Growing up I remember how my parents often tried to teach my brothers, sister, and myself polite manners around the dinner table. We received pointers on how to behave when we were guests in the homes of family members (grandparents, aunts, and uncles) or when visiting the homes of our school friends. My parents taught us that it was usually not a good idea to discuss religion or politics during conversation at the dinner table. While this may still be sound advice in polite company, our Christian faith and certainly Catholic social teaching does not at all maintain a separation between the two. In fact, the church’s social teaching proposes that Christian faith and morality are closely connected to our participation in political life. In other words, our personal and communal faith and our public lives in society, including political life, are closely connected. The Church teaches that Christian believers have serious obligations to participate in the political life of society. One primary way that we do this today is to exercise our right to vote in a responsible, thoughtful way.

David Tracy, a noted contemporary theologian, once observed that all theology is “public discourse,” and he suggested that all good theology understands its obligation to the public. In other words, theology and faith have something important to say about the right ordering of society. But, what does this really mean? How does this discourse happen? Should we (or must we) tread lightly when we express both our Catholic faith and our politics? Is it somehow inappropriate for us to consider our faith when we engage in political life and political acts such as voting in elections? In this post-modern age, there are strong cultural tendencies to think of religious faith as a highly personal and primarily individual practice. What might religious faith ever have to say to us and to society when we consider voting for particular candidates or supporting specific policies?

Recalling the wise lessons of my parents, it does seem that faith and politics are far apart. There’s much potential to cause disagreement and misunderstanding when we are brave enough to address highly charged topics in the divided and contested public square where we live out our daily lives both as Catholic Christians and as citizens. Deep down in our hearts, I believe we know that our faith influences everything, including how we live in society—and this is always part of political life. Still, I want to ask: how is our political participation part of this discourse? How might this be related to our practices of voting? These are complex questions. I’d first like to consider what Catholic social teaching says about our duties as Catholic Christians to participate in social and political life. Then, I will discuss what this might mean for us in relation to

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our rights and responsibilities as citizens to vote in elections. Finally, I will briefly consider some implications for us as we approach Pennsylvania’s primary election on June 2 and the general election this fall.

The rich body of Catholic social teaching first emerged in our faith tradition at the time of the Industrial Revolution. Many scholars propose that it formally began with Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical letter *Rerum novarum* (“On the Condition of Labor”). However, the papal tradition was beginning to address many social questions in society some time earlier. Catholic social teaching includes formal statements of popes and bishops that were often drafted by scholars and experts—many of whom were laypeople. These statements sought to help Catholics around the world interact with and live well in modern society as life, human work, and social relations changed quite dramatically. The tradition continues into our present.

Catholic social teaching begins with the claim that we are social beings called to communal life. For this reason, we have real and serious obligations to each other. In particular, Catholic social teaching understands human rights not only as negative protections against interference from others. Rather, human rights require at times (even often) that we take positive action to participate in the life of society on behalf of and for the good of others. Our duty to vote in elections represents one of the basic ways in which we actively participate in the life of society.

In Catholic social teaching, rights and duties are closely connected in our social lives. In his important encyclical letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (“Concern of the Church for the Social Order”) Pope John Paul II offers us a key teaching about who we are as persons. The Pope suggests that we are not strictly autonomous creatures but rather our lives in society reveal a profound interdependence (*SRS 38*). I think the present COVID-19 crisis reminds us in urgent ways that our personal choices and behaviors really do affect the lives of others. For John Paul II, when we recognize that we really are interdependent as persons, we move more and more toward an attitude, a virtue, of solidarity (*SRS 38*). In other words, in and through the virtue of solidarity, we all have important commitments to the common good of all in society. In one basic way, this is perhaps the most fundamental reason that Catholic social teaching emphasizes our duties of political participation and our obligations to vote in elections. Stated differently, the rights we have to vote flow from our duties in solidarity that we all have to common good. By voting, we serve the common good. More about this later.

During the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), major documents of the council also addressed questions of political participation and the implications for voting in elections. In *Gaudium et spes* (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”) the council teaches that persons are “to participate freely and actively in the political order” (*GS 75*). The council further teaches that “all citizens [are to] be mindful of the right and duty to vote freely in the interest of advancing the common good” (*GS 75*).

More recently, the US bishops similarly teach that “responsible citizenship is a virtue [and that] participation in the political process is a moral obligation” (*Faithful Citizenship 5*) The bishops, the Church, and the laity each have an important obligation to know and teach the tradition well so that our conscience and judgments may be well and properly formed. This is necessary in order to participate effectively in the political life of society. A key part of this participation involves thoughtful and careful voting in elections. Catholic social teaching makes clear that citizens exercise their God-given freedom when they vote in elections. As we can see, faith and politics cannot be separated.
from each other. Rather our faith places moral obligations upon us as Christians to consider and positively act in our roles in social life through direct participation in the political order. A fundamental way we do this in a democratic society such as the US is by voting in elections.

While the Church makes clear that we have freedom to vote as we ourselves rightly discern, Catholic social teaching also holds that we have the responsibility to properly form our conscience as we make political choices and decisions. The US Bishops have observed that “the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience” (USCCB, Forming Consciences 3,7). The tradition is quite clear that popes and bishops (or anyone else, for that matter) should not be telling believers specifically how to vote—that is, for which specific candidates to cast their votes. In fulfilling our duties to properly form our conscience it seems clear to me that a key question offers us guidance as we evaluate particular candidates: that is, does the candidate seek to promote the dignity of the human person? This is a bedrock principle of Catholic faith and morals that flows from our experience and belief of being created imago Dei (“in the image and likeness of God”).

This means that a key to making choices when voting is whether or not a candidate’s policies address the moral need to protect human rights and promote human flourishing—ideas central to Catholic social teaching about the common good. Voting is an essential way in which we actively support human rights, human dignity, and the common good. In other words, our legal and political system must serve the flourishing and dignity of persons.

There are, of course, different approaches about how to do this and much disagreement about how to practically support and protect human dignity. If I may mention one issue that is highly debated and important in our time: health care. While candidates have different approaches, it is basic in Catholic social teaching that reasonable access to health care is a fundamental human right and is necessary in the most basic support of human dignity. In my view, health care is a critically important issue that Catholic Christians must carefully study and discern when making voting decisions. There is much room for dialogue and disagreement about “how” on this issue. But the fundamental moral principle is clear: basic access to health care is a moral requirement. This should encourage careful thought and discernment on the part of voting Catholic Christians.

I must confess that part of me does not look forward at all to the upcoming election. Already, there are signs that on good days, the campaign rhetoric on all sides will be aggressive; on bad days it will be outright mean and nasty. I hope that I am wrong, but I predict that we will see poor public behavior on the part of many candidates as election day approaches. To be honest, I am tempted to tune much of it out. I’d prefer to avoid the whole thing. A less virtuous part of me wants not to participate at all. While I am not a sociologist or political scientist, it is clear that the divisions in our society right now are real and serious. In addition to the usual questions that need resolution, the COVID-19 pandemic brings a new urgency to our social and political lives. I believe that the present national and global situation makes it even more evident how important it is that we actively participate and carefully vote. Still, part of me really wants to run and hide from it, especially now. We are all likely feeling distracted and tired from the long period of lockdown due to the virus. However, applying for a mail-in ballot or getting out to vote if we can do so

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safely is a real way that we live out our citizenship and help our society and our communities which need the participation of us all.

Our faith, Catholic social teaching, and the present global situation make clear that our participation as voting citizens in the months ahead really matters. I know that I personally have a serious responsibility to read carefully, think prudently, and make careful decisions about all parts of the upcoming elections and to discern well all sections of the ballot. I believe that this is true for all of us as we try our best to live as faithful Catholic Christians. Voting is an important way for us to participate in the life of society and to contribute to the common good. Our thoughtful and active participation is greatly needed. We exercise our freedom and our responsibility when we prudently and carefully make decisions to vote and participate in the life of Christian solidarity that we are all called to by the Lord.

Images from Element 5 Digital, Jon Tyson and Ross Findon on Unsplash

Announcements

Requiescat in pace

Anne Byles, daughter of parishioner Beryl Byles, passed away unexpectedly on May 7 in New Orleans.

Old St. Joseph's parishioner Eunice Henwood, mother of Ursula Reed, passed away on May 9. A private funeral service was held on May 16 and Eunice was laid to rest in the Saints Peter and Paul Cemetery in Springfield, PA.

Giancarlo Mazzoleni, husband of parishioner Rosa Mazzoleni, died on May 19. Memorial arrangements are pending.

We pray for the Byles, Henwood and Mazzoleni families and their friends.

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them; may their souls, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

Socks Appeal

Thanks to your generosity, our guests at Faith, Food & Friends will be well-supplied with personal care items for some time to come. There is, however, an urgent need for socks. Faith, Food & Friends has been promised a gift of 2000+ pairs of socks from the Bombas Company. But the supply chain and delivery issues affecting us all have postponed the socks expected arrival. But our guests’ need is constant. You can help fill the socks gap by searching for Faith, Food & Friends wishlist on Amazon.

In your prayers, please remember our sick and homebound brothers and sisters, our ministry at Pennsylvania Hospital and all those who have asked for our prayers.

George Bernato, Debbie Brooks, Ann Crowther, Jane Crowther, Mary Kay Crowther, Barbara Epting, Owen Petzelka, Philip Press, Sara Smith, Sharon Winge and Pat Yusko.

If you wish to add anyone to the parish prayer list, please email bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org or call 215-923-1733.
INFORMATION

Pastor
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ (pastor@oldstjoseph.org)

Parochial Vicar
Fr. Francis Hannafey SJ (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org)

In Residence
Br. Robert Carson SJ
Fr. Ed O’Donnell SJ (eodonnell@oldstjoseph.org)

Pastoral Associate
BJ Brown (bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org)

Business Manager
Eric German (germane@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Music
Mark Bani (music@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Offices
(ooffice@oldstjoseph.org)

Religious Education (PREP) Coordinator
Christine Szczepanowski (prep@oldstjoseph.org)

Faith, Food & Friends Director
Deborah Hluchan (faithandfriends@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Hospital Ministry
Tom Volkert (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Rectory Office Hours
Monday through Friday: 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM
Sunday: 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM

Mass Times
Monday through Saturday: 12:05 PM
Saturday Vigil Mass for Sunday: 5:30 PM
Sunday: 7:30, 9:30, 11:30 AM and 6:30 PM
Holy Days: 12:05 and 7:00 PM

Medical Emergency
In a medical emergency when the need for a priest is urgent, please call the rectory.

Hearing Enhancements
Old St. Joseph’s is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are available in the rear of the church.

Registration
Registration forms are available in the rectory office during normal office hours, on the bookcases in the back of the church and online at www.oldstjoseph.org. They can be returned to the parish office by mail or in person.

Sacrament of Reconciliation
A priest is available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation Monday through Saturday from 11:30 AM–12:00 PM or by appointment.

Sacrament of Baptism
If you want to arrange a baptism, please contact Fr. Hannafey (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org) at least two months before the desired date.

Eucharist for the Homebound
To arrange to receive Communion at home, please contact the parish offices.

The Sacrament of Anointing
The Sacrament of Anointing (the sacrament of the sick) is offered during the 12:05 PM Mass on the first Saturday of each month. Homebound or hospitalized persons wanting to receive the Sacrament of Anointing should call the parish office.

Sacrament of Matrimony
If you want to be married at Old St. Joseph’s, please visit our website, oldstjoseph.org and read the material under the heading Weddings. Please call the parish office at 215-923-1766 at least nine months before your desired wedding date.

Rite of Christian Initiation
If you are an adult wishing to be baptized, or to receive First Eucharist and Confirmation, or are a baptized non-Catholic seeking full communion with Catholic Church, please call the parish office or email rcia@oldstjoseph.org.

Mass of Christian Burial
To schedule a funeral or memorial Mass, ask your funeral director to call the parish office.

Parish Pastoral Council
(osjpc@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Finance Council
Paul Shay, chair

Historic Preservation Corporation Board
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ, president

Adult Education
Rita O’Brien and Jeanmarie Zippo
(adulted@oldstjoseph.org)

Eldership
Pat Nelson (eldership@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Life
Joe Casey (parishlife@oldstjoseph.org)

Ignatian Spirituality and Formation
Len Mancini (osjspirituality@oldstjoseph.org)

Women, Faith and Fellowship
Rana McNamara (wff@oldstjoseph.org)

Young Adult Community
(osjyac@gmail.com)

Altar Servers
Maria Ramirez (altarserver@oldstjoseph.org)

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion
Bill Stewart (EM@oldstjoseph.org)

Hospital Ministry
Luanne Balestrucci (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Homebound Ministry
Neal Hébert (homeEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Lectors
Lou Anne Bulik (lectors@oldstjoseph.org)

Ushers
Nikola Sizgorich (ushers@oldstjoseph.org)

Children’s Liturgy of the Word
Peggy Connolly (clow@oldstjoseph.org)
Thank you for advertising in our church bulletin. I am patronizing your business because of it!