

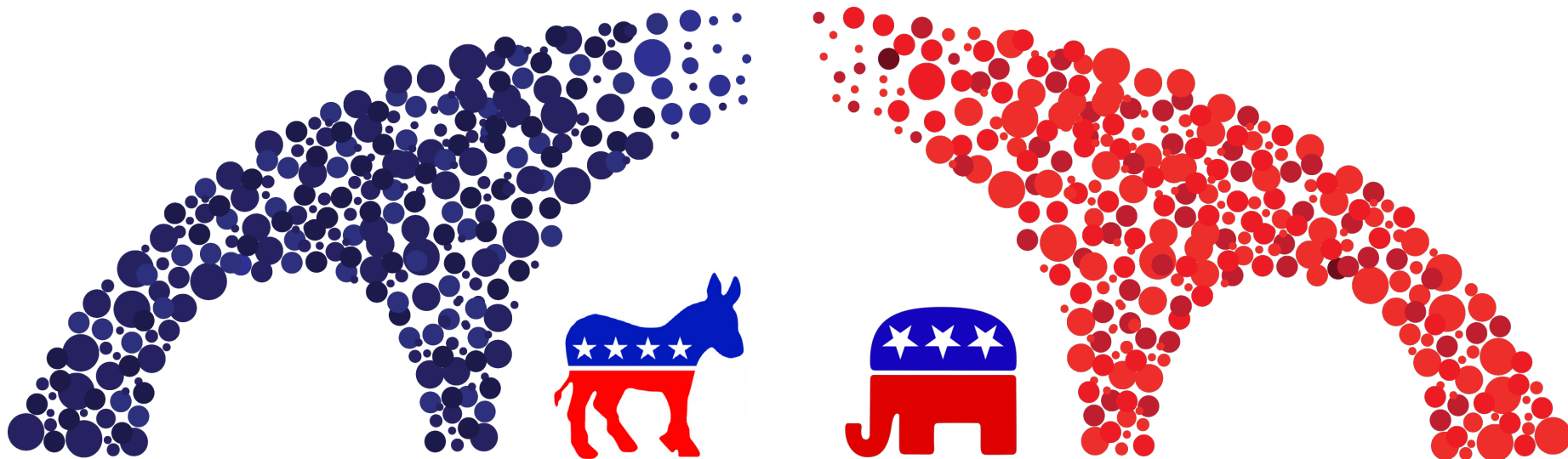


Missouri Catholic Conference

The Messenger

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BRIDGING THE POLITICAL GAP

BY MIKE HOEY

There is an old and narrow bridge at Louisiana, Missouri that I cross several times a year to visit my eldest daughter in Chicago. The Champ Clark Bridge was built in 1928 and people have known for years that it should be replaced. You hold your breath as you cross this weathered bridge. On sunny days the Mississippi shimmers menacingly far below. Things get especially interesting when a big truck approaches from the opposite side. Fixing or replacing a bridge like the one at Louisiana requires cooperation from many people. Recently, some federal money was found and Illinois and Missouri may soon pool their resources to replace the bridge. I thought of that bridge recently while considering the 2016 elections.

Presidential politics have sunk to a new low this year. Insults designed to silence opponents and avoid reasoned argument are the order of the day. Vulgarity is so commonplace that television debates should be R-rated for adults only. Regardless of who secures the nominations, or who ultimately wins the presidency, great harm has been done to the realm of public discourse.

An issue-by-issue comparison of candidates is difficult and, perhaps not even helpful. If a candidate flips positions from day to day how can you trust anything he or she says? Campaigns this year have become something out of an episode of “Survivor” in which people will do and say anything to win. How has it come to this? Talk to political operatives and they will tell you a dirty little secret: people say they hate negative ads, but negative ads work. The lies and personal insults are not all spontaneous outbursts; these verbal grenades are deliberately launched by politicians to divide people and foment hate and fear toward political enemies.

Mexicans and Muslims are demonized, and pro-life people who seek to protect unborn life are accused of waging a war against women. This rhetoric is calculated, but not thoughtful; it is designed

to bring “my side” to the polls, not to inspire or educate on issues. The demand to build a wall between Mexico and the United States is simply the most obvious sign of our divisive politics. After all, even the Catholic bishops, who urge us to “welcome the stranger” and to be compassionate to immigrants, recognize that a country has a right to secure its borders and have an orderly immigration process. The “build a wall” rhetoric, however, seeks to build walls not just between nations, but between people, even people who are American citizens.

In *Mending Wall*, Robert Frost opined: “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out/And to whom I was like to give offense.”

Who knows what talents and contributions we are shutting out when we spurn our opponents. When Saint John Paul II visited our shores many years ago, he left a warning message. “Democracy needs virtue... Democracy stands or falls with the truths and values it embodies and promotes,” he said. Part of that virtue must involve charity toward others, including a willingness to listen to others and give their opinions a respectful hearing. This was the glory of the ancient Greek City States where reasoned debate and the art of eloquent declamation was held in high esteem. John Adams took the same view. “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people,” he said. “It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

But eloquence is not required to shout down political opponents. And no dialogue or appeal to conscience is possible when someone like Robert Lewis Dear kills people at an abortion clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado and then declares: “I am a warrior for the babies.” This kind of rhetoric and these kinds of bloody actions can destroy a democratic society. The founders of the American Republic warned that the “curse of factionalism” could tear apart the fabric of civility needed for the rational exchange of ideas. A faction, James Madison said,

could be either a majority or a minority of citizens, but in either case it was motivated by its own special interests, not the common good. (*Federalist No. 10*) In classic natural law theory as expounded by John Locke and studied by Madison, men and women form governments to come out of a savage state of nature where “Might is Right” and no laws protect the weak. Catholic teaching underscores the need for just authority, declaring that government exists to uphold the common good and especially to protect the weakest members of society (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1902-1912)

Yet once a government is formed, even a supposedly democratic one, injustices can still occur, and a tyranny of the majority can develop. In defending the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Stephen Douglas championed “popular sovereignty,” arguing the people in the new territory should decide for themselves whether to accept the institution of slavery. Abraham Lincoln responded: “When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also another man, that is more than self-government – that is despotism.”

Majority rule does not ensure justice. In *Federalist No. 51* Madison said: “In a society under the form of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign, as in a state of nature where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger.” Catholic Church teaching also warns that democracy can degenerate into unjust rule:

“As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.” Democracy is fundamentally “a ‘system’ and as such is a means and not an end. Its ‘moral’ value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behavior, must be subject: in other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs.”

Seen in this light, calls to initiate special police patrols of citizens in Muslim neighborhoods should alarm all Americans. And rhetoric touting “full reproductive rights” can be recognized for what it is: a silencing of those who cannot speak for themselves, innocent unborn children.

The idea that “Might makes Right” can also be seen when political candidates wave off legal prohibitions against torture and tell voters “[military intelligence] will do what I say.” One wonders if the rule of law is durable enough to withstand the whims of leaders who are willing to play to the crowd by ignoring laws and taking whatever action they deem necessary. Of course, we elect our leaders but that does not guarantee they will act justly.

Even aspiring tyrants can say the right things for a time until they take the reigns of power. Faced with politicians who may deceive or manipulate voters to gain power, simply reviewing a checklist of a candidate’s supposed positions on issues is wholly inadequate. A better approach is to consider a candidate’s overall pattern of behavior. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (par. No. 410) declares that leaders should possess basic character traits, such as patience, modesty, moderation, and charity. In general, a leader is to be a servant of the people who exercises authority in order to promote the common good.

So perhaps we just need a good and holy king, for example, someone like Saint Louis IX who ruled France in the 13th century and spent many hours daily in prayer, fasting and penance. But we don’t believe in the Divine Right of Kings anymore, and good kings can be followed by bad ones. So how can just rule be preserved, and how can the weak be protected from the strong? Not by eliminating factions, according to Madison. To snuff out factions would be to blow out the candle of liberty. Madison advocated a Republic in which competing views could be refined by “a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and



The MCC works across party lines in the Capitol to fight for legislation that will benefit the common good.

love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” (*Federalist No. 10*) In particular, the U.S. Senate was seen as the institution that could act as a check on factionalism and impulsive decisions that might be deeply regretted later.

Madison saw the checks and balances of the U.S. Constitution as a bulwark against mob rule and would be tyrants. He did not fully foresee how political parties would arise that would operate outside the tidy confines of the U.S. Senate and the other branches of government. His political ally, Thomas Jefferson, was more realistic and considered political turmoil as necessary as a thunderstorm that clears the air for a new day. A world without political parties is nearly unthinkable in modern American politics and yet no party or political candidate is perfect.

Most American Catholics find fault with both major political parties and with nearly all of the candidates. This is not a bad thing; it indicates the person is taking their Catholic faith seriously. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (par. No. 573) observes: “It is difficult for the concerns of the Christian faith to be adequately met in one sole political entity; to claim that one party or political coalition responds completely to the demands of faith or of Christian life would give rise to dangerous errors...” The Church understands there will be political parties but urges Christians to have a critical distance from their chosen party and to always work to move that party to an agenda more closely aligned with the common good. Especially in working on the issue platforms of parties, Catholics can find guidance in the Faithful Citizenship reflections provided by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

But no guidance from the bishops or other Catholic organizations will be of any benefit if voters simply ransack these documents for points that support the party or candidate they have already decided to

support. The bishops' reflections should be used to initiate a dialogue with others, not a war over whom to support or whom to demonize. Is such a dialogue possible? Can people who may not agree on everything still work together for the common good? The answer is yes, and it can be seen big ways and small, from the stirring humanitarian response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11 to small communities marshaling their resources to help children stricken with cancer. In fact, viewing the health of American democracy just through the prism of presidential politics can distort the truth. There are a lot of patriotic and public-spirited citizens doing many good things in communities across our country. The challenge is to bring back into national politics the fundamental decency seen so often in local affairs.

For the good of our country, we need citizens with political virtue. This involves stepping outside our comfort zones and participating in public affairs. Thomas Jefferson loved his home at Monticello and frequently lamented that he could not spend more time pursuing his scientific and artistic interests – landscaping, architecture and writing. But he served in the Virginia House of Burgess, wrote the Declaration of Independence and was President of the United States for two terms.

Most people cannot devote that much time to public concerns, but we can probably do more than we are presently doing. If more of us will recall the patriotism of people like Madison, Jefferson, Adams and Lincoln who loved their country and sought the common good of all citizens, then America can see better days ahead. Let's hope so. We need more patriots. There are a lot of bridges that need to be built.

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Catholic Teaching on Government, the Common Good and Democracy

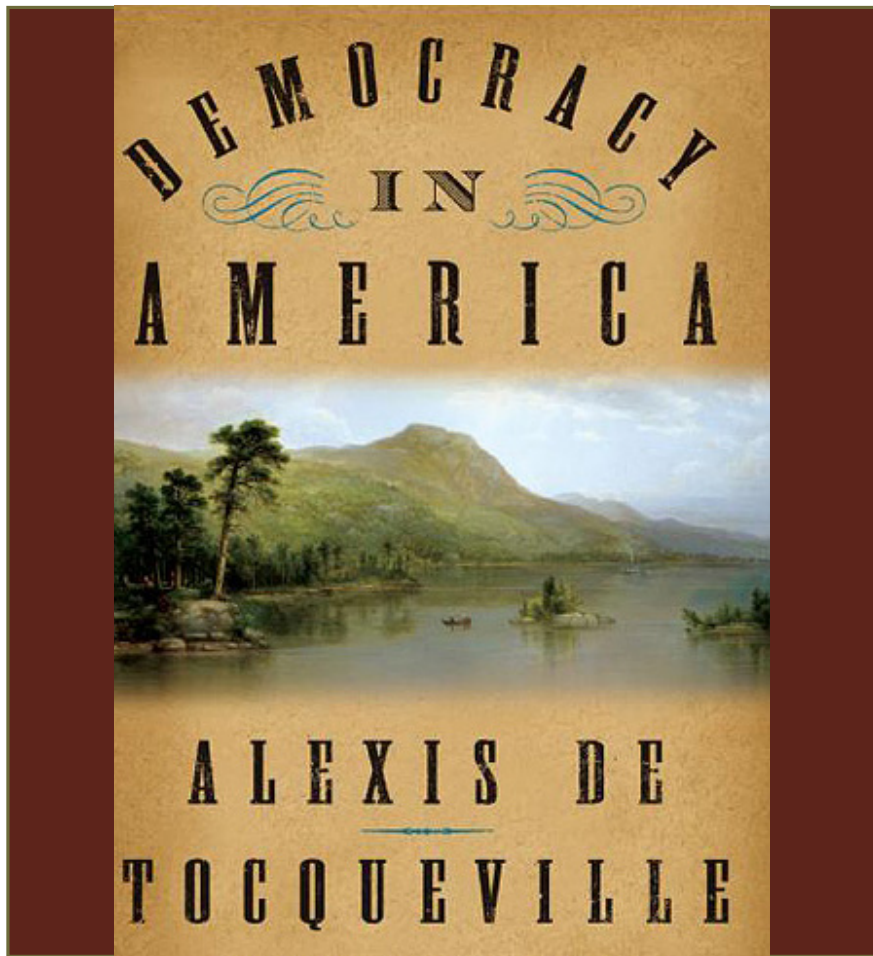
"Authority does not derive its moral legitimacy from itself. It must not behave in a despotic manner, but must act for the common good as a moral force based on freedom and a sense of responsibility."
Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 1902

"Authority must recognize, respect and promote essential human and moral values. These are innate and 'flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person; values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy.' These values do not have their foundation in provisional and changeable 'majority' opinions, but must simply be recognized, respected and promoted as elements of an objective moral law, the natural law written in the human heart. cf. (Rom 2:15) and as the normative point of reference for civil law itself."
Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, par. 397.

"An authentic democracy is not merely the result of a formal observation of a set of rules but is the fruit of a convinced acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures: the dignity of every human person, the respect of human rights, commitment to the common good as the purpose and guiding criterion for political life. If there is no general consensus on these values, the deepest meaning of democracy is lost and its stability is compromised."
Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, par. 407



Democratic Participation Necessary to Ward off Despotic Government



In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Toqueville remarks on the necessity of citizen participation in a democracy.

“I readily admit that public tranquillity is a great good, but at the same time I cannot forget that all nations have been enslaved by being kept in good order. Certainly it is not to be inferred that nations ought to despise public tranquillity, but that state ought not to content them. A nation that asks nothing of its government but the maintenance of order is already a slave at heart, the slave of its own well-being, awaiting only the hand that will bind it.

By such a nation the despotism of faction is not less to be dreaded than the despotism of an individual. When the bulk of the community are engrossed by private concerns, the smallest parties need not despair of getting the upper hand in public affairs. At such times it is not rare to see on the great stage of the world, as we see in our theaters, a multitude represented by a few players, who alone speak in the name of an absent or inattentive crowd: they alone are in action, while all others are stationary; they regulate everything by the their own caprice; they change the laws and tyrannize at will over the manners of the country; and then men wonder to see into how small a number of weak and worthless hands a great people may fall.”

Catholic teaching echos a similar thought.

“As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life. The manner of this participation may vary from one country or culture to another. One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom.” Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 1915

Faithful Citizenship: Catholic Bishops' Call for Political Responsibility

Every four years the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issues a reflection on the responsibility of Catholic voters to form their conscience as they consider voting choices in elections. To read this in-depth document, visit the USCCB website.

Personal Integrity, Politicians, and Finding a Political Home

Policy positions are all well and good, but can you always trust what the candidate is saying? Politicians promise a lot of things—and they are not above bending the truth. But at some point, voters have to decide if the candidate is basically trustworthy.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (par. No. 410) describes some of the attributes political leaders ought to possess:

Those with political responsibilities must not forget or underestimate the moral dimension of political representation, which consists in the commitment to share fully in the destiny of the people and to seek solutions to social problems. In this perspective, responsible authority also means authority exercised with those virtues that make it possible to put power into practice as service (patience, modesty, moderation, charity, efforts to share), an authority exercised by persons who are able to accept the common good, and not prestige or the gaining of personal advantages, as true goal of their work.

In the very early days of the American Republic, some hoped there would be no need for political parties. Very soon, however, citizens saw the advantage of banding together to make common cause on issues of shared concerns. Parties can help organize a major segment of public opinion into a coherent political force. But no party or candidate is perfect. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (par. No. 573) observes the struggles of finding a political party:

It is difficult for the concerns of the Christian faith to be adequately met in one sole political entity; to claim that one party or political coalition responds completely to the demands of faith or of Christian life would give rise to dangerous errors. Christians cannot find one party that fully corresponds to the ethical demands arising from faith and from membership in the Church.

Their adherence to a political alliance will never be ideological but always critical; in this way the party and its political platform will be prompted to be ever more conscientious in attaining the true common good, including the spiritual end of the human person.

