

Political Reality on Fraternal Life—NAFRA Chapter 2020
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*“Mindful that they are bearers of peace
which must be built up unceasingly,
they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony
through dialogue,
trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone
and in the transforming power of love and pardon.” (19)*

What is our understanding of social commitment? We know what our political commitment should be:

- less about seeking self-interest,
- less about accessing privilege,
- less about influencing power, and
- more about standing in solidarity with one another.

Our vote is but one expression of the all-encompassing commitment to the common good and of building up solidarity.

11 days remain until the presidential election, where we take an active role shaping the common good. The responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each of us in light of a properly formed conscience. The Rule asks us to reflect, discuss, engage, discern, and decide. The love of God creates in us a new mindset: seeing the world as God sees the world. We are created dependent, we need one another, we are responsible for one another. This is living out the virtue of solidarity—love and compassion and solidarity.

Benedict XVI said, *“the more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them.”*

In the words of St Oscar Romero before being killed, *“every effort to better a society, especially one that is enmeshed in injustice and in sin, is an effort that God blesses, that God desires, that God demands of us.”*

As Sr Thea Bowman put it so beautifully, *“God’s glory is revealed because we love one another across the barriers and boundaries of race, culture, and class.”*

We are not immune to divisive politics, even when our faith should unify us, and transcend purely partisan identification. Polarization causes harmful effects—politically, fraternally, and socially—when people are

- quick to judge and categorize;
- eager to condemn and forego dialogue;
- fear of the other as enemy.

Franciscans are called to take seriously the demands of the Gospel, to be agents of reconciliation and peace.

- alleviate suffering;
- extend hope;
- provide for the well-being of others.

There can be no two sides of this divide. All of us need to do better at encountering and accompanying one another on the journey of life.

Individualism is rampant in our social, political and economic life, tearing apart the body politic and the body of Christ. Racial inequality. Mass killings. Covid-19. Public shaming of a person. BLM. Fake news. MAGA. Qanon.

What are the possibilities before us at the ballot box for real solidarity in this historical moment?

We require leadership with character and experience, capable of expressing a moral vision to resist harsh individualism and lack of solidarity fueling the crises facing America.

We are in need of genuine leadership and vision to overcome ingrained attitudes of being “*masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters*” and to re-learn to “*speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world.*”

We are grateful when the values of the working class are being recognized; when our young people can see women reflected in our nation’s highest leadership.

We are encouraged when promises will be made to address climate change; for the creation of a path to citizenship of the undocumented; for restoring protection for asylum seekers; and never to repeat the criminal practice of separating families at the border.

We must also acknowledge the stumbling block created for religious voters by an ever-stronger commitment to promoting abortion without any sensible restrictions, including the repeal of the Hyde Amendment.

Looking into the signs of the times, we see a continuous struggle to re-direct ourselves away from a radical “one-issue” stance, namely abortion, to a *principled “pro-life” stance* that includes ***abortion among the 16 other acts of violence to human life—*Lumen Gentium* #27—“whatever is opposed to life itself:”***

- murder
- genocide
- abortion
- euthanasia or willful destruction
- mutilation
- torments inflicted on the body or mind
- attempts to coerce the will
- subhuman living conditions
- arbitrary imprisonment
- deportation
- slavery
- prostitution

- human trafficking of women and children
- disgraceful working conditions

Catholics are not single-issue voters. Pope Francis has repeatedly challenged American Catholics to reframe our approach to abortion. The Holy Father is clear in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 101:

“Our defense of the innocent unborn needs to be clear, firm, and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his/her stage of development.

Equally sacred are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection.

Just as the unborn have a special claim on our consciences, so too do those who suffer from the legacy of continuing racial injustice.”

We must repudiate any compromise of the moral integrity of the Church’s witness through partisan alignment with single-issue political strategies disconnected from an integral ethic of human life.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s lecture at Fordham University over 25 years ago put a name on it: *“a consistent ethic of life.”* Quote: *“If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political, and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us—the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrants, and the unemployed worker.”*

Politicians on both sides, including both current presidential candidates, have contributed to the weakening of solidarity and the erosion of the common good.

Benedict XVI, in Deus Caritas Est, 38, states: “The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life, and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice, as well as greater readiness to act accordingly.” The Church does not tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote.

Voting requires a well-formed conscience and to exercise prudence after prayerful discernment of all the issues at stake. Our commitment is not to the dealings of party platforms but to the instances of human suffering in our midst. Human solidarity is before us. To achieve justice, prayerfully reflecting on the sacredness and equal dignity of all human life, as well as our duty to care for God’s creation.

Let’s be honest. We may still arrive at different conclusions as to whom to vote for. However we vote, God will judge us by the depth of our commitment to stand with those forced on the margins of our society, even after Election Day.

The “seamless garment” metaphor, in its commitment to nonviolence, is mostly forgotten and invisible to popular opinion because the principle of nonviolence itself is neither recognized nor appreciated in today’s culture. Instances of particular protests against particular violence and injustices receive lots of attention in the news, but not the fundamental principle of peace, justice and integrity of creation—the commitment to nonviolence.

And so, I propose a plan of action. On the local fraternity level, with the SAs addressing the need for correction;

- that the topic for formation be the re-direction from a “radical one-issue stance” to a “*principled pro-life stance*;”
- to re-examine Vatican II’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,”—*Gaudium et Spes*—there to find the issue of abortion listed third among 16 others; and
- to explore the term “*nonviolence*” in the writings of St Francis and in the Gospel teaching of Jesus.

More from “Fratelli tutti”—application about social and political charity:

“Authentic political life, built upon respect for law and frank dialogue between individuals, is constantly renewed whenever there is a realization that every woman and man, and every new generation, brings the promise of new relational, intellectual, cultural and spiritual energies.

Viewed in this way, politics is something nobler than posturing, marketing, and media spin. These sow nothing but division, conflict, and a bleak cynicism incapable of mobilizing people to pursue a common goal.

At times, in thinking of the future, we do well to ask political leaders,

- Why are you doing this?
- What is your real aim?

As time goes on, reflecting on the past, the questions will not be

- How many people endorsed you?
- How many voted for you?
- How many had a positive image of you?

The real and potentially painful questions will be

- How much love did you put into your work?
- What did you do for the progress of our people?
- What mark did you leave on the life of society?
- What real bonds did you create?
- What positive forces did you unleash?
- How much social peace did you sow?
- What good did you achieve in the position that was entrusted to you?

*Politics,
according to the Social Doctrine of the Church,
is one of the highest forms of charity,
because it serves the common good.
Pope Francis*

For those who already voted, these questions can still be asked, even after Election Day.