



Forming Our Conscience for Election 2020: Highlighting the Need for Solidarity

By Minnesota Catholic Conference Staffⁱ

The current pandemic has highlighted our interdependence: we are all linked to each other, for better or for worse. Therefore, to come out of this crisis better than before, we have to do so together, all of us, in solidarity. –Pope Francis, General Audience, September 2, 2020

Introduction

The various crises in which our world finds itself have intensified the divisions in our country. Divisions which are being played out in the current elections, especially at the national level, and they have made civil discourse and principled reflection on politics much more difficult. As a Church, we know where these divisions come from, because we know the story of humanity deeply affected by sin. We offer here some reflections on how to participate in the common life of our diverse society, especially knowing that many people within our same society no longer share our beliefs about human dignity and the common good.

Our brother's keeper

The third chapter of Genesis gives us the biblical account of the tragic fall of the human race, when Adam and Eve first refused to embrace their identity as children of God and instead chose to make themselves to be “like God.” Then, in chapter four, we have a glimpse of how sin’s poison spreads to human relationships, this time in the story of their two sons, Cain and Abel. Envious of God’s regard for Abel, Cain rises up and murders him. He commits this act of violence against his own brother out of concern only for himself. His self-absorption is revealed when he is asked by God, “Where is your brother?” Cain replies, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:1-9).

This scriptural story is more than a fable and not simply a description of a past events that happened to someone else. Biblical stories reveal God’s truth to us, and they are meant to become a mirror in which we can see our own lives. In Cain’s retort, “am I my brother’s keeper?” we see reflected back at us an egocentrism that is sadly common in American life and politics today. As we approach the November election, the political landscape in our country and here in the state of Minnesota is shaped more and more by the demand for individual “choice” - regardless of harm done to others - and less by a commitment to authentic human goods that benefit everyone.

But, as Pope Francis reminds us, “all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start” (*Laudato si*, 205). Of course as Catholics we do not look only to politics to construct the civilization of love we are called to build, but we do know that, each election cycle represents a new opportunity to promote the humanitarian values of the Gospel and to pursue the true and the good with renewed energy and creativity. This year is no exception.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has given U.S. Catholics a comprehensive set of principles for making voting decisions in their document “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.” We whole-heartedly recommend this resource for every Catholic, and in addition we wish to offer a local perspective on the election given Minnesota’s unique local challenges and concerns. We do this because we are concerned that sometimes

the importance of local elections can be lost—especially given our state’s, counties’, cities’, and towns’ unique local challenges and concerns—by focusing exclusively on the presidential election.

We believe that what is especially needed right now in Minnesota is a return to solidarity amongst the entire human family. This requires us first to remember our own true identity as children of God - an identity that we share with all persons. Only when we see our fellow man and woman as brothers and sisters can we begin to work fruitfully towards a just society for all.

Living in a consumer culture

Just a few short months ago we all became familiar with scenes from grocery stores and wholesale retailers across the country of empty shelves, lines out the door, and grocery carts piled six feet high with toilet paper and disinfectant. The panic that ensued in our country over the thought that there might not be enough of these resources to go around, and the resulting instinct to hoard as much of it as possible, illustrates the consumer mindset of American culture today that has conditioned us to believe that we are entitled to have what we want, when we want it, regardless of the harm we may inflict upon someone else by acquiring it.

Having everything we want on demand is not a virtue in and of itself. Today, however, it seems as if we are increasingly persuaded by appeals to individual “choice” as the ultimate good for society, with no reference to an objective good of the human person or the human family by which to measure those choices. Morality is reduced to the phrase “As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else,” and it is argued that all is permissible and even praiseworthy, except that which limits another’s liberty.

This consumer culture has distorted many of the professions that are meant to serve the common good: medical professionals are expected to give their patients what they want, in some cases even when it is actually harmful (E.g., assisted suicide, abortion, sex-change operations). Even priests are sometimes treated like sacrament vending machines who function only to satisfy the demands of their parishioners.

Neither is politics immune to this distortion. Elected officials are expected to make decisions along party lines or to satisfy the wants of their constituents or donor base as if the people they serve are no more than one among many special interests that must be satisfied. Constituents often approach their legislators with a list of demands rather than with appeals to reason and to the good. Legislative priorities on both sides of the aisle demonstrate a narrow focus on special interest. We find them proposing laws like assisted suicide, gambling expansion, the creation of a commercial surrogacy market, and recreational marijuana legalization, while bills that would extend assistance to those most in need, such as the immigrant driver’s license bill, opportunity scholarship initiatives, or pro-life initiatives are met with indifference and even hostility.

The need for solidarity

Solidarity is the awareness of the bonds we share with every person living on this planet because we belong to the one human family, under the benevolent providential care of God the Father. Society is a great “family of families” in which we all need one another. In a culture slavishly devoted to independence, it is hard to fully appreciate our interdependence and to have genuine concern for others. As Americans, we are taught from an early age that we have been given the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but rarely are we challenged to consider the responsibility we have to guarantee those rights for others, especially those on the margins of society.

Pope John Paul II said it best: “[S]olidarity [is] not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far ...[but] a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38). Solidarity is rooted in the Gospels where Jesus tells us how to

treat our neighbor in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and reminds us that “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

A return to solidarity must begin with our own awareness of our identity as children of God. We have been redeemed, purchased by Christ’s death and resurrection, and through Baptism we have been made sharers in his Divine life as members of the Church, the Body of Christ. Because of his saving love we are called to live in word and deed a life of gratitude for the gifts he gives us, which shows itself in loving service to our brothers and sisters who are made in his image as well as reverence for all his creation. Our response of solidarity is rooted in this proper sense of our own identity as redeemed children of God, and the responsibility we have for others because of it. As well as a recognition of the dignity of our common humanity and shared common goal—eternal beatitude.

We live in a society, however, that prefers to espouse other identities, and encourages us to make them our primary ones—considering ourselves to be a U.S. citizen above all else, or aligning ourselves primarily with a political party or candidate, or even identifying first and foremost with our race, a preferred gender construct, or our sexual preferences, as if these things are the main realities that define who we are. In reality, these are secondary identities, or sometimes false identities, and too shallow to speak to our deepest selves. Even worse, they ultimately lead to tribalism and to the temptation to look at those who are different from us as “other” or even as enemies. The counterfeit solidarity that we think we achieve with others through these identities masks instead an individualism that undermines the pursuit of the authentic common good.

As the Pontifical Academy for Life recently stated about the current pandemic: “Our pretensions to monadic solitude have feet of clay. With them, there crumbles the false hopes for an atomistic social philosophy built on egoistic suspicion toward what is different and new, an ethics of calculative rationality bent toward a distorted image of self-fulfillment, impervious to the responsibility of the common good on a global, and not only national, scale.” (*Humana Communitas in the age of pandemic: untimely meditations on life’s rebirth*, §1.3, July 22, 2020).

When we put our own wishes and wants over and above the needs of others, when we ignore unjust structures of sin merely because they do not directly impact us, and when we look upon our political opponents as personal enemies, we further alienate ourselves from this human family. Rather we must see our own fate as intrinsically connected to that of others as we pursue the true good of every person with wisdom and empathy seeking to build communities that help everyone flourish regardless of national, religious, racial, or partisan differences.

The unique circumstances brought about by the pandemic, show that we “are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided.” As Minnesotans make decisions about voting and participation in the political process, our guiding principle must be the conviction that “the good to which we are all called and the happiness to which we aspire cannot be obtained without an effort and commitment on the part of all, nobody excluded, and the consequent renouncing of personal selfishness ... it is for all or it is for none” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26).

Moving beyond the “lesser of two evils” paradigm

What does this all mean for us as we enter the voting booth on November 3rd?

First, it is a call to scrutinize our political candidates by how they promote an agenda of solidarity. Minnesotans should ask themselves when evaluating candidates: Does a candidate seek to unite Americans across party, socioeconomic, and racial lines, or do they employ rhetoric that stokes division? Does the candidate focus on the good he or she hopes to accomplish in office or does the candidate seem more interested in pointing out the failures of others? Is a candidate’s vision of justice one that includes everyone, or will it benefit only a select few? Is she committed to policies that promote authentic human flourishing, or is he a proponent of policies

that would reward vice and harm the elderly, the unborn, the disabled, the immigrant, the marginalized, and the poor? It is important to remember that not all issues are equal and that we must take our stand with the most vulnerable.

One may believe that we are setting up voters for exasperation, because such candidates and officials seem to be in short supply. But we must admit that we see mainly the worst of public officials on the news. In reality, many elected officials want to do the right thing and just need guidance in doing so. And there have been bipartisan pieces of state legislation in recent sessions that demonstrate the solidarity we are speaking of, such as criminal sentencing reform, aids to the homeless and more affordable housing, and an increase in the allotment to programs serving Minnesota's families most in need.

Voting is a matter of prudence on the part of each person. We must form our consciences and inform our vote. Even still, sometimes there is no easy answer.

It is unlikely that you will find a perfect candidate. We do not need many reminders that politicians, like all of us, are sinners. The political process works when we come together in a reasoned discussion about how we order our life together. There is no presumption that we all start out with the right answers. We have to convince others of the reasonableness and justice of our position.

It is also often true that Catholics will look at a particular candidate election and discern that they must pick between the lesser of two evils. Or even that they cannot, in good conscience, vote for either of the major-party candidates; in this case, voting third-party or choosing not to vote in a particular race is not a "wasted vote" but may be an action taken out of principle.

At the same time, refusing to vote altogether because you do not like the candidates at the top of the ballot is imprudent. There are many other candidates who have the potential to impact major decisions being made at a local level and these merit study and careful consideration. If we are disgusted with what goes on in Washington, it should give us more reason to focus our attention on electing trustworthy leaders to state and municipal government.

Regardless of our personal decisions and the election outcomes this fall, our work does not end on November 3rd. Building a culture of solidarity requires to work for the true and the good in ways beyond voting. We must learn to bring our gifts to the process to advocate for good policies. Reaching out to our elected officials in civic friendship and taking the time to build relationships with them helps build the common good by establishing trust and good will even if we do not always agree politically. It gives us an opportunity to share honestly with our legislators about our concerns and invite them into a conversation about what a good and just society ought to look like. Good public policy cannot save our society, but it can create the conditions where we can all flourish.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the current crisis, the stakes are high. Every member of society has to do their part in building a civilization of love. Acting with solidarity is required of us as disciples of Jesus Christ. "[T]he response required of us is not just a reaction based on sentimental notions of sympathy; it is the only *adequate* response to the dignity of the other summoning our attention, an ethical disposition premised on the rational apprehension of the intrinsic value of every human being." (*Humana Communitas*, § 2.3)

Now is a time for each person to think and pray seriously about what he or she can do to transform the political environment so that we end existing cycles of division and factionalism that pull us further and further apart from one another. It is easy to lament the current situation and complain about what is going wrong. Imagine what could happen if we instead chose to ask God for wisdom and courage so that we could do something about it.

The election of 2020 is a unique opportunity for Minnesota Catholics to devote themselves anew to participation in the political process for the sake of our brothers and sisters, refusing to demonize others or to give in to a consumer mindset, and instead choosing to embrace our call to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers, working together to build a just society for all.

ⁱ These reflections were published with the permission of the Minnesota Catholic Conference Board of Directors

