
Abide in Christ
Faithful Citizenship

By Most Rev. John C. Wester, August 2016 edition of People of God

Recently, I was at a social gathering when someone broke one of the cardinal rules of conversation: never talk about religion or politics, and certainly not together! He talked about his support of a presidential candidate, then offered his opinion about Pope Francis. Talk of religion and politics in public can lead to both awkward and interesting moments. Do I fight or flee? Or is there a third way? How are Catholics to respond to these kind of conversations? Do we participate in the public square or not? How do we participate in true dialogue with others to come to deeper understanding of ourselves and others? Are we to vote in contentious elections? How do we become informed voters, taking time to study the issues to better understand how to act?

As Catholics, we have a responsibility to be good citizens, exercise our right to vote, and to be active in the public sphere. We have to engage in civil discourse with principled ideas and concern for the common good. We cannot avoid it in good conscience. As Pope Francis reminds us, "We need to participate for the common good. 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 can govern" (Pope Francis, 9/16/13).

Our world is increasingly complex. The global social, political and economic realities do not give way to simplistic answers. Our world is fraught with wars, terror, violence, civil unrest, poverty, migration leading to a refugee crisis, hunger, and human-caused climate change, human trafficking and racism. As Catholics we uphold dignity of all, most especially the poorest and most vulnerable in our world. We must grapple with the fact that no one party or candidate represents all my thinking or the Church's thinking. We must also look at all the issues, not only one or two, although it is important to prioritize the issues since not all are equal and some, like the sanctity of human life, are of the utmost importance. Pope Francis speaks to our call to be involved in the complexities of our world. "Authentic faith...always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it...If indeed 'the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics,' the Church 'cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.'" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 183.).

A parishioner asked me recently about what to do in this election. How does a Catholic participate in the public square, and exercise the right and duty to vote, given these realities? She mentioned that neither of the major candidates represented well her beliefs. Tom Chapman, of the Iowa Catholic Conference, offers a great response when asked about party politics. He "asks attendees to put aside their political party, and take on their identity as a member of the Body of Christ. We discuss political issues and the principles of our social teaching as Catholics first." With that identity as Catholics, I offered her this response.

First, I told her to study the US Bishop's teaching document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC) on the political responsibility of Catholics. It contains important principles of Catholic teaching that all Catholics need to consider before voting, including the dignity of the human person, the common good,

solidarity and subsidiarity. I will offer subsequent articles on the FCFC document. Reading this document is one step in the formation of conscience.

As Pope Francis stated, “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.” (Pope Francis: No. 37, *The Joy of Love*). Conscience is a reasoned judgement that helps us recognize and seek what is good, and reject what is evil. We have to work at forming our conscience. It does not just happen. Conscience formation includes openness to the truth, studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church, examining the issues and background information, and prayerfully reflecting on our own and with others. It is a challenging lifelong task. As Antonio Spadaro, SJ and Louis Cameli state, “conscience is that interior space where I hear what is true, what is good, what is of God; it is that interior place of my relationship with God. And there, God speaks to my heart and helps me to discern and to understand the road that I need to follow. Once I have made a decision, God helps me to go forward and to remain faithful to it.”

Second, I encouraged her to be informed. We need to study carefully the issues at hand and analyze what we see, hear and read. We need to be aware of many points of view on a particular topic, not just the point of view that we might favor. We need to ask good, deep and sincere questions, in a spirit of good will, assuming the best of the other. In that sense, we need to enter into a true civil dialogue, whether with another person or the words in print in order to fully understand the “other’s” point of view and experience. This takes discipline and willingness to be changed by the dialogue.

Third, I reminded her of the need to discern, using the gift of prudence, which St. Ambrose described as the “charioteer of the virtues”. Prudence is synonymous with discernment. It enables us to “discern our true good in every circumstance...Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives and determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively.” (FCFC No. 19). Discernment means following one’s conscience with courage. As Pope Francis states, “this does not mean following my own ego, or doing what I am interested in, or what I find convenient, or what I like.” (Angelus address, 6/30/13).

Finally, I urged her to put her faith into action: exercise her right and duty to vote. I recall the long lines of voters when, finally, eight years after the Anti-Apartheid Act, South Africa’s first all-race elections were held. People stood in line for hours to exercise their hard earned right to vote, something we often take for granted in our country. Some in the US won’t even go a minute out of the way to vote. We have to remember the great sacrifice of those who won our right to vote. Participation in voting is a duty of a faithful citizen.

It is up to each Catholic therefore to form their conscience, to dialogue civilly with others, to make a prudent decision and to act, always working for the promotion of the Gospel and for the common good. Go to www.faithfulcitizenship.org to view the document, videos and other resources in both English and Spanish.