Opinion
Guest Voices



An angel statue set off by fall foliage at St. Margaret's Catholic Cemetery in Neenah, Wisconsin, Sept. 22 (CNS/Brad Birkholz)



by John Stowe

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(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Editor's note: *Like the rest of the country, we at the National Catholic Reporter have been intensely focused on the run-up to the U.S. elections. The coronavirus pandemic, economic devastation and a political polarization that may even threaten the existence of our democracy have made it one of the most consequential elections in our lifetimes, if not in the history of the United States. But where do we — as a country and a church — go from here? We asked four of our columnists and one bishop to reflect on that question in essays that will run daily during election week. The first installment, from Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, kicks off this series today.*

After living through a period of intense division, enhanced by a contentious presidential contest and made more urgent by a pandemic, what do we do now as a nation? And what should the role of the church be in this pluralistic post-election democratic society? It seems to me that after the election, rather than in the midst of it, is the time to be forming consciences for faithful citizenship.

Despite the richness of our Scriptures and tradition, we managed to find our church as divided as any other body in the country. In contrast to our regular celebrations of the Sacrament of Unity, in-person and live-streamed, we found ourselves in a "Facebook mentality" of either "liking" or "disliking" what we heard from the pulpit, filtered through our political lenses and our own sense of infallibility. We witnessed

bishops issuing statements and tweets at odds with each other about the correct interpretation of our teachings. We even see the pope's teachings and priorities met with cool indifference or downright disdain. Priests saw fit to pronounce condemnation of entire political parties on social media, sometimes with episcopal endorsement. Others, holding on to their Catholicism by a thread, walked away because they could not countenance their church implicitly affirming the most amoral occupant of the White House in anyone's memory.

How do we move forward now?

I have frequently mused on the directive of Pope Francis to the bishops participating in the Synod on the Family, "speak boldly and listen charitably." That seems so hard for us to do simultaneously. But how different might our politics be if we were capable of doing this within our governmental system, which really cannot function properly if it is not participatory.



People pray outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington Sept. 26. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Scripture and tradition teach us that it is the Evil One who sows division. So many of St. Paul's admonitions to the recipients of his epistles sound so contemporary precisely because he was trying to get his readers to overcome their divisions that were rooted in anything but Christ.

In his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, issued on the Feast of St. Francis and one month before the U.S. elections, the pope appealed to the world to learn the price of our nationalism and tendencies to isolationism at a time when what we really need is for all people to come together to face the immense problems on a global scale that are afflicting us.

Describing the darkness enveloping a closed world, the pope said, "the spread of despair, hyperbole, extremism and polarization, strategies of ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism denies the rights of others to have an opinion" [*Fratelli Tutti*, 15-17].

This approach to politics leads to a permanent state of disagreement and confrontation, and the only way to win with this approach requires eliminating one's opponents. Knowing that the pope is addressing the whole world and not just targeting the United States, I still couldn't help but wonder whether he had watched a Trump campaign rally when crafting these words.

Fratelli Tutti, as its title implies, is a call for global solidarity elevated to global fraternity. At a time of such intense intolerance on the international as well as on a domestic scale, it is hard to imagine a more countercultural stance. Noting the opportunity that is at hand, the pope said that COVID-19 momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community and that we can only be saved together because we are part of one another.

But it was only momentary; the pope laments how easily we forget the lessons of history. Although the first chapter is filled with gloominess because of its accurate presentation of our current situation, Francis is a man of faith and hope who naturally points us toward Christ as the answer.

How good it would be if the adamant anti-abortion forces would be able to situate their abhorrence for the destruction of life in the womb within what Pope Francis calls a "throw-away culture" that permits the strong to exclude many categories of people considered disposable: refugees seeking asylum after fleeing violence and starvation, migrant families trying to survive, the victims of prolonged wars and

famines and those immediately affected by global climate change.

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Local residents and volunteers deliver aid packages to residents affected by flooding in Thua Thien Hue province, Vietnam, Oct. 20. Two dioceses in central Vietnam hit by some of the worst floods in the country's history are struggling to provide emergency aid for hundreds of thousands of victims. (CNS/via Reuters/International Federation of the Red Cross handout/Yen Duong)

And how good it would be for those who are attuned to the suffering inflicted on the weak on such massive scales if they could also see how attitudes toward the elderly, the terminally ill and the unborn can also be part of the same destructive culture that judges who is deserving of life.

Earlier in his papacy, Pope Francis suggested that the fifth commandment in our time should be expanded to "thou shalt not exclude" because in the new globalization exclusion equals death. In that light, the pope calls attention to the

other viruses that are afflicting us: radical individualism and racism. He notes that our hostility to refugees and migrants extends to the "hidden exiles" in our own society who suffer the exclusion of neglect in their neighborhoods and schools, especially when they lack access to medical care and opportunities to work. He calls for each of us to pay attention to the basic dignity of each human person and the need to work for the common good.

The pope is not afraid to dream, nor should we. As a Latin American, he is not dismissive of the utopian, but wants to work to make it real even if it will only be fully realized by God in the kingdom that begins right here among us. He dreams of a world in which the diversity of peoples and cultures enriches everyone in contrast with a "monochrome" society that becomes absolutist. He knows full well that this attractive vision of what could be will require the conversion of hearts, minds and, what we are most resistant to in the United States, lifestyles.

Can we as people of faith dismiss a worldview based on dialogue and friendship, as the pope envisions? Or after such a contentious and long election season, should we approach Advent with the hope of a new beginning and dare to dream with the prophet who envisions lions lying down with lambs and nations beating swords into plowshares? The pope would suggest that now is the time to form consciences for faithful citizenship — faithful citizenship in a globalized world in which the common good is an urgent requirement.

[Bishop John Stowe, Order of Friars Minor Conventual, is the third Bishop of the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky, since May 2015.]

This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.
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