in our society, that of voting for candidates for office. Thus, ultimately it is to the citizens of our nation as a whole that the challenge of Pope Francis is directed. Catholic teaching proclaims that voting is inherently an act of discipleship for the believer. But American political life increasingly creates a distorted culture that frames voting choices in destructive categories that rob them of their spiritual character and content.

It is for this reason that the central foundation for an ethic of discipleship in voting for the Catholic community in the United States today lies not in the embrace of any one issue or set of issues but rather in a process of spiritual and moral conversion about the very nature of politics itself.

A Spiritual Conversion to Solidarity

Such a conversion requires deep self-scrutiny and reflection. It demands a rejection of the tribal element of politics that sees voting as the opportunity to advance the well-being of our race, our class, our religious community at the expense of others. It entails a purging of the inherent human tendency to allow anger and wedge issues to infect our voting choices. A spiritual conversion among voters demands that we reject the increasing habit in our political culture of attributing all differences of opinion to ignorance or dishonesty. And such a spiritual conversion prohibits us from framing political choice in the United States as essentially a competition between two partisan teams, one good and one bad, with all the visceral enjoyment that such a competition brings.

Most important, a spiritual political conversion requires the orientation of soul that flows from the principle of solidarity that St. John Paul II powerfully outlined as a fundamental element of Catholic social teaching. This orientation reminds us that in society we must always understand ourselves to be bound together in God's grace

and committed, in the words of “On Social Concerns,” “to the good of one’s neighbor, with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to lose oneself for the sake of the other rather than exploiting him.”

The implications of such a spiritual stance for discipleship in voting are clearly reflected in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*: “The principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become a part.”

Such a spiritual conversion to solidarity is not alien to the American political tradition. The founders of the United States called it civic virtue, and they believed that it was absolutely essential for the success of the new experiment in democracy that they were launching. The founders generally believed that religious belief was one of the few foundations in the hearts of men and women that could produce enduring civic virtue and the self-sacrifice that at times it demands. It was their hope that a culture of civic virtue would lead to a politics of the common good.

A Moral Conversion to the Common Good

The core concept of the common good is simple. Rooted in the dignity, unity, and equality of all people, the concrete common good is the set of social conditions at a given historical moment that will best allow all people in a society to attain their fulfillment as individuals and groups.

One of the greatest gifts of Catholic social teaching has been its reflection on the key elements that form the political common good in contemporary society. This reflection is anchored in an unswerving commitment to the transcendent dignity of the human person, the protection of human life, an abiding care for the poor and the marginalized, the protection of authentic human freedom, and the promotion of peace.

It is particularly important to note five aspects of Catholic teaching about the nature and concrete embodiment of a nation’s political common good in any particular historical moment:

1. The political common good of a nation embraces those elements of life in society that properly fall to the work of government.
2. The concrete political common good is dynamic. While the fundamental elements of Catholic moral teaching about the common good are enduring, the identity of the concrete common good that should guide citizens in voting is rooted in changing social structures, laws, socioeconomic challenges, and historical events. Thus, for example, the political importance of immigration as a component of the common good is amplified at this time both because the world is today facing the most monumental refugee crisis since World War II and because the political process of comprehensive immigration reform has come to a complete standstill. Similarly, the incompatibility of assisted suicide with the common good has greater political salience today because of the growth in efforts to legalize assisted suicide within the past five years.

3. Structural changes in society regularly produce new developments in Catholic doctrine designed to analyze the new moral realities that processes like industrialization, secularization, globalization, and climate change have produced. In a very real sense, the history of modern Catholic social teaching is a history of the development of doctrine. From the contribution of Pope Leo XIII on the rights of labor to St. John XXIII on human rights; from the Second Vatican Council’s “Declaration on Religious Freedom” to Pope Paul VI’s doctrine of integral human development to St. John Paul II’s theology of work; from Pope Benedict’s seminal teachings on the stewardship of the environment to the writings of Pope Francis regarding extreme poverty, Catholic social teaching on the common good has been characterized by a fundamental continuity maintained through a substantial dynamism, never stasis.
4. Pope Benedict observed in “Charity in Truth” that “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors, but does not make us brothers.” This penetrating insight deserves deep and sustained attention in our formulation of the concrete common good in 2016. The process of globalization has created new dimensions of the common good and new moral imperatives among nations precisely because the growing interpenetration of economic, political, and cultural actions by powerful nations has enormous and sometimes very destructive impacts on vulnerable states and economies. Pope Francis addressed this very reality when he urged the bishops of the United States to witness powerfully to America’s necessary service to solidarity in the international system as a “nation whose vast material and spiritual, cultural and political, historical and human, scientific and technological resources impose significant moral responsibilities in a world which is seeking, confusedly and laboriously, new balances of peace, prosperity, and integration.”
5. Finally, and most important, Catholic teaching on the nature of the political common good is increasingly focused on the needs of those most vulnerable in society.

The Political Common Good

During his address to the bishops of the United States, Pope Francis outlined the major issues that constitute the political common good in the United States at the present moment: “I encourage you, then, my brothers, to confront the challenging issues of our time. Ever present within them is life as gift and responsibility. The future freedom and dignity of our societies depends on how we face these challenges. The innocent victim of abortion, children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, war, violence, and drug trafficking, the environment devastated by man’s predatory relationship with nature...the family.”

These are the elements that form the central moral claims that voters must weigh as they seek to approach their political responsibilities through a framework of discipleship. Hauntingly, Pope Francis advances these claims not as

abstractions but with the human faces of the victims who suffer concretely from the failure of our society to advance specific dimensions of the common good. As voters seeking to be disciples, we must maintain a focus in our political discernment on these very human faces, so as to inoculate ourselves against the powerful tendency in our culture to selectively minimize the power of any of these moral claims out of self-interest or partisanship, class, or race.

The primary step of moral conversion to the common good requires an ever deeper affective understanding of how the commitment to the dignity of the human person radically embraces each of the issues that Pope Francis identified as constitutive of the common good of the United States at this moment in our history. It requires, in a very real sense, the development of “a Catholic political imagination” that sees the mutual linkages between poverty and the disintegration of families, war and the refugee crisis around the world, the economic burdens of the aging, and our societal lurch toward euthanasia.

Setting Priorities

A second step in the moral conversion to the common good for voting requires discernment about how Catholics should prioritize the major elements of the common good in the United States today. If immigration, abortion, poverty, religious liberty, the family, war and peace, the environment, the rights of workers, trafficking in drugs, and assisted suicide all constitute central elements of the common good, which issues are pre-eminent?

Many widely circulated independent Catholic voter guides propose that the concept of intrinsic evil provides an automatic process for prioritizing the elements of the political common good in the United States.

The church teaches that certain acts are incapable of being ordered to God since in their very structure they contradict the good of the person made in God’s likeness. Such actions are termed “intrinsically evil” and are morally illicit no matter what the intention or circumstances surrounding them. Those who focus primarily on intrinsic evil make two distinct but related claims: 1) that the action of voting for candidates who seek to advance an intrinsic evil in society automatically involves the voter morally in that intrinsic evil in an illicit way; and 2) Catholic teaching demands that political opposition to intrinsically evil acts, like abortion, euthanasia, and embryonic experimentation, must be given automatic priority over all other issues for the purposes of voting.

The recent statement of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” shows why this argument is simplistic and thus misleading. The bishops’ statement clearly asserts the absoluteness of the prohibitions against concrete intrinsically evil acts, emphasizing that no circumstances or intentions can justify performing or illicitly cooperating with such acts. At the same time, “Faithful

Citizenship” recognizes that voting for a candidate whose policies may advance a particular intrinsic evil is not in itself an intrinsically evil act. Voting for candidates is a complex moral action in which the voter must confront an entire array of competing candidates’ positions in a single act of voting. It is crucial that in voting for a candidate who supports the advancement of an intrinsic evil, Catholic voters not have the intention of supporting that specific evil, since such an intention would involve them directly in the evil itself. But voters will often find themselves in situations where one candidate supports an intrinsically evil position, yet the alternative realistic candidates all support even graver evils in the totality of their positions.

This is particularly true in the United States today. The list of intrinsic evils specified by Catholic teaching includes not only abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and embryonic experimentation but also actions that exploit workers, create or perpetuate inhuman living conditions, or advance racism. It is extremely difficult, and often completely impossible, to find candidates whose policies will not advance several of these evils in American life.

Even more important, a fatal shortcoming of the category of intrinsic evil as a foundation for prioritizing the major elements of the political common good lies in the fact that while the criterion of intrinsic evil identifies specific human acts that can never be justified, it is not a measure of the relative gravity of evil in human or political acts. Some intrinsically evil acts are less gravely evil than other intrinsically evil actions. Intrinsically evil action can also be less gravely evil than other actions that do not fall under the category of intrinsic evil. For example, telling any lie is intrinsically evil, while launching a major war is not. But it would be morally obtuse to propose that telling a minor lie to constituents should count more in the calculus of voting than a candidate’s policy to go to war. It is the gravity of evil or good present in electoral choices that is primarily determinative of their objective moral character and their contribution to or detraction from the common good. Moreover, because voting is a complex moral action involving mitigating circumstances, a vote for a candidate who supports intrinsic evils often does not involve illicit cooperation in those acts. For these reasons the category of intrinsic evil cannot provide a comprehensive moral roadmap for prioritizing the elements of the common good for voting.

The Four Pillars of Life

A far better guide to prioritizing the major elements of the political common good of the United States lies in the intriguing words Pope Francis used in outlining those elements for the bishops of the United States: “I encourage you, then, my brothers, to confront the challenging issues of our time. Ever present within them is life as gift and responsibility.”

At this moment there are four pre-eminent political issues facing the United States that touch upon life as gift and responsibility in a decisive way.

The first is abortion. The direct destruction of more than one million human lives every year constitutes a grievous wound upon our national soul and the common good. It touches upon the very core of our understanding of life as gift and responsibility. As Pope Francis wrote in “Laudato Si’,” “How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is unwanted and creates difficulties. ‘If personal and social sensitivity toward the acceptance of the new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away.’”

The second is poverty. In a world of incredible wealth, more than five million children die every year from hunger, poor sanitation, and the lack of potable water. Millions more die from a lack of the most elementary medical care. In “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis wrote: “Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.” The United States is the most powerful economic actor in the world today, and even the most basic ethic of solidarity demands that it take dramatic steps to reform the international systems of trade, finance, and development assistance in order to save lives in the poorest sections of the world. Moreover, inside the United States, the realities of exclusion and inequality created by poverty are growing, menacingly sapping the solidarity that is the foundation for our national identity and accentuating the fault lines of race and class. In the richest nation in human history, homeless people live on the streets, the seriously mentally ill are all too often left without effective care, and our prisons overflow with young men who are disproportionately poor and of color.

A third pre-eminent issue centering upon life as gift and responsibility is care of the earth, our common home. The progressive degradation of the global environment has created increased poverty and death among many of the poorest peoples on earth. Each year thousands of species are destroyed, lost forever to our children and to the earth’s future. Most chillingly of all, science has clearly established the existence of dramatic climate change produced by human action, a peril that threatens the very future of human existence. Pope Francis underscored the urgency of global action saying: “Every year the problems are getting worse. We are at the limits. If I may use a strong word, I would say that we are at the limits of suicide.”

The final pre-eminent question at stake in the political common good of the United States today is assisted suicide. For at its core, assisted suicide is the bridgehead of a movement to reject the foundational understanding of life as gift and responsibility when confronting end-of-life issues. In 2015 the state legislature of California passed a bill legalizing assisted suicide but would not fund palliative care for the state’s suffering poor at the end of their lives. Such is the “false sense of compassion” that Pope Francis has described as lying at the heart of the movement to spread assisted suicide. As with abortion, this movement corrodes society’s responsibility to secure the health of its members as an integral component of the common good.

The underlying assault upon the notion of life as gift and responsibility embodied in these four issues marks them as the four central pillars of life for the election of 2016. Each of them reflects the “throwaway culture” that Pope Francis has identified as a central cancer of our modern world. The unborn child, the poor, the sick, and the elderly are all disposable; even the very planet that is vital for the continuation of human life itself has become disposable.

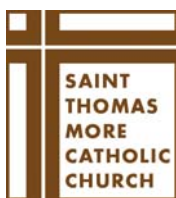
A Sign and a Safeguard

In his closing remarks to Congress and the American people, Pope Francis said: “A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty, as Lincoln did; when it fosters a culture that enables people to ‘dream’ of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work....” How different this understanding of national greatness is from the current political conversation in the United States!

Fifty years ago this past December, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council declared that the church embraces her role in the modern age of being “at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.” It is essential that every member of the church at all levels of leadership take up this responsibility to reclaim our national politics for the protection of the dignity of the human person and the advancement of the common good.

Most Rev. Robert W. McElroy is the bishop of San Diego.

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