

A Time for National Healing, New Directions and A New Government

- After “politics as usual” and the national campaigns, what are the lessons learned?
- Can we heal as a nation? Will we choose to “recreate” a functioning democracy?
- What can our Catholic Social Teachings contribute to going forward?

Polarization, Politics of Division – What Now?

We have survived the long presidential campaigns and observed the government working through transition and the inauguration. During the campaigns, we lived through character assassination, meanness, lies and an orchestrated politics of division made possible by a misuse of money and the power of marketing and psychology. Respectful discussion in the public square of ideas was limited and seeking the common good was the goal of too few.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting not only on this campaign but also on the federal government over the past years, we have experienced not only sharp political divisions but have witnessed a climate where little gets done. So, what are the lessons learned?

- Maintaining a sharp polarization yields few results for either side of any argument.
- We can no longer explain to our children how our government works (remember the educational song about “I am a bill on Capital Hill . . .”). Explaining how a bill actually proceeds will only discourage our children!
- Resources are wasted – dollars, personal energy, time.
- Windows of opportunity pass by, “things get worse”.
- Pain and suffering grows – as evidenced by increases in unemployment, poverty, homelessness, loss of access to health care, crime and broad based financial distress.

It Was Not Always This Way

Some 30 – 40 years ago the political process at the national level was noticeably more functional - with sharing of ideas, lively debate on the issues, and working out some political compromises. (This is not to underplay the limitations that still existed.) The political leadership generally respected each other and knew it was in their best interest and that of their constituents to “get the job of governing done”. That practical model of governing was lost starting in the late 1970’s.

What now? Will the new national government be able to lead us toward a functioning democracy? Or will we collectively head for the rut of highly partisan politics? Time will tell, but national healing cannot wait.

Reframing How We Collectively Govern

There is a better and more practical way to go forward as a country and as individuals. Issues can still be debated vigorously and alternatives evaluated, but with useful results in the end for both sides on most issues. To accomplish this, I join with others in saying that we should:

- Reformulate our expectations,
- Change some of our methods,
- Recast how we look at “the opposing side”,
- Find common ground with “the other side”,

- Broaden the political dialog at the local level.

Much of a better approach to operating is contained in Jesus’ Second Great Commandment and in our Catholic Social Teachings, as well as being just good common sense. I invite you to reflect on the principles covered in the first four bulletin articles of this series (see citation below). We will cover this topic in more detail in future articles in the series, but for now, I offer some simple opening thoughts:

Expectations: Insofar as we live in a diverse society, we should expect to engage a wide variety of views. From the earliest time as a nation in 1776, we have worked through an extremely broad range of problems, viewpoints and solutions.

Methods: We should do our homework, express our views and listen actively to the other views being expressed. We should see by now that confrontational methods usually yield much “heat” and disappointing results for all sides.

The Opposition: How we engage each other should be respectful of each other’s essential human dignity, life experience and potential for contributing innovative ideas.

Common ground: On topics where we cannot agree on the solutions, we need to work on getting part-way to our goals - where we can agree - rather than perpetuating a standoff.

Dialog on politics: We should, as individuals, stop avoiding the discussion of politics and what we need to do and become as a people. Our own life’s experience and local dialog can collectively inform the larger debate.

Time for Some Resolutions

Change starts with each of us. As we engage the new year:

- Let us fundamentally respect each other, as we learn in our Constitution and in Catholic Social Tradition.
- Let us accept that both Republicans and Democrats are patriotic, concerned for themselves, their children and their country, and have valuable ideas to contribute.
- Let us re-understand politics as the “art of the possible”.
- Let us listen intently to each others’ good ideas.
- Let us insist on non-partisan, critical thinking.
- Let us expect to propose, to discuss, to compromise and to go forward with consensus and voted decisions.
- Let us ignore both religious and secular commentators in the media who promote division and partisanship.
- Where we differ sharply, let us find the common ground that we can agree on and work together where we agree.
- And finally, let us pray for guidance, healing, listening skills, and the capacity to see the good in each other!

Deacon Bob Wallace January 2009

(For related materials, see www.paxjoliet.org/bulletin)

Representative Sources:

1. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, USCCB, Nov 14, 2007 – see www.faithfulcitizenship.org which is one of the U.S. Bishop's several permanent web sites on social concerns, peace and justice issues.
2. *Gaudium et Spes* (literally “Joy and Hope”) commonly known as “The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”, Second Vatican Council, December 8, 1965 (Available from the Vatican web site: www.vatican.va, just search on the Latin title.)
3. *A Nation for All*, Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley, Jossey-Bass / Wiley, 2008
4. *Sojourners, A Christian Magazine of Faith, Politics and Culture*, with printed subscriptions or on-line at www.sojo.net. Also, a free weekly newsletter – subscribe via e-mail to subscribe@sojo.net
5. *God's Politics – Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, Jim Wallis, Harper, 2005. Editor's note: Both *Sojourners* and *God's Politics* come out of the Christian Evangelical tradition and are largely consistent with Catholic Social Teachings in the views expressed. *Sojourners* also has a number of regular commentators who are Catholic and express appropriate Catholic viewpoints.

Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. Using Catholic Social Teachings as the main criteria (reference foundational articles 1 – 4 in this series at www.paxjoliet.org/bulletin - or from other sources), describe what you like about the other party's views. (If you tend to be a Republican, describe what you like about the Democrat's positions. Or, if you tend to be a Democrat, describe what you like about the Republican positions.)
2. Name one or two contentious issues where you have some thoughts on how to achieve common ground. (eg, on abortion, immigration reform, capital punishment, financial reforms). Elaborate on the specifics of where the common ground might be found.
3. Do you see progress among both Republicans and Democrats as the new Obama administration takes shape? Why or why not? Cite some recent examples.
4. Share what you think will be the most contentious public policy issues(s) going forward in 2009. What viewpoints would you express to a Republican legislator? What viewpoints would you express to a Democratic legislator?
5. For questions 2, 3 or 4 above, describe what Catholic Social Teachings apply and what do you draw from these teachings as a basis for forming a moral position or for working more collaboratively?