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Citizenship and the Greatest Commandments

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Back to the basics. Jesus says: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The whole law and the prophets depend upon these, the two greatest commandments. “Remember who you are and where you came from,” God says to Moses in the Book of Exodus. You were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. Therefore, you shall not molest or oppress an alien, stranger or immigrant, nor take advantage of any vulnerable or defenseless or poor person. You are children of a compassionate God who hears the cry of the poor and defenseless. Therefore, you must be compassionate. What could be simpler than these basic, essential instructions for the Christian life? What could be more transformational in our lives? What could be more challenging? And if we are honest with ourselves, what could be more difficult, if not impossible, to live day in and day out?

In their letter *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States,* the bishops discuss the wide range of complex issues Catholics must address in their political activity, which is only one way that we seek to live out the greatest commandments. The mention of aliens or immigrants, the poor and defenseless, is everywhere in the documents. Since we have an election in nine days, I would like to share a few sentences.

"The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not one issue among many. It must always be opposed." (paragraph 28)

"Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or lack of health care, or an unjust immigration policy are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act. These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed. Catholics are urged to seriously consider Church teaching on these issues." (paragraph 29)

Very quickly we realize that living out the greatest, most basic commandments takes us into very complicated issues in our divided political world. My tendency, as I have just done, is to jump immediately from love of neighbor as self to the kinds of tough issues I have just mentioned from *Faithful Citizenship.* But to do so is to miss something essential to Christian living. Where is love in this laundry list of problems we are called to address as Christians in our world? Where is charity of the heart? Where is compassion in our political discourse?

We are used to hearing that we must put our faith into action, that faith without works can be empty. But there is at least one other side to that coin: Good works without charity of the heart are also a failure to live out the most basic Christian commandments. It could even be hypocritical. It is possible, after all, to do good works, but to do them for the wrong reasons. It is possible to sign up for a service project in order to put it on our resume, for example, or in order to look generous, or in order to ease our conscience about the sufferings of others. It is possible to work tirelessly to defend the dignity of all human life and to advance social justice, but to do it with self-righteous bitterness, condemning in our hearts all those who do not see it our way, rather than to do it with genuine love for all those we encounter.

It is also possible to read a document like *Faithful Citizenship* without true love or true openness to God's initiative. It is possible to read such a document defensively, looking only for lines that reinforce a pre-established political view or to look for ammunition against my political opponent who may actually share the same pew with me in church. I confess that I have caught myself doing this on many occasions. It is possible to read this kind of document without true charity toward the bishops who wrote it, or toward my friends on the other side of the political aisle, or toward those neighbors near and far whose basic human needs threaten my job security. And it is possible to not read the document at all for similar reasons.

I fear that nearly all of us fall into the trap of approaching Jesus' words and church teaching with the same political suspicion and divisiveness that has infected our political world. Pastors and bishops are not immune to this infection, it seems to me. We still are, on the average, more familiar with and much more influenced by our political philosophies and allegiances than we are by our love of God, by our familiarity with Scripture, or by the teaching tradition of the church. We swim in a caustic political sea, and it takes both effort and God's merciful grace to allow Christian charity to shape us more than this corrosive partisan bitterness.
If we approach church teaching primarily as potential ammunition against our fellow Catholics or Christians who have different political views than we do, then we have failed at the most basic level of Christian charity.

Fortunately, the beginning of Faithful Citizenship and the readings from today's Mass remind us that the key Christian duty is not to simply perform works of mercy or charity or justice, but to do so with love, with charity of the heart. And if we are honest with ourselves, loving God with all our heart, soul and mind, and loving our neighbors as ourselves, is beyond our capacity. We can't do this on our own. Our love isn't big enough.

The good news here is that we are not left with our love alone. We are able to love God and neighbor fully only because God loves us first and because God's grace increases our own capacity to love. We are children of a compassionate God who expects us to be compassionate only because we are first and foremost people who are the recipients of divine, limitless compassion. Our capacity to love this way can only come from the compassionate God of whom the Psalmist says: "I love you O Lord, my strength ... my God ... my rock of refuge ... my shield ... the horn of my salvation ... my stronghold." It is from God's love for us that we are able to love. As our opening song says, "From this table" of God's love for us, "we do what Christ commands" as "a vessel of the love that never ends." 2

Please do not take this homily as an argument to stop your political involvement or your social charity. By all means:

- **Keep volunteering** for service projects, and keep working for life, peace and justice. I know from personal experience that even if we start out doing them for the wrong reasons, God can use them to transform our hearts and to fill us with compassion and charity of heart.
- **Do read the bishops' document** Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, and try to be open to the teaching wisdom of the church, which challenges many of our political assumptions.
- **Allow yourself to be challenged** by the reminder that Catholics do not enjoy the luxury of feeling comfortably at home in either major political party, nor of being single-issue voters, nor of allowing voting to be the extent of our political involvement in the struggle for peace, justice and the inherent dignity of every human life.
- **Above all, let us pray.** Pray for guidance not only in how we will vote this election, but in how we will live our Christian political responsibility every day and every week.

Spend some time in reflection on today's Scriptures. Pray that your hearts and mine will be dominated by the compassionate love of a merciful God, not by self-interest or political mean-spiritedness. Pray for the grace to trust in God's love and for hope in the face of suffering and evil. Pray that your hearts and mine might be enlarged by God's grace, becoming so full of God's love for us that they overflow to return God's love with all of our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Pray that with conviction and compassion we may go to do what Christ commands. From this table, may we be vessels of the love that never ends.

**Today's Scriptures:**

- Psalms 18: (url: http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm18.htm) 2-3,3-4,47,51
- 1 Thessalonians 1 (url: http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1thessalonians/1thessalonians1.htm) :5c-10


2 From This Table, text and melody by Francis Patrick O'Brien. (c) 1994, GIA Publications Inc.