Power and the Upcoming Elections

In the next few weeks America goes to the polls. The midterm elections promise to be explosive. Sadly, anger and bitterness color this election more than we’ve seen in recent elections.

This fact forms the backdrop of our remarks this morning. I hope to touch upon two topics—they are the Catholic moral principle of solidarity and the dynamic of formation of conscience that helps this principle become a moral principle shaping our character and guiding our actions. This latter topic—forming for solidarity—faces squarely the question heard at church doors after Mass. “Father, what does the Church say about..?” You fill in the blank.

No one sitting here this morning is naïve about politics—it’s about power: who has it, who does not have it and who wants it. We know that any organization needs to distribute power to govern—after all—we’ve all walked into chaos when no one takes responsibility. The point is that power is not evil. The misuse of power, however, proves a different story.

When we rip power from its proper context of moral principles this misuse takes root and festers. What is a ‘moral principle’? A thumbnail sketch tells us that a moral principle articulates a value—it sets a “line on the playing field”—a starting point. I’m always reminded of the Last Gospel in the Mass of my childhood. “In principio”—“..in the beginning”.
**Challenge to be in Solidarity: A Principle and Moral Virtue**

The “beginning” for that parishioner standing at that front door of your Church is the compassion of Christ Crucified. This Divine compassion forms disciples. Uprooting the value of compassion in Christ as the principle shaping social relations unleashes confusion and too often evil.

We remember from sleepy physics class that nature abhors a vacuum. Given human frailty, power too often roots itself in soil both cynical and the myopic. The result often generates corruption. This distortion threatens the common good—the keystone of Catholic social morality.

Nature abhors a vacuum; so when cynicism and corruption—some subtle, some blatant—rushes into the void, the moral duty of solidarity with the marginalized and the poor—in short, the *powerless*—too readily falls victim to being shoved into the shadows. Christians reject the eclipse of solidarity. The Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church promulgated in 2005 tells us that “solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples toward an ever more committed unity.”

In Catholic social ethics—echoing the Beatitudes—this “ever more unity” depends upon concretizing the principles of justice, subsidiarity, preferential option for the poor, access to the political process and solidarity.

Together they form a rock-solid foundation for a society truly committed to human values. They move us forward toward a society committed to the dignity of each person created in the Image of God, redeemed in Christ Jesus and drawn in the Holy Spirit to the heart of the Divine Trinity—the wellspring of compassionate justice. Such a society marks the advent of the Kingdom of God.

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The Gospels testify to Our Lord’s compassion for the powerless. The Lord hears the cry of the poor is not merely a catchy refrain for a communion meditation song, but a solid challenge to Christian discipleship especially to those who will shepherd questions of “well, Father, what does the Church say about immigration?”

In the end, solidarity as a principle acts as a moral virtue—it shapes our character both as individuals and as communities to say in our political arena: “you’re running in circles.” A virtue regulates our emotions so that over time standing in solidarity with our brothers and sisters left out of the magic circle—left beaten and abandoned on the side of the road to Jericho—becomes second nature. Beneath the chisel of virtue character takes form.

**The Formation of Conscience**

This second nature takes time—like the slow, patient Colorado River carving the Grand Canyon. It takes time in us and our parish communities. Keeping the principle of solidarity in mind, we look at insights into conscience formation that—over time—may prove helpful in our ministry. Let me say up front that I’m working under the premise that as priests we have a duty to help form the conscience of the woman or man who takes seriously Jesus’ question to Andrew: “What are you looking for?” Our discussion centers on forming the conscience in general—and within the context of the upcoming elections—forming the conscience to risk solidarity.

And for many of us ‘risk’ is the right word. Conscience forces us to confront moral truth. Reminding us that conscience can get it right or can get it terribly wrong. To face front-and-center our mutual responsibility to work toward the common good at the heart of solidarity means, after all, embracing self-sacrifice, facing biases and prejudices and knowing that St. Paul’s vision of the Body of Christ confronts uncritical individualism and indifference. Risk is the right word.
The Three Parts of Conscience Formation

In deference to our erstwhile Archbishop, we will break down conscience formation into three parts. Time does not allow for a thorough discussion of each part but hopefully these remarks will wrap some ideas around our experience.

Three dynamic elements shape one’s conscience: Norms of the Community, Life Experience—that is to say the narrative of one’s life and, finally, the Moral Imagination. The order today is arbitrary—but all three dynamics are “up and running” in formation of conscience. Let me say a bit about each and perhaps a bit more about moral imagination.

I. The Norms of Community

In baptism Christ initiates each of us into His living Body the Church alive with His promised Holy Spirit—in whom we live and move and have our being. We live in the Spirit and the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that the Holy Spirit poured out on the church at Pentecost is God in the same sense that the Father and Son are. This Holy Spirit lavishes the gifts of wisdom on the Church. The Church as community of interpretation and action interprets the “signs of the times in the light of the Gospel,” calling upon both the deposit of divine revelation and the natural law. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit animates her teaching charism.

The Church offers us norms which are values articulated in terms of behavior. The Ten Commandments are norms—the value of the sanctity of human life gives us the norm: “Thou shalt not kill.” The complex and deeply personal goods of marriage warn us to heed the norm of not betraying the intimate trust of the marriage bed—“Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Many of us have counseled a couple in the throes of crisis brought on by adultery—and not a few of us have had the unspoken realization that the hope of healing the deep, burning hurt of this betrayal lives only in the realm of grace.

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The indwelling of the Holy Spirit allows the Church’s teaching voice to risk improvisation as new challenges emerge in history—bioethics is a good example. Our history is rife with improvisation under the light of the Gospel. St. Francis and St. Dominic in their time; St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila faced the Reformation, took a look around, prayed, took a deep breath and stepped out of the boat. The Catholic conscience, then, seeking wisdom needs to prayerfully and humbly listen to the both the Church’s teaching and—importantly—her reasoning for the teaching. It’s never arbitrary. This humility mentors the primacy of conscience—keeping it from the ever-present danger of self-serving rationalization. Arguments usually sound quite convincing in a diving bell.

2. The Life Experience of the Person
Secondly, if openness to the Magisterium’s voice articulates norms within a community of interpretation and action, the dynamic of life experience forms the conscience as well.

Life experience hones the virtue of prudence—practical wisdom akin to garden-variety common sense. Sadly, a life-narrative marked by exploitation, grinding poverty, marginalization, abuse, violence and ignorance may well maim personal conscience. Catholic teaching notes this challenge confronting the conscience. Corrosive life-experiences may distort the formation of conscience; however, this corrosive experience never obliterates the voice of conscience within—as Gaudium et spes alerts us:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that….” (GS, #16)

In that same context, the Council Fathers note that: “Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity.” This belief may find its way to your Church door.
Horrible choices may bring a man to death row, for instance—but hope never sits on death row—Christian hope that compassion may stir grace to realign the depth of his conscience. Seeking reconciliation remains a true test of solidarity.

3. Catholic Moral Imagination

Lastly we touch upon one of the elusive but crucial elements of conscience formation: the moral imagination. This ‘imagination’ is not the ability for childish whimsy but the capacity for bringing order and intelligibility to the often disparate elements of human experience. This lens focuses and gets the picture.

A young woman I knew became pregnant in her first year of college. Unmarried she faced a crisis pregnancy. The elements of her life came into focus within the symbolic world of a community that spends an entire liturgical season awaiting the birth of a child. Her moral imagination brought into focus her options. Terminating the pregnancy simply did not come up on her screen.

The point I’m driving home is that this imagination is the province of liturgy that expresses the deepest soul of our community of interpretation and action. The symbolic world of Catholic consciousness so richly realized in our liturgical life forms consciences like no other dynamic.

For example, Catholic social principles can form the backbone of some of our homilies. The values of solidarity—among others—are interdependence, mutual responsibility, compassionate justice, mercy and reconciliation. Two imperatives form the pillars of Catholic morality—be generous and be reconciled. Homilies bringing home these moral themes equip the woman or man standing before you at the Church door on Sunday morning with the ability to listen, to discern, to judge and to act and to take responsibility. Particularly in the upcoming elections.
Compassionate justice rings out in the woman caught in adultery. Interdependence—a key Catholic value—rounds out reconciliation as the Father welcomes his son home—grasping his son who has left home but never his heart.

Matthew 25 needs little discussion—noting that the goats are goats when they arrive on the scene. The Lord recognizes the residue of a life of self-absorption rather than a life of solidarity. No magic here—only the same compassion and sorrow that rang in God’s voice to Adam and Eve, “Who told you that you were naked?”

**Conclusion**

Finally, let me close by adding that usually I tell my students that I am their only audio-visual, but allow me to use an audio-visual. This battered red book is a vintage Butler’s Lives of the Saints—the pictorial version. We Price Hill kids need pictures. A friend gave me this after sharing stories about what fed our Catholic imagination.

I remember sitting in the Overlook Branch of the Public Library looking through this reference book, hearing the soothing hum of what I still call library fans. The pictures of Peter’s crucifixion, Simeon Stylites in the wastes of Syria standing atop his pillar put flesh on Catholic conscience—bringing respect for the Church’s teaching, helping interpret my experience as parochial as it might be and—to the point this morning—slowly carving a moral imagination alive with fidelity, perseverance, faith, hope and love—bringing home to heart and soul Jesus’ promise to never leave us orphaned (Jn. 14:18)

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