



January 27, 2021

The attacks, accusations, and demands fly in from every side. “You supported Trump in the election and are complicit in the attack on the Capitol.” “You are in the back pocket of the Democratic Party.” “You made abortion the only issue in the election.” “You were not vocal enough in defense of life.” “You need to help stop the steal.” “I demand that you publicly affirm that Biden is the legitimate president.” “I am leaving the Church because you are too (take your pick) … conservative, liberal, silent, vocal, weak, strong.” These are all messages I and probably every bishop in the country have been inundated with these past months and it is actually getting worse. The anger and vitriol is palpably toxic.

Our cultural, political, and social divisions, exacerbated by COVID; the elections; and the violence in our streets and cities have unfortunately entered into the Church and are seriously wounding our unity in Christ. We now seem to have Biden Catholics and Trump Catholics, perhaps just the latest incarnation of traditional and progressive Catholics, but a division that is louder, angrier, and far less compromising than all the previous rifts in the Body of Christ. Any words of moderation, actions of conciliation, benefit of the doubt given to another point of view, or attempt to find middle ground is dismissed as betrayal and disloyalty to the truth.

Most Catholics are simply trying to live their faith, focus on Jesus Christ, become holy, and do God’s will. Many people had questions and concerns about some of President Trump’s policies and actions, as many do about President Biden. The Catholic bishops of the United States called abortion the “preeminent” issue facing our nation because of its intrinsic evil as the deliberate taking of human life in its fragile beginnings, but “preeminent” does not mean “only.” I articulated this point in my letter last September. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has always tried to work with every presidential administration, supporting policies and programs consonant with moral teaching and resisting those which are not. The fact that President Biden is a baptized Catholic who attends Mass and asserts faith as the guiding principle of his life gives greater urgency to the need to challenge those of his policies which are opposed to moral teaching based on the natural law. Some may mistakenly assume the Church is taking political sides, but Her actions are always inspired by the truth of God’s revelation and the dignity of the human person. And that cuts both ways, as the Word of God is “sharper than a two-edged sword.” *Hebrews 4:12*

All Catholics have to be careful to engage in political life in a manner that reflects the Gospel, but clergy need to exercise special caution so that their political activity is consistent with their vocation in the Church. Bishops, priests and deacons, as individuals and citizens, obviously can vote and hold political opinions. As pastoral leaders and members of the hierarchy, however, our

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task is to preach and teach the Catholic faith to the laity and to lay out the revealed priority of moral issues (and indeed for pastors to fail to preach the truths of our faith is to fail in loving our people). The task of the laity is to form their consciences and apply the teachings of the Church to the spheres of politics, economy, society, and culture. Clerics should not be publicly voicing overt and purely political opinions regarding individuals, parties, election results, the current news cycle, nor engaging in ad hominem attacks. Such actions threaten to politicize the Church and divide our people even more. Furthermore, canon law places legitimate limits on clerical engagement in political activities. This is not a matter of being timid or politically correct, remaining neutral on moral issues, or protecting the Church's tax exempt status, but of acknowledging and honoring the respective roles of the clergy and the lay faithful.

I have a suggestion for everyone, including myself. Let's spend these months leading up to Easter in deeper prayer, penance, and almsgiving. Instead of pointing accusatory fingers at others, let's point one at ourselves. How can I be more patient, kind, gentle, and compassionate to others, especially those I disagree with? Get off social media and get in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Stop watching so much news and start reading the Good News. Spend the time on volunteer service to help the poor instead of writing angry emails. Examine your conscience regarding the sins of calumny, rash judgment, violent anger, and malicious speech. And then go to confession.

I am not implying that we should be silent in the face of evil, injustice, and wrongdoing, but we need to stick with the moral issues and refrain from the personal attacks. If we do not even desire to heal the divisions among us, how can we ever rediscover our unity in Christ? The painful experience of these past months tells me that we as fallen human beings can become divisively tribal. We instinctively associate with the people who think, act, and live as we do. While this may be a reflexive human response due to our fallen nature, Jesus Christ calls us to a far greater reality, indeed a supernatural unity, founded in the very life of the Most Blessed Trinity. Jesus served, loved, died, and rose from the dead to establish a New Covenant in His Blood, a redeemed humanity of every race, tribe, and tongue, incorporating every culture, nationality, class, and people into the Church. For us Christians, water is thicker than blood, for the communion we discover in the waters of Baptism is far deeper and significant than the ties of race, nation, political party, and even family. If we are bound together in Christ as His Mystical Body, then how can we keep tearing each other apart? We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

“But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.” *Galatians 5:15*

Blessings and prayers,

  
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