



DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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A Pastoral Letter on Politics and How Catholics Can Respond

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” In the ancient Mediterranean world this question was posed to highlight the relationship between reason or philosophy, symbolized by Athens, renowned for its philosophical traditions, and religious faith, symbolized by Jerusalem, sacred to Judaism and Christianity (and now to Islam). In our present American context Athens and Jerusalem may stand for the relationship between politics and religion.

We Catholics know that Jesus taught that our love of God has to be joined to love of our neighbor. That command prompts us to foster the good of the communities in which we live: our town or city, our state and nation and our world. Our civic involvement might lead us to coach a children’s soccer team or contribute to an organization that provides sheltered workshops for persons with special needs or join an international group that works for peace. Our service fulfills the Lord’s command, for all people are in some degree our neighbor.

It is said that, after the constitutional convention in 1787 in Philadelphia, a woman asked Benjamin Franklin what kind of government the framers had given the country. He reportedly said: “A republic, Madam, if you can keep it.” Love of country is a form of love of neighbor. Do we not all want to keep our republic strong? Then we must dedicate ourselves to its wellbeing, which demands that we be involved in political affairs. Jesus has joined Athens and Jerusalem and what God has joined we have no right to separate. As Pope Francis has said: “Sometimes we hear: a good Catholic is not interested in politics. This is not true: good Catholics immerse themselves in politics by offering the best of themselves so that the leader may govern.”

In some countries religion is banned from public expression. In Vietnam religious believers may gather for worship and to study their faith but they are not allowed to engage in public activities or criticize the government. Catholics in Nicaragua are now experiencing government restrictions on their free speech. Such governments tolerate Jerusalem but not its relationship with Athens.

Our American situation is different but not benign. Powerful groups wish to curtail our right to the free exercise of our religion. Federal agencies’ regulations and decisions by government officials and courts are increasingly hostile to the values we try to live by, often seeking to force compliance to values alien to our faith – even in Catholic institutions. Our concern, however, is not only with our internal Church life but with the effect of unjust policies on the common good. It is incumbent, then, on us Catholics, to take part in the political process and raise our voices in the public square.

Our Catholic faith is a great help to us in seeing our way forward. With centuries of experience with many forms of government, certain basic principles have emerged in our Catholic tradition to guide our efforts to do good for our communities. The most fundamental one is our respect for the human person in community. That means that we consider both what affects individuals and what affects the common good (which includes families and marginalized groups).

This fundamental principle is why we oppose abortion and assisted suicide and favor efforts to lift people out of poverty and end unjust discrimination. Both the individual and the group deserve our support. Concern for the common good, however, is not limited to sub-groups but must respect the needs, rights and obligations of all people. It is why we must all obey traffic laws, pay taxes and ensure the right of every citizen 18 or older to vote.

We are well aware of the serious divisions among Americans today. Some disagreements are over matters so essential to our common life – the nature of marriage and gender, hard-won civil rights for African Americans, our historic welcoming of refugees – that one view or the other must prevail through persuasion and conversion of minds and hearts and, finally, by law. In other matters – and often regarding the specific ways in which more fundamental concerns are resolved – compromise is appropriate to achieve social peace. No one gets the whole loaf, but everyone gets a part of it.

In dealing with societal divisions, can our experience as Catholics be helpful? It can be, if we remain united ourselves. I urge you not to import disagreements over politics into the Church. We must treat one another as the brothers and sisters in faith that our baptism has made us and not primarily as political opponents. We must respect the person even if we firmly disagree with his or her views.

Despite many differences of race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education and political persuasion, we Catholics enjoy a unity of faith, charity and governance that are the envy of many other groups. We must all learn to respect one another, remembering Jesus' words: *Judge not lest you be judged. The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you* [Matthew 7:1-2]. Our unity comes from staying within the parameters of the faith that comes to us from the Lord Jesus through his Apostles. Analogously, we Americans can be united, even though we are of many races, levels of income and education and political leanings, if we all hold to the ideals of liberty, justice and equality for which past generations strove. We must call our fellow citizens back to those ideals. Our unity as Catholics gives them good example.

In the current political climate, how can the faithful Catholic respond? First, if you are capable and so inclined, you might offer yourself for political office. Bring your Catholic conscience with you: respect for the dignity of the individual and service to the common good. Running for office usually means joining a political party. No party fully embodies the fundamental principles of Catholic political life; yet, if you have the fortitude to keep your principles, you may by your integrity and persistence win some people to your side. If running for office is too strong a drink for you, you might help a candidate in whom you have confidence or volunteer to serve at a polling place on election day or simply be willing to share your well-informed point of view in cordial conversations with family and friends.

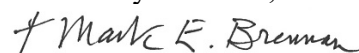
Second, there are groups working for justice in various areas. They are always looking for new members. The prolife movement was successful in attracting many to its cause, as have been some groups advocating for racial justice. Working with others is usually more effective than going it alone.

Third, vote. But before you vote, consider seriously the candidates. What is the candidate's track record and positions on important issues? What about his or her integrity and sound judgment? Does the office the candidate is seeking have much impact on issues that affect individuals or the common good? Regarding issues, our Church looks at them through the lens of the dignity of each human being and the common good. Look for the document entitled, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," at the US Bishops' Conference website (www.usccb.org, then click on Issues and Actions, then Topics, and then Faithful Citizenship). I encourage you to read it because it gives insights from a thoughtful Catholic perspective on many issues facing American voters today.

The most maligned person in the political process is the voter. We are often faced with very difficult choices, forced at times to determine which candidate will do the least harm. I urge you to form your conscience according to the fundamental Catholic values of respect for the individual person's dignity and the promotion of the common good. Because each of you brings your conscience into the voting booth or as you fill out your absentee ballot, the Church's clergy must respect your conscience. I have made it clear to our priests and deacons that, while they should address issues based on the Church's teachings, they are not to endorse or defame particular candidates or parties, whether in the pulpit, in teaching, on social media or in other ministerial settings. They are welcome to their opinions, but they should not exploit their ministry to advance them. You deserve that respect.

Jesus was once confronted by his opponents and asked whether or not taxes should be paid to the Roman government which was occupying the Jewish land. His response was: *Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God* [Mark 12:17]. The Lord accepted the legitimate role of government while emphasizing the higher sovereignty of God. In acting on behalf of our republic through political involvement, we fulfill both roles, for the sovereign God has taught us to love our neighbor, leading us into the world of civic life and politics. Athens and Jerusalem are distinct but are not inherently opposed. May God's grace sustain our service to our neighbor through appropriate political activity and participation in the public square, where we both render God praise and benefit our fellow citizens.

Sincerely in Christ,



+Mark E. Brennan

Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston