Bringing Christ to the caucus

By Bishop Andrew Cozzens

Venturing into the political realm today can be an unappealing prospect. Sometimes it seems that American politics appeals to our base fears and prejudices, while advancing only the special interests of a powerful few. Often sound bites, faux controversies, and empty gestures take the place of true civil discourse and a deeper understanding of how to pursue the common good.

As followers of Christ, we might wonder if participating in the political process is worth our time at all. Why muddy ourselves or the Church in such a seemingly dirty business? Shouldn’t we stay above this ugly fray?

Not according to Pope Francis, who reminds us that “a good Catholic meddles in politics.” In fact, rather than lamenting the negative state of things, I believe we are called to do our small part to make a ripple of change. One of the keys is not getting fixated on national and presidential politics. Instead, we should remember the fundamental truth that political change starts in our local communities and in our state.

Duties of faithful citizenship

Civic engagement is part of the vocation of all God’s faithful, who are called by Jesus to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” Though contemporary politics may indeed be distasteful at times, and darkened by a flawed understanding of the human person, this is all the more reason for Christians to bring the Good News into public life in whatever way we can.

This is not a duty that any of us can delegate. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that it is every person’s responsibility, as far as possible, to promote the common good through participation in public life (CCC 2240). Yes, we are our brother’s keeper, and our social concern for others extends to the public arena, where the lawmaking process can have an important impact in affirming human dignity and fostering the common good.

Though each of us is responsible for the care of our community, this does not mean we all have to run for office (thank God!). Nor does it mean that our civic responsibilities are fulfilled after casting our ballot. We all have different gifts and roles to play, and we must discern where we are called. For some, it might be issue advocacy; for others, it might be service in the community, such as volunteering at a crisis pregnancy center or providing meals for the hungry.
At minimum, we can—and should—pray! We can pray for our nation, elected officials, and all citizens.

Of course, we are all busy with many responsibilities in our homes, schools, and workplaces. But exercising the duties of faithful citizenship need not come at the expense of our more immediate responsibilities. In fact, given the growing number of political and legal threats posed to our religious liberty and way of life, Catholic engagement in politics is necessary to defend our families and consciences.

**Be the change we seek**

It’s fair to ask, “Where do we begin?” Like in any work of missionary discipleship, the key is to start with prayer so that we may see better through the lens of faith. Where am I needed? What are my gifts? How do I feel led by the Holy Spirit?

Though we can be focused on what we see filtered through national media, I know from personal experience that even simple engagement at a local level can have a noticeable impact. I was blessed to grow up in a family that believed in the importance of political participation. As a high school student, I would join friends and family members and participate in local precinct meetings, especially when I turned 18 and was able to vote. It was incredible to see and experience how a few individuals who are well organized and of strong conviction can affect the candidates a political party endorses and the positions it adopts.

Here in Minnesota, we have a fast-approaching opportunity to be faithful citizens by participating in local precinct caucuses, which will be held on March 1 (see the article below for details). Though there are many ways to participate in the political process, precinct caucuses are an impactful—but often overlooked—means of shaping our political landscape. A unified Catholic voice at the caucus level can play a large part in ending the “political homelessness” that many Catholics experience by urging all political parties to adopt positions that foster human flourishing from conception to natural death.

As you consider ways in which you can exercise faithful citizenship, I encourage you to look to the Minnesota Catholic Conference—the public policy voice of the six Catholic dioceses of Minnesota. They have a wealth of resources to help faithful Catholics better participate in the political process, foster faithful citizenship, and end political homelessness.

By entering the public arena, emboldened by the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, we can, little by little, change American politics and be faithful to our Church’s call to foster the common good for all Minnesotans.

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*Bishop Andrew Cozzens is a board member of the Minnesota Catholic Conference. Visit mncc.org for more on how you can help end political homelessness.*