

Living Our Faith, Shaping Our Politics

I am grateful for the invitation to be with you tonight. It is an honor to speak here at the University of St. Thomas, in this program sponsored by the Center for Catholic Studies. I wish to thank Dr. Don Briel and his staff for their hospitality. I also wish to thank the Joseph and Edith Habiger Endowment for its contribution to the Catholic Studies program here at St. Thomas. It is good to reconnect with Msgr. James Habiger who used to direct the Minnesota Catholic Conference. During that time I had the privilege of serving on a Conference advisory board and, thanks largely to Msgr. Habiger's leadership, I gained a deeper appreciation of how the church can engage effectively in the social, economic and political realms.

My remarks this evening, under the theme of "Living Our Faith, Shaping Our Politics," are organized under three principal headings: First, the relationship between faith and life; second, Catholic thought about the renewal of society; and, third, how all of this relates to voting, especially during this

presidential election.

Faith and life relationship

Several years ago a friend of mine was speaking with her representative in the Minnesota State Legislature. The conversation related to the effort of some legislators at that time wanting to bring capital punishment back to Minnesota. My friend pointed out to her legislator that the Minnesota Catholic bishops were opposed to capital punishment. The legislator, himself a Catholic, responded by saying, "I try not to let my faith interfere with the political decisions I have to make." Not surprisingly, the conversation soon came to an end.

I tell this story because it illustrates what we should not do, but what many of us in fact do. That is, we often separate our faith from the daily decisions we make. We may do this for different reasons. For some of us this represents a misreading of the separation of church and state in this country. For others among us we do not have an appreciation of the role that our faith should play in our lives. For still others this separation results from a habit of not wanting to challenge the values of society, of our culture.

Back in 1965 the Second Vatican Council addressed

this growing split between faith and life when it reminded us that religion and faith are more than acts of worship; they are more than the following of moral laws. Rather, the religious life has everything to do with daily life. They cautioned: “This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 43).

The Council grounded this statement on a text from the Prophet Isaiah which connects ritual with acts of love, mercy and justice. Isaiah notes that the people are complaining that their God does not seem to notice all the fasting they do. God does not give them credit for their fasting. Through the Prophet, God warns the people:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?

This is calling for a faith that leads to actions and a faith that guides those actions. This includes all actions – from how we treat our roommates throughout the semester to the political choices we make during elections. Even more, this

Isaian text states that our religious practices, like liturgy, must lead to particular kinds of behavior in our public life.

From this perspective there can be no privatization of belief. There can be no separation of our faith and our life. Of course, it is true that some people go too far and wear their religion on their sleeve in sometimes annoying and embarrassing ways. It also is true that some people use religion or faith to bully and coerce others into accepting their particular view of the world with sometimes fanatical enthusiasm and disastrous consequences. But another person's misuse of religion and faith in the public square should never be a reason for the rest of us to abandon the challenge of shaping our public involvements by what we believe. We need not abandon this challenge, we just need to work at getting it right.

Catholic theology has much to tell us about how we as individual Christians and as church are to be present and active in the social and political aspects of contemporary life. This theology tells us that actions on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are constitutive dimensions of the preaching of the Gospel. It is a theology that reminds us that the mission of the Church is a religious mission,

but within that religious mission is a concern for the social, economic, and political dimensions of our lives. That concern is grounded in the recognition that how well we respond to God's call, how well we develop as morally responsible persons, is influenced by the social context of our lives. That concern rises out of an awareness, for example, that persons living in extreme poverty or political oppression may find it very difficult to exercise the needed freedom and initiative to become morally responsible agents.

Catholic theology draws an unmistakable connection between worship, morality and justice. In his first encyclical, *God is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted that connection.

The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word (22).

In a Catholic appreciation of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, of what it means to live the Christian life, it is never enough to engage in acts of worship, however faithfully we may do so. It is never enough to follow laws of morality in our private lives, however scrupulously we may do so. Indeed, we must do all of this. But to live the Christian life is also to engage in works of charity and justice. The latter especially

leads us to consider carefully the decisions we make during an election year.

Catholic thought and the renewal of society

Catholic theology and Catholic thought more broadly position us well to be engaged the renewal of culture and of contemporary society. One of the most important aspects of that teaching is the dignity of the human person. This is the biblically-based recognition of the sacred dignity of every person. It is the belief in the sacredness of every human life, because every person is created by God, redeemed by Christ and called to communion with God.

It is this recognition of the dignity of the human person that leads us to protect human life from conception to natural death. It is this belief in the dignity of each human being that calls us to organize society so that between those two points – conception and natural death – everyone has what is needed to live one's life in dignity.

Catholic thought related to the renewal of culture and contemporary society is reflected especially in the Church's social teachings. These teachings, developed over the past 117

years, provide guidance on how we are to live together as the social beings that we are. They direct us to organize society so that everyone can have a decent life. Catholic social teachings show us how to live as disciples of Jesus Christ at this time, in this place, and with the issues we face today.

These teachings speak of the common good and family life; of rights and responsibilities. They speak of the special attention we must give to the poor and the solidarity we enjoy with all humankind. They speak of the dignity of work and the rights of workers. They speak of caring for all of God's creation. Catholic social teachings help us to reflect on what it means to be a Christian in a world of 800 million malnourished persons. They challenge us to consider what it means to be a Christian in a nation that grows daily more accepting of war, torture and other forms of violence as means to resolve conflict. They call us to examine what it means to be a Christian in a culture that shows far too little respect for the life of the unborn child or the well-being of that child after its birth.

These are the teachings that guide us in the task we face during the weeks ahead as we decide how to vote in the coming

elections. Much has been written and said about how Catholics should vote. Many viewpoints and strong emotions accompany any conversation about the elections. The following remarks do not mean to suggest which candidates should be elected, but how we might approach the task of deciding.

Catholics and voting

Catholic social teaching does not tell us which candidates we should elect. It does not claim that all Catholics should arrive at the same conclusion about how they should vote. From this teaching, however, we can draw criteria to guide us in making election decisions. I would propose three such guidelines that are evident in the teachings and that should be considered by all Catholics: the common good, attention to the marginalized, and defending life and human dignity.

When we speak of the common good in Catholic social teaching we refer to that definition present in papal and conciliar documents. It is

. . . all those condition of social living by which we as individuals, families and groups are able to achieve our own fulfillment (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 74).

The common good refers to everything that is needed for a

decent life: food, housing, education, jobs, health care, safe streets, a clean environment, the practice of religion and other things we take for granted as part of normal living.

We should note as well that in Catholic teaching one of the primary purposes of government is to ensure those conditions that allow for a dignified life. During election campaigns we debate much about the role of government, about how large government should be, about what should be the limits of government. We may hold many different views on this topic, but one point where we should find common ground, at least as Catholics, is that the role of government, the role of the State, is to promote the common good.

It is also a part of Catholic teaching that the common good – those conditions necessary for achieving our fulfillment -- is for everyone. It is not only for people in certain parts of the world, nor for certain racial or ethnic groups. The common good is not only for the majority, but for everyone. It is for all members of society and for the entire human family.

Catholic teaching on the common good is rooted in the theological image of who we are as a people. The Second Vatican Council captured this notion in the beautiful statement:

. . . it has pleased God to make us holy and save us not merely as individuals, without any mutual bonds, but by making us into a single people . . . (*Church in the Modern World*, 32).

This statement reminds us that we are on a shared journey, that we go to God together, and that along the way, we look out for each other. That is the common good. Rooted in a theological conception of who we are as a people, it also reflects the practical awareness that we will do well when everyone does well.

Promoting the common good presents a difficult challenge to our voting considerations. It tells us that as we deliberate about candidates and voting, the first question we should ask is: what are the needs of society? What is needed to ensure that all persons can live a reasonably decent life and can achieve their fulfillment. That is the first question and only after we struggle with that question do we ask the second: What resources are needed to meet those needs?

The order of these two questions is important, especially today when political candidates invariably begin their election campaigns by assuring potential voters that raising taxes is not something they will do. Some even sign pledges not to raise taxes. That is not the way to promote the common good. Our first consideration is to ask what do we need, and then to ask

what resources are required to meet those needs. We may conclude that we have sufficient revenue, or that there is waste in utilization of current state or federal income. My point simply is that we do not close the door on the possibility of raising revenues before we consider what needs we face as a community or society. So we ask which candidates are willing to consider and act upon these community needs?

A second guideline or criterion by which we can evaluate candidates is that of giving attention to the marginalized. This means that within the common good we ask which candidates are likely to give particular attention to those who struggle the most, to the poor, to the marginalized.

This guideline has deep roots in our Sacred Scriptures. The Prophets of the Old Testament frequently reminded the people of Israel that they must care for the widows, orphans and strangers. Faithfulness to their covenantal relationship with God required Israel to show particular attention to these groups who represented the poor and the vulnerable of that time and that culture.

In the Gospels we find many examples of Jesus' special attention to the poor. At the beginning of his public ministry

he states that he has been sent to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). Near the end of Matthew's Gospel we read in the Parable of the Last Judgment: as long as you did it to one of these the least of my sisters and brothers, you did it to me (Matthew:25:40).

Catholic social teaching has developed this biblical focus upon the poor through its emphasis upon both charity and justice. The former always has been an expectation of the Christian's call to love the neighbor – to respond to the neighbor's immediate need, to reach out in service with acts of charity. The practice of social justice, on the other hand, calls us to work for changes in the social, economic and political areas. These will be changes that make it easier for everyone to have their needs met, for everyone to be able to take responsibility for their lives and to contribute to the communities in which we live, for everyone to not be dependent upon other peoples' charity.

In Catholic teaching the systemic, structural changes that social justice calls us to enact are to be directed especially towards the needs of the poor. This is the preferential option

for the poor that has developed in Catholic social teaching. In 1971 Pope Paul VI wrote that

. . . the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society: the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others (*A Call to Action*, 23).

The preferential option for the poor guides us in making decisions when faced with choices or options about what direction to take regarding new laws, or changes in policies and programs, or electing politicians. It says we should support those changes in systems and structures, in policies and programs that are of the greatest benefit to persons with the greatest needs.

So we ask which candidates are most likely to support the common good generally and within that to pay particular attention to the needs of those most marginalized, most vulnerable.

A third guideline in a Catholic approach to voting is that of defending life and human dignity. This criterion is best considered in two parts. The first is that we resist direct attacks against human life. This means that we stand against abortion as well as embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia and assisted suicide. It means we oppose the death penalty. It means we

oppose acts of terrorism and war.

Yes, we must oppose war, even in a religious tradition that teaches the “just war criteria” – guidelines that tell us when it is morally permissible for a nation to engage in acts of war. The possibility of a “just war” should never blind us to the fact that from the perspective of the victims of war – whether civilian or military – war represents a direct attack against their lives. With that in mind Catholic social teaching calls us to work for justice and peace always so that the conditions that breed hatred, violence and war may be kept in check. It is with this in mind also that the Catholic teaching increasingly reminds us of the validity and importance of engaging in nonviolent approaches to resolving conflicts. One place to see this teaching is the 1983 pastoral letter of the United States Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and our Response*.

With this guideline we ask which candidates will stand up against all direct attacks against human life? A second aspect of this criterion is to support efforts to enhance human life, a challenge close to that of promoting the common good. This guideline tells us to help create conditions in society and

throughout the world that allow everyone to live a dignified life. In a nation that spends 700 billion dollars to assist the financial institutions of Wall Street but has no answer for many of the thirty-five million Americans living in poverty, we need to talk about what it means to promote human dignity. In a country that boasts of the best medical technology, but cannot make that available to many of the forty-seven million Americans without health insurance, we need to talk about what it means to defend human life.

To promote human life and dignity is not only to stand against premature death at the hands of terrorism, the death penalty and abortion. It is not only to defend a person's right to be born. It is also about promoting the conditions for a dignified life after that birth has occurred and throughout that person's entire life. That is what it means to be pro-life!

And so we ask which candidates support this approach to defending human life and to promoting the conditions for a dignified life?

These are three criteria from Catholic social teaching that can guide us in our deliberations and choices regarding voting: the common good, attention to the marginalized, and

defending life and promoting human dignity. These criteria do not tell us for whom we should vote but they do suggest how we might approach the task of deciding. Beyond the universal social teachings of the Church we might also study the document of the United States Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

All of these sources remind us that a Catholic approach to voting means knowing our values, knowing the issues and knowing the candidates. That approach especially requires that we know who we are as a people of faith, and what values that identity imparts – for voting, for how we are present in the world, for how we work to help fashion a society and world that more closely reflects the love and mercy, the justice and peace of God.

I would like to end by reconnecting with the Prophet Isaiah and his warning that our rituals, our worship must lead us to acts of love, mercy and justice; that our faith must guide our lives. A more contemporary prophet offered much the same in 2004. In an apostolic letter, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, Pope John Paul II reminded us that our Eucharistic celebration must lead us in practical ways to build a more just society. I end by quot-

ing part of that statement.

The tragedy of hunger which plagues hundreds of millions of human beings, the diseases which afflict developing countries, the loneliness of the elderly, the hardships faced by the unemployed, the struggles of immigrants. These are evils which are present – albeit to a different degree – even in areas of immense wealth. We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ. This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged (28).

