

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, part 3

By Archbishop John C. Wester, *People of God*, October 2016

Continuing my reflection on the U.S Bishops' document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC), I offer some additional thoughts about our place as Catholics in the public square. These reflections are prompted by a recent talk I heard by Fr. Bryan Hehir, a theologian on the faculty at Harvard who has worked with the USCCB over the years. He highlights some important points that help us to put FCFC in context.

Fr. Hehir reflected that Catholicism includes ideas, institutions and a community. When we approach an issue, such as poverty, we deal with it from the point of view of our thinking, our teaching, and our ideas. But Catholics also bring the institutional element of our church to bear, with its moral authority and its process for acting in the world. This is mainly done through its institutions and communities including the magisterium, parishes, student bodies, religious orders, presbyterates, conferences of bishops, etc. Catholics act through the institutions of our Church, which actively participate in the world's affairs. In this way, our "ideas" are grounded in the action of our institutions and communities. The Church exists not just in our sacristies but also out in the world, rubbing shoulders with others and exchanging ideas and priorities. Our hospitals and schools that serve the communities are also great examples of this.

He also noted that the Catholic Church has long held the importance of the common good. The principle of the common good holds that the good of each person is intimately related to the good of the whole community. It recognizes that the human person is both sacred and social by nature and is born into a fabric of relationships. All persons must contribute what they can to society and all must also share its mutual benefits. This human interdependence calls us to "take account of the needs and legitimate aspiration of other groups and even the general welfare of the entire human family" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #26).

In the US, we speak more in terms of "public interest " or "what is best for the most" rather than "common good." The Church's concept of common good is broader: Common good is a concern for the whole, is built on the dignity of

all people, and requires a foundation of basic human rights. People realize their dignity within a community not in isolation. Common good should not be confused with “utilitarianism” which is opting for the greatest good for the greatest number because this can allow for the exclusion of individuals or segments of society. Common good looks after looks at the dignity of all and must be the lens through which we act in society.

In addition, St. Pope John Paul II raised the principle of "solidarity" to new importance, though it has long been a key part of our social teaching. Solidarity means that we are brothers and sisters to all in our world. Solidarity calls us to stand with, to be one with all people, most especially those who are poor, vulnerable and/or suffering in some way.

Another point Fr. Hehir makes is that we are a “center/edge Church.” We are rooted in the center of society and at the same time the Gospel calls us to always go to the edges. Therefore, we are present both places. Many social groups only exist in one or the other: those in power, those without power; the rich and the poor; the entrenched and the newcomer, etc. This place of “both/and” gives the Church a unique perspective in dealing with issues.

The Church also brings important perspectives to social issues especially with community, pastoral care, direct services and public advocacy. Take for example the poor. Mercy toward the most poor and vulnerable is clearly the theme of Pope Francis' pontificate. He not only talks about this but also lives it, integrating his papacy into addressing the issue of poverty in our world. He is not simply dealing with the poor themselves but also the systems that cause and perpetuate poverty in our world: economic systems, world markets and political systems. He calls us to offer the poorest and most vulnerable a ministry of hospitality, to offer them community, a family in which they are important members and not just on the periphery. As Fr Hehir says, just like in the TV show, *Cheers*, “where everybody knows your name.”

Once the poor have a name and we are in relationship with them, we offer pastoral care to address SPIRITUAL poverty. Pope Francis often reminds us that this is the worst kind of poverty. Through the Church we also provide

direct service for their immediate needs through St Vincent de Paul and Catholic Charities locally and internationally through Catholic Relief Services, Cor Unum, and Caritas International. In addition to services for immediate needs, the Church also works at the systems level to change policies that work against vulnerable. In the public square, we bring truth to power, talk to legislators, vote, and peacefully protest to give voice to the forgotten, and help poor people speak for themselves. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is an example of helping people on the margins to have a voice for positive change.

All of this suggests that we must see ourselves as Catholics who engage in what Fr. Hehir calls "critical collaboration." This means we must intelligently engage society through the lens of the Gospel, neither running away into our little corner nor accepting the norms of society that often are contrary to Gospel values. We acknowledge that we live in a pluralistic society and that not everyone agrees the Church's perspective. We have to engage society to do this but we are "critical" in that we do not go along with everything nor are we co-opted by society. Nonetheless, we have a responsibility to proclaim the Gospel in the public square, critically collaborating with society in an effort to move it closer to Christ's vision for his Kingdom here on earth.

It is my hope that this month's reflections on *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, as well as the last two months' articles, will help us to vote intelligently and prudently this coming November. The ballots this year present us with an eclectic mix of candidates and issues. We are called to vote in such way that Gospel values will be promoted, life will be cherished from conception to natural death, the poor will be given new hope, immigrants will be welcomed in our midst with the hospitality of Christ, the common good will be promoted and our solidarity with all our brothers and sisters will be deepened. I pray that we will do all that we can to form our consciences properly and to be faithful to the great responsibility we have as citizens of this wonderful country of ours, keeping in mind that we are also citizens of God's Kingdom here on earth.