



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**September 6, 2016**

Media Contact: Paul Snatchko  
(202) 269-2502  
media@paulist.org

## **PAULIST FATHERS COMMENTARY ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE 2016 U.S. ELECTION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As the 2016 General Election approaches, we are all aware of the many difficult issues facing our country, along with the contentious arguments that have characterized this campaign and dominate the national news. Disagreement and debate among citizens and between political parties are natural and inevitable in a free and open society. Wisely and properly conducted, they make it possible for us to choose intelligently among competing candidates and their policies, and so provide for the peaceful and legitimate transfer of political power to those we designate to govern our country according to our political, cultural, and moral values. Those are the values which we will express in our votes.

As committed Catholic Christians, we also share with our fellow citizens in the benefits and the responsibilities of citizenship in 21<sup>st</sup>-century American society. Does our faith offer resources to help participate in civic life? What lessons from centuries of Catholic spiritual and intellectual tradition, and the experience of Catholic history in the United States, can we share with our fellow citizens? What can we do together to promote the common good and care for our common home? The evident seriousness of the issues facing policy makers and the intensity of the current political campaign make it all the more essential for us to take part in these important debates and to bring to them the particular perspectives of our rich Catholic faith and experience.

For this reason, we anticipate that much individual reflection and many group discussions will be taking place in our communities, a process we wish to encourage. To assist in these reflections and discussions about the issues and the candidates, the Paulist Fathers offer the following commentary, identifying some foundational principles for us to take into account as we prepare to exercise our duty as citizens to vote.

In doing so, it is not our intention to dictate to anyone how to vote or whom to vote for. An election challenges each citizen to evaluate the issues and the available information and form a reasoned moral decision in the forum of one's conscience. Amid all the loud and angry noise of our current campaign cycle, our purpose is rather to highlight some fundamental moral and religious principles, which ought to form a foundation for helping us make these judgments, not just for one election but for ongoing participation in our political life.

It is our hope that individuals and groups – Paulist Fathers, Paulist collaborators, and lay people in parishes and throughout the Church in the United States - may find this reflection helpful as an aid in their own study and deliberation and a resource to foster further discussion. For this purpose, we have included sample questions for individual reflection and group discussion.

## **THE BLESSING AND CHALLENGE OF CITIZENSHIP**

*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. [1]*

So wrote the prophet Jeremiah, six centuries before Christ, to those who had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon. Jeremiah counseled them not only to become responsible and productive citizens of the society in which they were living, but also to appreciate how much their long-term wellbeing depended on their doing so. Jeremiah's prophetic insight remains relevant for the People of God today. As Pope Benedict XVI reminded the Diplomatic Corps in 2013, "the glorification of God and human peace on earth are closely linked." [2] If, as has been said, "we give birth to ourselves by our own free choice of what is good," [3] who we become here and now will be who we are for all eternity. And who we become here and now is inseparable from our participation in the human communities of which we are a part, communities from which we benefit and to which we must in turn contribute.

From the beginning Christians have been conscious of being both in the world while not of it. [4] Jesus famously told his questioners to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. [5] Saint Paul told the Christians in Philippi that our citizenship is in heaven, but he also instructed the Christians in Rome to obey lawful governments and to pay their taxes. [6] Going even further, the New Testament explicitly instructed the early Christian community to pray for the emperor. [7] In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, despite Roman persecution, the early Christians prayed, "for Emperors, their ministers, for the condition of the world, for peace everywhere, and for the delaying of the end." [8]

The early Christians appreciated the benefits of civil society. In instructing them to obey the law and honor the Emperor, the New Testament emphasized that our religious obligations to God, while always absolute in themselves, do not cancel out our membership in civil society and our resulting obligations to the political community we all share. Whether as public officials or as ordinary citizens, who vote, pay taxes, and affect public policy in any number of ways, we enjoy the peace, security, and justice that civil society makes possible. And we have corresponding obligations. Thus, the Second Vatican Council called upon all citizens to "be mindful of the right and also the duty to use their free vote to further the common good." [9] Likewise, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that "the love and service of one's country follow from the duty of gratitude," [10] and that "as far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life." [11]

Civilization doesn't come free. Nor does our faith allow us any excuse to act as if it did. Thus, the Second Vatican Council warned: "They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper

vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.” [12]

The same Council taught that, while the Church as such has received from Christ “no proper mission in the political, economic or social order,” even so from its explicitly religious mission comes “a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law.” [13]

Over time, the Church has adopted as her own - and adapted to ever changing political and social situations - the ancient philosophical understanding that human beings are social and political by nature, [14] that human beings are naturally intended to live and thrive in close cooperation with others, and that the most developed and fulfilling form of that is our political association as fellow citizens. This political association as citizens with one another provides us with many benefits, which we would not otherwise enjoy. At the same time it also challenges us with serious responsibilities and obligations to one another and to the wider community.

In this traditional understanding, political choices – such as whom or what party to vote for, who should benefit from tax policies, what to spend on and what to cut in the budget, and how to relate to other nations and states in the world community – all such choices are ultimately moral choices that express what we value. Such choices identify whom we care about enough to include (or not), and highlight what kind of nation (and world) we want to be. As Catholics and citizens, we need to be particularly attentive to this dimension of political decision-making. As Catholics and citizens, we need to respond to the challenges of voting and other political choices in a morally serious way that transcends simplistic sloganeering and emotional appeals to narrowly defined secular identities and group interests. As our own American bishops have recently reminded us: “Catholics may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems, but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to help build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended.” [15]

1. Jeremiah 29:4-7.
2. Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 7, 2013
3. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily on Ecclesiastes," *Liturgy of the Hours*, Tuesday, 7th Week in Ordinary Time.
4. John 17:15-16.
5. Matthew 22:20; Mark 12:17.
6. Philippians 3:20; Romans 13:1-7
7. 1 Timothy 2:1-2
8. Apologetics, 39.
9. *Gaudium et Spes*, 75.
10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2239.
11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1915.
12. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43; Cf. Hebrews 13:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Ephesians 4:28.
13. *Gaudium et Spes*, 42
14. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* I, 2
15. USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (1915), 20.

## **RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP AND AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE**

In 1931, James Truslow Adams coined the now familiar term “the American Dream.” All too often, we tend to reduce that image to its material and consumerist components. In its fullest sense, however, that American Dream “is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” [1]

The first Europeans to settle in the New World were Catholics, who brought their Catholic faith and institutions with them, leaving a strong legacy of Catholic culture throughout this continent. That legacy is currently being highlighted in so many ways by recent generations of Latin American immigrants. They follow earlier generations of European immigrants, who brought a distinct Catholic sensibility to the American experiment, rooted in their own immigrant experience and its challenges.

Already in the 1830s, an astute European observer of American society, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted Catholicism’s capacity to contribute to American democracy, for “it imposes the same observance upon the rich and the needy, it inflicts the same austerities upon the strong and the weak, it listens to no compromise with mortal man, but reducing all the human race to the same standard, it confounds all the distinctions of society at the foot of the same altar, even as they are confounded in the sight of God.” [2]

Later in that same century, Servant of God Isaac Hecker, the founder of the Paulist Fathers, emphasized the moral seriousness of citizenship and its responsibilities. Toward the end of his life, he wrote, that someone “who cannot subject his private interests to the common good is not fit to enjoy American liberty.” [3]

As part of his mission to evangelize America, Isaac Hecker consistently sought to identify important points of contact between the Catholic faith and its understanding of society, on the one hand, and the political culture of the United States, on the other. While humanity’s ultimate fulfillment is always finally to be found in one’s citizenship in the kingdom of God, Hecker recognized the implications of the transcendent requirements of being a citizen of God’s kingdom for the immanent responsibilities of citizenship in society. “We protest, therefore,” Hecker said in one of his most famous sermons, “against the idea of giving the earth over to wretchedness and the world to sin; rather would we indulge the hope, of establishing God’s kingdom here, and laboring earnestly for it.” [4]

Like De Tocqueville and other contemporary thinkers, Hecker was sensitive to the problem posed by the fragmented character of an American society with fragile connections between individuals, and the dilemma of how to create a community capable of uniting individuals consistent with their freedom. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, in which the Catholic Church was struggling to survive as an institution against an increasingly hostile political order, the Church sought to counteract growing social fragmentation and to reconnect increasingly isolated individuals into a community by preserving, repairing, or restoring religious bonds. The way it tried to do this was to assert the Church’s claims to authority as vigorously as possible and to insist upon its political and institutional rights in relation to the modern state. In the very different American context, however, Hecker saw a solution in which full Catholic participation in American society and participation in its democratic institutions would positively influence American social and political life.

Thus, in a time of terrible social conflict and political polarization in the United States, Hecker expressed his confidence in what Catholics had to offer America. Already at his very first audience with Blessed Pope Pius IX, on December 22, 1857, in response to the Pope's concern about factional strife in the United States, "in which parties get each other by the hair," Hecker confidently replied that "the Catholic truth," once known, "would come between" parties "and act like oil on troubled waters." [5]

Hecker's hope that we act like oil on the troubled waters of a conflicted and polarized society remains relevant for us today. It is a fundamental challenge facing faithful Catholic citizens in this election year – as it always is. Unfortunately, economic trends, social and cultural changes, and changes in family and marriage patterns have all combined to make society and the social bonds that are its glue that much more brittle. Meanwhile, our political polarization and governmental gridlock have made corrective action in the form of effective public policy more and more difficult to achieve. In turn, these trends may further encourage apathy and cynicism on the part of ordinary citizens and increased ideological intensity among the most politically active.

Research has shown how "the mere fact that one party proposes an idea can motivate partisans on the other side to dismiss it." [6] The moral and public policy consequences of framing political choices in this way are alarming for the future of our society. Hence, this recent warning from the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: "When we fail to see the difference between our enemies and people of good will, we lose a part of who we are as people of faith. Policies of fear and inflammatory rhetoric will only offer extremists fertile soil and pave the way toward a divisive, fearful future." [7]

This same concern also applies to the moral and political judgments and choices which we make about the wider world beyond our national borders, where we must likewise guard against what Pope Francis has called "the simple reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners." [8]

At the same time, in the United States today, religious faith itself seems increasingly in danger of being separated from public life and consigned to the parochial realm of personal belief and private spirituality. If what we believe is true, however, then there can be no such separation. Catholics need to be fully engaged in the complex cultural, economic, social, and political questions that our country and our world are facing, bringing to the debate the truth about the human person and human society. As Pope Francis has reminded us, our faith summons us "to overcome suspicion, habitual mistrust, fear of losing our privacy, all the defensive attitudes which today's world imposes on us." [9]

More pointedly, Pope Francis has challenged us as a Church "to give a clear answer in the face of the threats that arise within the public debate: this is one of the ways of the specific contribution of believers to the building of the common society. Believers are citizens." He reminds us, "The nation is not a museum, but a collective work in permanent construction in which the things that differentiate one, including political and religious membership, are to be put in common" [10]

It is, of course, primarily the particular and proper role of lay people to act in the political sphere. "Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to laymen," taught the Second Vatican Council. "Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role." [11]

Recognizing and respecting this distinction of roles, the Church's pastors in their role also "have the right to offer opinions in all that affects people's lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being." [12] It is, after all, the responsibility of the Church's ministers to share fully with all the faithful the abundant riches of our Catholic teaching and tradition. "Bishops, to whom is assigned the task of ruling the Church of God, should, together with their priests, so preach the news of Christ that all the earthly activities of the faithful will be bathed in the light of the Gospel." [13] In fact, all the faithful are challenged to "demonstrate that even now the Church by her presence alone and by all the gifts which she contains, is an unspent fountain of those virtues which the modern world needs the most." [14]

Indeed, our Catholic tradition of reflection on political principles and on social and economic questions and policies represents a profoundly rich storehouse of moral wisdom. We believe that this wisdom fully reflects centuries of human experience and responds to fundamental human needs more comprehensively than contemporary secular ideologies, such as the life-style libertarianism of the extreme Left or the economic libertarianism of the extreme Right.

For this reason, already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Isaac Hecker contended: "Make a list of all the honest demands for ameliorations and reforms in man's social, industrial, and political condition – it will not be a short one – and you will discover that they have their truth in the spirit, and are justified by the teachings and the practice, of the Catholic Church." [15]

In today's comparably challenging circumstances, the Bishops of the United States have continued to offer guidance for Catholics in their fulfillment of their political responsibilities as citizens. [16] Through this exercise of their pastoral leadership, they invite us all to "take to heart the urgency of our vocation to live in the service to others through the grace of Christ and ask humbly in prayer for an outpouring of the grace of the Holy Spirit on the United States of America." [17]

1. James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, pp. 214-215.
2. *Democracy in America*, p. 356.
3. "The Human Environments of the Catholic Faith," CW, July 1886, p. 466.
4. Sermon, How To Be Happy, 1863, pp. 60-62]
5. "From a letter to the American Fathers, dated Rome, December 22, 1857," *The Paulist Vocation*, p. 46.
6. Geoffrey L. Cohen, "Party over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 5, (2003), 808-822.
7. Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, December 14, 2015.
8. Speech to Joint Session of the Congress of the United States, September 24, 2015.
9. EG 88.
10. Pope Francis, Address in Florence, November 11, 2015.
11. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43
12. EG, 182.
13. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.
14. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43
15. *The Church and the Age*, p. 167
16. Cf. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility* (2007), revised with "Introductory Note," (2015)
17. *Faithful Citizenship*, Introductory Note

## **CONSCIENTIOUS CITIZENSHIP AND PRUDENTIAL JUDGMENT**

Jesus in the Gospels repeatedly challenged his disciples to understand that saying “Yes” to God may mean saying “No” to certain other options. The long list of the Church’s martyrs testifies to God’s uncompromisingly absolute claim on our consciences – in the face of any and all competing secular claims. Certainly, some things are simply wrong – “in and of themselves ... by reason of their object.” [1] As Pope Francis recently reminded the United Nations General Assembly: “The defense of the environment and the fight against exclusion demand that we recognize a moral law written into human nature itself, one which includes the natural difference between man and woman, and absolute respect for life in all stages and dimensions.” [2]

Within what legitimately “belongs to Caesar,” however, within civil society’s legitimately large sphere of action and responsibility, it is more often than not a matter of trying to approximate what will work best in specific circumstances. The ordinary dynamics of politics and economics have not been repealed by the Gospel, which does not try to tell us precisely which policies will produce a more prosperous economy or a more stable and secure international balance of power. But the Gospel does invite us to a life of authentic faith, from which certain principles follow. Even then, when it comes to practical judgments of policy and their implementation in legislation, we often have to figure things out, as best we can as citizens or lawmakers, using the best human knowledge we have at our disposal. And, because we are human and our human wisdom is limited, we may make mistakes. For this reason, when it comes to making practical policy judgments, reasonable, morally sincere people, applying the same general principles, may well come to different but comparably compelling conclusions.

In practice, therefore, “Decisions about political life are complex and require the exercise of a well-formed conscience aided by prudence.” [3]

### ***A Well-Formed Conscience***

“Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment.” [4]

Conscience is defined as “a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act.” [5] According to the moral law written in our hearts, [6] conscience properly challenges us to do good and to avoid evil. [7] Blessed John Henry Newman, one of the patrons of the Paulist Fathers, famously called conscience “the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.” [8]

In order for our conscience to function effectively in guiding us in making moral judgments, developing a well-formed conscience becomes a serious human and religious responsibility. What does it mean to have a well-formed conscience? “A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.” [9]

Ignorance is a serious obstacle to the correct formation of conscience – both ignorance of fundamental moral principles and ignorance of the realities regarding which decisions must be made. Faithful discipleship and

responsible citizenship challenge us to honest study and prayerful discernment of political issues in the light of authentic Catholic moral principles and the data which actual human experience provides.

This is especially challenging when the character of our political debate itself seems sometimes to do little to encourage a conscientious engagement with moral principles or even with the relevant facts of actual human experience. Sometimes, “issues are exploited by a rhetoric which cheapens them.” [10] We live, Pope Francis has sadly warned us, “in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which lead to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment.” [11] Hence, the heightened importance of strengthening our capacity for morally serious political analysis, which will enable us to form morally and politically sound judgments as citizens and make wise choices as voters, fully recognizing what is at stake.

What we need, Pope Francis has stressed, are “more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances – of the evils in our world! Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.” [12]

To achieve such a politics requires conscientious citizens, formed in the virtue of prudence.

### ***Aided by Prudence***

As the Second Vatican Council reminded us, we must “recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.” [13] To do so calls for the virtue of prudence, which Saint Thomas Aquinas defined as “wisdom concerning human affairs” or “right reason with respect to action.” [14] Prudence is a moral virtue (one of the four classical cardinal virtues) that concerns all aspects of practical human life. [15] Prudence enables us “to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.” [16] Aided by prudence, citizens are called to exercise a well-formed conscience to make practical political judgments - to apply moral principles to particular policy choices and to our choices among political candidates.

Political judgments – whether about particular policies or about political candidates – are rarely opportunities to implement the ideal or perfect alternative. Politics and policy-making are widely and rightly recognized as “the art of the possible.” The policy preferences we adopt as citizens and the political choices we make as voters will most often reflect this limited, practical dimension. This side of utopia, policy-making is most often incremental. Our political actions, choices, and decisions must likewise reflect this fundamental limitation. That is why “incremental improvements in the law are acceptable as steps toward the full restoration of justice.” [17]

Political parties and partisan activity are an inevitable part of political life in a free and pluralistic society. As such they can contribute significantly to the effective functioning of social and political institutions. As citizens, Catholics may choose to identify with a particular political party and to engage in overtly partisan activity, but no political party or program will ever produce perfect justice. For that reason, the Church and its representatives must always be cautious in how they evaluate partisan political claims and should avoid being manipulated by one party or another on sensitive issues. Pastors and preachers in particular must be vigilant not to let themselves be co-opted by political parties and their partisan language, something that contradicts



the pastoral character of their office and ultimately diminishes the efficacy of their ministry and the credibility of the Church as an authentic spokesman for the well-being of all people - rich and poor, old and young, healthy and sick, citizens and non-citizens.

Finally, Catholics “must recognize the legitimacy of different opinions with regard to temporal solutions, and respect citizens, who, even as a group, defend their points of view by honest methods. Political parties, for their part, must promote those things which in their judgement are required for the common good; it is never allowable to give their interests priority over the common good.” [18]

1. CCC, 1756.
2. UN Address, September 25, 2015.
3. *Faithful Citizenship*, 31.
4. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.
5. CCC, 1778.
6. Cf. Romans 2:14-16.
7. *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.
8. “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” V, in *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching II* (London: Longmans Green, 1885), 248.
9. CCC, 1783.
10. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 203.
11. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 64.
12. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 205.
13. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.
14. *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae 47, 2 ad 1, and 47, 4.
15. *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae 47, 2 c.
16. CCC, 1806.
17. *Faithful Citizenship*, 31.
18. *Gaudium et Spes*, 75.

## **SOLIDARITY, THE COMMON GOOD, AND THE CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME**

As Saint John Paul II reminded us almost 30 years ago, Catholic social teaching is constant “in its fundamental inspiration, in its ‘principles of reflection,’ in its ‘criteria of judgment,’ in its basic ‘directives for action,’ and above all in its vital link with the Gospel of the Lord.” But it is also “ever new, because it is subject to the necessary and opportune adaptations suggested by the changes in historical conditions and by the unceasing flow of the events which are the setting of the life of people and society.” [1] In the day-to-day world of social and political life, especially in this era of almost unprecedented dramatic social and cultural change, new issues will surface and old issues will re-surface requiring re-examination in the light of altered circumstances. While the fundamental moral principles underlying one’s conscientious response to these issues always remain constant, the virtue of prudence directs us to evaluate and respond to new issues and changed circumstances in an engaged and dynamic way.

As it has developed over the centuries, Catholic social teaching has highlighted several fundamental moral principles that constitute its very heart and are all critical for our political life.[2] Among these constant

principles are the principles of *solidarity* and *the common good*, which - without excluding any of the other fundamental moral principles of the Church's social teaching - seem especially relevant right now in the context of our contemporary national and international circumstances and the corresponding issues that arise in our current political debates. Related to these foundational moral principles, we also need to consider *the care for our common home*, so emphasized by Pope Francis in his recent encyclical *Laudato Si'*. This principle of *the care for our common home* represents a specific application and significant development of those fundamental principles in the changed historical conditions which the human race is experiencing throughout the entire world in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In clear contrast to the biblical and classical conceptions of solidarity that have been and remain at the heart of Catholic social teaching, the United States and other modern western democratic societies have, in varying degrees, tended to take the individual as the starting point for discussion. This has led to "the individualism of our postmodern and globalized era," which Pope Francis has so strenuously warned against. [3]

In our increasingly privatized, individualistic culture, the very basis for and the extent of shared social bonds and political obligations to society may seem problematic to many. Thus, contemporary debates about the size and scope of government, about paying taxes to promote the common good, and about the legitimacy of economic regulations to protect the environment and manage climate change - and the fundamental concerns underlying such debates about protecting and prioritizing personal and individual rights - all reflect this very modern individualistic philosophical premise.

In contrast, the biblical story highlights the essential solidarity of the human race in many ways, beginning with its accounts of creation itself. Catholic social teaching reminds us, for example, how in the beginning God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of humankind, how this "universal destination of goods remains primordial and that the right to private property "does not do away with the original gift of the earth" to all. [4] It further follows from this, for example, that private property is rightly regulated by political authority "for the sake of the common good." [5] As the medieval author of *The Imitation of Christ* famously observed, whoever "seeks to have private possessions loses the things that are common." [6]

Catholic social teaching in the modern era has continued to remind the world of this fundamental human solidarity in its emphasis on the common good, understood as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily." [7] Pope Francis has described "the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good" as "the chief aim of all politics." [8] Promoting the common good of all is the proper responsibility of government at all levels - local, state, and federal - and must, therefore, be uppermost in political decision-making, starting with the individual citizen's fundamental decision to vote and whom to vote for. "For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential." [9]

Solidarity is, thus, "not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all." [10]

Nor is solidarity as a principle of political judgment to be confined solely within the borders and limits of our own society and country. “The same criterion is applied by analogy in international relationships. Interdependence must be transformed into solidarity, based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all.” [11]

Of course, nations have always had to deal with one another, and conscientious citizens and statesmen have always had to take international issues as well as domestic political considerations into account. The world wars and global crises of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrated the impossibility of isolationism as a national policy. One of the defining characteristics of our contemporary world, moreover, is how much more interconnected than ever human beings have become all over the world and how 21<sup>st</sup>-century political decision-making must reflect that interdependence. This reality, of which we are now so especially conscious because of the international crises created by such contemporary concerns as climate change and the across-border movements of refugees and migrants, was already recognized by Vatican II over 50 years ago: “The destiny of the human community has become all of a piece, where once the various groups of men had a kind of private history of their own.” [12]

More recently, Pope Francis has stressed this point as one of the principal concerns of his pontificate: “As creatures endowed with inalienable dignity, we are related to all our brothers and sisters, for whom we are responsible and with whom we act in solidarity. Lacking this relationship, we would be less human. We see, then, how indifference represents a menace to the human family.” [13]

1. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 2.
2. Cf., *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 160.
3. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 67.
4. CCC 2402-2403; cf. Genesis 1:26-29; *Gaudium et Spes*, 69, 1.
5. CCC 2406; cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 71 § 4; Saint John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42; *Centessimus Annus* 40; 48.
6. III, 13.
7. *Gaudium et Spes*, 26 § 1; 74 § 1.
8. Speech to Joint Session of the Congress of the United States, September 24, 2015.
9. *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.
10. Saint John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.
11. Saint John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39.
12. *Gaudium et Spes*, 5.
13. Message for 49<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Peace, January 1, 2016

## **CONCLUSION**

During his historic visit to the United States last year, Pope Francis became the first Pope ever to address a Joint Session of Congress. Although our elected representatives were his immediate audience, the Pope explicitly stated that he was speaking through them to “the entire people of the United States.” [1] As citizens, we should take that as a fitting reminder that our representatives are there only because we have empowered them, and that our government’s policies are ultimately our policies, for which we as citizens all share moral responsibility. As another national election approaches, we have both the opportunity and the duty to

exercise our responsibility as citizens to contribute to our ongoing political debate and participate in shaping a humanly fulfilling future for our country and for the world. In this election year, may every conscientiously arrived at prudential judgment that we make about competing candidates, political parties, and public policies be “an expression of our compelling need to live as one, in order to build as the greatest common good: that of a community which sacrifices particular interests in order to share, in justice and peace, its goods, its interests, its social life.” [2]

May we all respond faithfully to this perennial challenge to live out our responsibilities as conscientious Catholic citizens and so fulfill Isaac Hecker’s hope that the resources of our Catholic faith and the wisdom of Catholic truth may “act like oil on troubled waters” for our country and our entire world.

1. Speech to Joint Session of the Congress of the United States, September 24, 2015
2. Speech to Joint Session of the Congress of the United States, September 24, 2015.

### **QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Do I vote regularly? Do I consider it my duty to do so? Why?
2. Do I identify with a particular political party? Has my party allegiance been lifelong or has it changed over time? Why?
3. What issues in the current campaign concern me most? How does my Catholic faith and experience affect my judgments about those issues?
4. What issues in public life does my Catholic faith highlight for me that I feel the current campaign is neglecting?
5. How do my political beliefs, values, and preferences relate to Catholic language about solidarity, the common good, and care for our common home? Do I consider these Catholic principles relevant and helpful for my own political decision-making?
6. Without endorsing particular candidates, what political issues would I like to hear my parish priests, my bishop, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops speak more about? How would their guidance assist me in my own thinking about such issues?

###