



MAKING CONNECTIONS

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THE TIMES THAT TRY OUR SOULS

During an historic pandemic, our country faces one of the most contentious presidential election campaigns in recent memory. Some of our fellow Americans may be wondering if they are living in the apocalypse, with fire, drought, hurricanes, flooding, riots and other stresses added to the mix. Just where is our country headed?

There is much at stake in the upcoming election. As Catholics, we are obliged to be informed of and to engage in the political process. Our society benefits when good Catholics run for office, participate in political parties, and fulfill their civic duty to vote. We each have an important role in creating a society in which every human life is respected and valued, and in which the freedom to practice religion is guaranteed.

What I see happening in our nation, unfortunately, is a strident, rancorous discord that tears not only at the fabric of our society but also at the communion of the Church. And this disharmony endangers the salvation of souls. I am more concerned about the aftermath of the upcoming presidential election than I am about the election itself. What kind of people are we becoming because of today's political climate?

As the bishop for this local church, the Diocese of Jefferson City, I have a particular responsibility to do everything I can to ensure the salvation of souls in my diocese. For this reason, I strongly encourage every Catholic and anyone of goodwill to read the statement of the U.S. bishops, "[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#)." As the document explains, the Catholic social teachings we hold dearly have political implications, whether they concern the dignity of human life, marriage and family, racism, the environment or the economy. For this reason, I have and will continue to take positions on important ballot measures and issues that touch upon these teachings. However, the responsibility I carry as a bishop does not mean I tell people for whom they should vote. Let me explain.

The obligation to preserve the authentic teachings of our Catholic faith is not the same thing as making a prudential decision on how these teachings are best applied in the political process. The Church's responsibility in addressing political and social issues is to assist Catholics in forming their consciences. When we vote for candidates for public office, we are not directly voting for party platforms or issues, we vote for a person. This is an important nuance, which is considered in detail in "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," nos. 17-39. The individual Catholic voter bears responsibility for connecting the dots between what our faith teaches and which candidates will best serve the common good. For this reason, no bishop, priest, deacon, religious or lay ecclesial minister shall endorse or oppose a candidate in the name of the Church.



It is urgent that each of us enter these remaining weeks before the election with the end in mind – our place in eternity. In addition to voting in accord with a well-formed conscience, we are all obliged to be faithful to our Lord in how we treat one another, especially during this charged election season. I therefore encourage the following:

1. Always treat other people according to their dignity as fellow human beings, perhaps especially those who espouse contrary political opinions from us. People can disagree, even fervently, without losing decorum and respect. Unfortunately, the lack of civility now commonplace only feeds the culture of death and impedes a culture of life. Jesus instructed us to love our enemy and to pray for those who persecute us.
2. Remember frequently the teaching of our Lord: “How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,’ when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye? You hypocrite!” (Luke 6:42). As Christians engaged in the political process, we are obliged to reflect first on the shortcomings of our own political party and candidates before casting aspersions on others. It is all too easy to point out how the other political party or other candidates fall short of our Catholic teachings. It is difficult, even humbling, to acknowledge the truth that our own political party and candidates also fall short in some way.
3. No matter whom the electorate will choose on Nov. 3, many people will still be hurting from the effects of the pandemic – mentally, physically, emotionally and economically. The broken-hearted will still be with us, as will the neglected and marginalized. They will need our mercy and charity. We will need to find a way to heal our political divisions and to work side by side with all people of goodwill to “form a more perfect union.”

We can do none of this if we are not first paying attention to our own souls. As St. Paul wrote, it is impossible for God’s Love to be born from idolatry, hatred, rivalry, jealousy, fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, and other selfish behavior (see Galatians 5:19-23).

Instead, St. Paul claims that our souls should bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Notice how each of these fruits of the Spirit are a virtue that affects other people. If we take care of the state of our own soul first, we can then relate well with others. But when we fail to live in accord with these perfections, it is an indication that something is wrong in our own soul.

In these trying days, when we are all somewhat fragile and feeling buffeted by the storms of life, those gifts of the Spirit are the best offerings we can bring to our families, our communities and our nation. May our participation in this year’s election be an opportunity for us to act in accord with our Catholic faith and to strengthen a more perfect union among us.