

What Every Catholic Can Do to Transcend Partisanship

Address to Catholic Press Association

Carl A. Anderson

June 22, 2012

I would like to begin by thanking you for the service Catholic journalists provide to the vitality of the Catholic faith in our country. At a time when information sources seem to be growing at an exponential rate and much of the media coverage of our Church is inaccurate or unfair, you are needed today more than ever to accurately inform our fellow Catholics.

All of us have at one time or another lamented the sad state of today's political environment: the intransigence and partisanship that disfigure nearly every national policy debate and make the search for solutions virtually impossible. It is an environment that drives away from national leadership many persons of intelligence and integrity.

But I believe we can find a way out of the present politics of gridlock and destruction if we think beyond the next election and if we sincerely work together.

Catholics are uniquely positioned to offer a solution to our current dilemma. We have an extraordinarily rich tradition of social teaching and the experience that much of American history has been shaped by Catholics.

If we are faithful to the social teaching of our Church, Catholics can truly transcend partisanship and transform our nation's politics. I would propose four steps by which we may do so.

Civility in America's National Discourse

Writing in the *City of God*, Saint Augustine observed, "let this city bear in mind, that among her enemies lie hidden those who are destined to be fellow citizens, that she may not think it a fruitless labor to bear what they inflict as enemies until they become confessors of the truth." Augustine reminds us that as Christians we must

hope that even our most strident adversaries may one day join us as saved souls together in heaven.

This perspective obliges us to insist on a more respectful, civil discourse. Our approach ought to be one of seeking the conversion, not the destruction of our political opponents.

In my recent book, *Beyond a House Divided*, I observed that as a nation we adopt this insight in times of national crisis, for example, in the days following the terrorist attack on 9/11 or after the murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I concluded *Beyond a House Divided* by quoting from Robert Kennedy's speech following the announcement of Dr. King's death.

"What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another...."

We need to embrace this attitude not only *after* a national tragedy. This attitude should be normative of our national life.

Our first step as Catholics must be a firm commitment to civility in America's national discourse.

Charity as a Distinctive Catholic Contribution to National Life

You may notice that the title of these remarks is similar to the title of my book, *A Civilization of Love: What Every Catholic Can Do To Transform the World*. That book grew out of my experience with the Knights of Columbus on the role of charity and solidarity in society and ethics and sustainability in business.

In both areas Catholics can make a unique contribution to American life.

This is the lesson we should learn from the religious brothers and sisters and other Catholics who by their sacrifice built our schools and hospitals, orphanages and universities. They did so much to make America a more humane society.

Catholic charity is not simply a mechanism for the more efficient or cost-effective delivery of social services.

As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in *Deus Caritas Est*, Catholic charity arises from “a heart that sees where love is needed” and responds appropriately. It arises from a religious tradition that understands that *caritas* is the pre-requisite of justice. And as Pope Benedict observed, there is no society so perfect as to have escaped the need for love.

Catholic charity, grounded in the Christian vision that we are our brother’s keeper, provides an irreplaceable contribution to society since it introduces fraternal brotherhood as a source of national unity.

The relationship of giving something of one's self to another person creates a solidarity that can unite society in profound ways.

I saw this first hand in Haiti when we provided wheelchairs and prosthetics to children and adults who had lost legs in that country's terrible earthquake.

My experience with the Knights of Columbus convinces me that every Catholic is capable of a charity that can change countless lives.

Thus our second step must be to build up the fabric of American society through a fraternal solidarity based on personal works of charity.

Consistent Commitment to the Church’s Social Teaching

The candid observer must admit that when it comes to a consistent commitment to the social teaching of our Church, Catholics in America still have a long way to go. We have made considerable progress but, in the words of Robert Frost, we have “miles to go before we sleep.”

In 1976, I had the opportunity to go to Washington, D. C. to work as a legislative assistant in the United States Senate. For the next five years I spent almost all of my time working on the pro-life cause: promoting legislation to prevent abortion funding as part of U.S. foreign aid; helping to pass the Hyde Amendment restrictions of abortion funding; as one of the attorneys successfully defending the Hyde Amendment before the U. S. Supreme Court and organizing the bi-partisan Congressional Pro-life Caucus.

Later, I joined the Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Reagan Administration where one of my principal responsibilities was working to provide new federal protections to stop discrimination against handicapped newborn infants. Two years later, I joined the White House staff of President Reagan and helped draft the

Mexico City Policy to cut off U.S. foreign aid to organizations that perform or promote abortion overseas.

In 1987, I left the White House staff to join the Knights of Columbus. As I told President Reagan then, I left politics to serve a higher calling and to promote key elements of Catholic social teaching beyond the political realm. I believed these issues could not simply be limited to – or dismissed as – the domain of a political party.

Since 2008, the Knights of Columbus has worked with the Marist Institute for Public Opinion on a series of surveys on the ethical attitudes of Americans. We call it our Moral Compass Project.

Our polling – as illustrated in my book *Beyond a House Divided* – has shown that Americans' attraction to Catholic social teaching transcends party lines. Americans share a broad moral and even spiritual consensus that often tracks closely with Catholic social teaching.

Over the years, it has become clear to many that if Catholics in both political parties had practiced a consistent commitment to Catholic social teaching and if they had been able to overcome partisan rigidity and hostility, we would have been able to significantly restrict abortion.

We were not able to do this because of a failure of our elected Catholic officials.

But there was also a failure by Catholic voters who were led to believe that their choice was between candidates who were only partly committed to a consistent ethic of life.

However if Catholic voters had insisted that this choice was not acceptable, we might have been able to solve the abortion issue decades ago.

One of the great obstacles to forming a successful Catholic coalition on the life issue was the position Governor Mario Cuomo articulated in a 1984 speech at the University of Notre Dame. He defended his position of being personally opposed to abortion but unwilling to take a position opposing abortion because this would mean imposing his beliefs on his fellow citizens.

Those of us who disagreed saw a fatal flaw in his argument.

We understood Catholic teaching on abortion to have nothing to do with faith *per se*. Medical science has concluded that the being alive in a mother's womb is a *human* being irrespective of one's religious conviction. Therefore, the protection of innocent human life that is a fundamental legal principle of every civilized society should apply to protect unborn children.

Those of us who criticized the so-called “Cuomo doctrine” saw the issue not as a question of Catholic faith, but as a matter of social justice and human rights.

Yet, the force with which Gov. Cuomo made his argument and its widespread acceptance effectively inoculated a generation of “pro-choice” Catholic politicians. The result has been a political stalemate on the abortion issue for nearly three decades.

But there was also another effect.

Gov. Cuomo’s rationale created an environment in which it became easier for candidates to dismiss other principles of Catholic social teaching.

So every election year many Catholic voters see their choice as between the lesser of two evils. They face candidates who argue that while they may not be consistent with Catholic values on all issues, they are consistent on some and that should be good enough.

But it is not good enough.

And as bad as this situation is, it has produced an even worse result.

It has blocked the potential of Catholic social teaching to transform our politics.

But must it always be this way?

Can we find a way to persuade both political parties to come into alignment with the fundamentals of Catholic social teaching?

If so, future Catholic voters may one day freely choose between political parties based upon their prudential judgment of which candidate is more likely to advance the common good.

As Catholics we must stop picking and choosing which parts of Catholic social teaching we will accept.

And we must insist that our politicians stop doing this as well.

So our third step must be to build a consistent commitment to Catholic Social Teaching among Catholic voters in America.

Transforming Politics by Transcending Partisanship

We can find a solution if we learn from the Civil Rights Movement.

The most important thing we need to do is to take the long view.

Consider, for example, the Democratic Party when the Supreme Court overturned the legal doctrine of “separate but equal” in its 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The Democrats had integrated their national convention in 1948 causing Senator Strom Thurmond to run for president that year as a Dixiecrat. But throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s the Democratic stronghold of the South remained in the hands of entrenched segregationists. Yet, in little more than two decades the segregationist base of the Democratic Party was gone and a Democratic governor from the Deep South committed to civil rights was elected president.

Who could have possibly foreseen this outcome on the day the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*?

But if such transformation in American politics was possible within two decades, why cannot something similar happen regarding Catholic social teaching?

It can, if we learn also from the courage and boldness of African-Americans of that time.

In fact, we may have little choice.

During the 1980s, some Catholics came to regard the “Cuomo Doctrine” as a kind of “truce” in the culture wars. Catholics would be free to practice their faith while not taking positions consistent with fundamental Catholic teaching because this would be imposing their morality on others.

But this year many Catholics sense that this “peaceful co-existence” with secular culture has ended as a result of the HHS mandate on contraception.

Catholic public officials, who for years maintained that they would not impose their religious morality on others, now appear entirely comfortable with imposing secular values on their fellow Catholics and Catholic institutions.

Our bishops tell us that, if implemented, the HHS mandate will affect the autonomy and integrity of our Church and its institutions—that it will dramatically change the mission of the Catholic Church in the United States.

Therefore the HHS mandate confronts us with a challenge which is very different from that of social issues such as legal abortion. It is different because it is a challenge to the integrity of our Catholic institutions and our own lives as Catholics.

As I observed in my remarks to the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast earlier this year, what is at stake is the re-definition of religion itself and the reduction of the role of religion in the public square. This is what was at stake in the *Hosanna Tabor* litigation and remains so with the HHS mandate.

These government initiatives have profoundly raised the stakes for the future of religion in America.

The question is not primarily about public policy choices.

Instead, the question now is the sustainability of the mission of Catholic institutions.

In these circumstances Catholics can no longer accept politics as usual.

Today, Catholic voters must have the courage to act boldly and insist that every candidate for public office respect the integrity and mission of the Catholic Church and its institutions.

Catholic voters must have the courage to tell candidates that if they want Catholic votes they will have to respect the fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching such as the sanctity of human life before birth as well as the institutions of marriage and family.

Catholic voters should insist that candidates measure their political platforms by Catholic social teaching—especially if they are Catholics.

Catholic voters should have the courage to settle for nothing less than this.

And they should have the courage to withhold their vote from candidates who fail this test—even if it means at times that they will withhold their vote for both candidates for a particular office.

The bishops' document, *Faithful Citizenship*, tells us that some actions are intrinsically evil and must always be opposed. As Catholics, we wish we could debate and vote on the full range of Catholic social teaching – including prudential issues that raise serious moral questions. But to be able to effectively do this, we must first refuse to support candidates who advocate policies that are intrinsically evil.

Withholding a vote may at times be the most effective vote.

In 2005, an Italian referendum that would have removed Italy's restrictions on *in vitro* fertilization and embryonic research failed because of low voter turnout. The Italian Bishops Conference had urged Catholics to boycott the referendum. Political pundits in Italy were convinced that the referendum would easily pass, but what the bishops had described as the "double no" of a Catholic voter boycott reversed the expected result in a dramatic fashion.

Only days before the vote, Pope Benedict XVI appeared to endorse the bishops' strategy, noting that they were "involved in enlightening and motivating the decisions of Catholics and of all citizens concerning the upcoming referendum," and saying "I am close to you with my words and my prayers."

Obviously, there is a difference between a national referendum and the election of candidates for public office, but consider what we could achieve over the next decade if we insist that politicians seek our vote on our terms—that is to say, on the terms of an authentic appreciation of Catholic social teaching.

Consider one example from recent history.

In the 1976 Iowa Caucus, Jimmy Carter and Sargent Shriver were both seeking the Democratic presidential nomination. As we know, Jimmy Carter won in Iowa and went on to win the nomination and become president. But what if Shriver had won in Iowa and he had gone on to become president?

Is it likely that four years later Ronald Reagan would have been able to build a winning coalition of so-called "Reagan Democrats" composed primarily of blue-collar Catholics to defeat an incumbent pro-life, Catholic President Shriver?

How would American politics have been different after eight years of a Shriver Administration rather than of a Reagan Administration?

Shouldn't our goal as Catholics be a political environment where Catholic voters can choose between candidates who are in agreement on the fundamental social teaching of the Church?

And if so, how would that new reality change the platforms of both our major political parties regarding other principles of Catholic social teaching?

I cannot predict the answers to these questions, nor can I say which political party would benefit. I cannot say how our political parties may change during the next decade if politicians take seriously Catholic social teaching.

But the outcome could be a new political coalition in which Catholics would play an irreplaceable role. This is not promoting partisan politics—it is the opposite of partisanship.

Our fourth step must be to transform our national politics by transcending partisanship on the basis of Catholic social teaching.

It was in our grasp to transform American politics in 1976.

And it can be again.

No political party in America can be successful and at the same time lose a majority of Catholic voters.

The solution is as simple as this: We should exercise our right to vote on our own terms and not on the terms of others.

If we do, America will be a better place.

I believe that as Americans and as Catholics, you and I have a responsibility to make this happen.

There may be those who say that now is not the right time. But we must look not to the next election, but to the next decade.

Dr. King had the courage to dream a great dream.

I believe that Catholics can dream great dreams as well.

Thank you very much.