Opinion

News



People in Houston gather to protest outside of a federal courthouse Nov. 2, where a judge rejected a GOP bid to throw out ballots cast at drive-through polling locations. (CNS/Reuters/Callaghan O'Hare)



by Daniel P. Horan

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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. This is the second installment. Read previous commentary from Bishop John Stowe here and Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister here.*

The division in American society will not immediately dissipate once the 2020 presidential election concludes. Regardless of how things turn out, the polarization, sectarianism and widespread distrust will still need to be addressed after the election.

I believe there are three insights for Christians seeking to move forward toward reconciliation and peace after the 2020 election: We have to avoid cynicism, preserve memory and restore a sense of our shared humanity.

While Pope Francis did not write his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* solely for a United States audience, some notable lessons in the teaching might help us in our efforts to move forward toward healing and reconciliation in our communities.

In evaluating the contemporary realities of our time, the pope recognizes that there "are those who prefer not to talk of reconciliation, for they think that conflict, violence and breakdown are part of the normal functioning of society" (236). With this observation, Francis critiques the cynicism that can creep in when we survey the polarized landscape of our politics and social order.

"Still others," the pope adds, "believe that reconciliation is a sign of weakness; incapable of truly serious dialogue, they choose to avoid problems by ignoring injustices" (236). This form of political cynicism also dominates a great deal of our civil discourse today. Legitimate grievances can give rise to a spirit of vengeance and retaliation. And citizens who understand themselves to have been harmed or disadvantaged by our dysfunctional system might refuse any effort at reconciliation, seeking instead to inflict the same sense of pain or abuse on others.

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But there is another way. Pointing to the fact that "Forgiveness and reconciliation are central themes in Christianity and, in various ways, in other religions" (237), Francis reminds us that our response to injustice cannot take the form of revenge or more harm. To succumb to such cynicism is to freeze in place, to refuse to grow, to prevent any hope of change or progress. Forgiveness is what our baptismal vocation demands of us, and forgiveness is what we are called to offer. However, this does not mean that we merely look the other way.

"We are called to love everyone, without exception; at the same time, loving an oppressor does not mean allowing him to keep oppressing us, or letting him think that what he does is acceptable. On the contrary, true love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make him cease his oppression; it means stripping him of a power that he does not know how to use, and that diminishes his own humanity and that of others" (241).

By rejecting the cynicism that leads to either resignation on the one hand, or revenge on the other, we take a constructive step forward in addressing the

brokenness of our communities and the distortion of our individual and collective senses of self.

Even if President Donald Trump somehow wins reelection, a time will come when he is no longer in office and another presidential administration will have to discern how to pick up the pieces of our fragile and fractured society. If Biden wins the 2020 election, that responsibility will have already begun. In that case, the challenges of a global pandemic, economic crisis and persistent, systemic racism will weigh heavily on the next administration. It may be tempting for the next president to move quickly past the egregious sins and alleged crimes of his predecessor under the pretense of wanting to "move forward" and "focus on the crises."

We've seen this before. For example, when President Gerald Ford swiftly pardoned former President Richard Nixon after his resignation. Or when President Barack Obama's administration effectively let off the hook officials from the Bush administration who tortured detainees, which is a war crime. The Obama administration also declined to hold Wall Street executives legally responsible for the Great Recession in an effort to move forward with passing financial recovery legislation. A phrase commonly used by Obama and his colleagues at the time was that he believed "that we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards."

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>
> —Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan
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The problem with this sort of attitude is that it inevitably contributes to the erasure of history and memory tied to abuse, oppression, injustice and other kinds of harm. Recalling how this dynamic often is employed across the globe, Francis writes: "Nowadays, it is easy to be tempted to turn the page, to say that all these things happened long ago and we should look to the future. For God's sake, no! We can never move forward without remembering the past; we do not progress without an honest and unclouded memory" (259).

In this way, the pope is echoing the important work of the late German theologian Fr. Johann Baptist Metz, who talked often about the importance of maintaining "dangerous memory" in Christianity. He strongly critiqued brushing over difficult truths and the tendency many people have to erase challenging memories in order to replace them with "false consciousness of the past." Metz calls for another way for Christians to remember: "dangerous memories, memories that challenge. These are memories in which earlier experiences flare up and unleash new dangerous insights for the present."

He adds, "It is no accident that the destruction of memory is a typical measure taken by totalitarian governments. People's subjugation begins when their memories are taken away. Every colonization takes its principle here. And every resistance to oppression is nourished by the subversive power of remembered suffering. The memory of suffering is always standing up against the modern cynic of power politics."

Real forgiveness, the path toward genuine reconciliation, and the hope of a new and better world is only possible if we do not shy away from the memory of pain, suffering, oppression and injustice. The Trump administration has presided over some of the most horrific and scandalous policies in modern American history: Muslim travel bans, child separation at our southern border, constant fomenting of anti-Black and anti-immigrant racism, and the devastating failure to adequately contain the coronavirus pandemic.



A helicopter passes over the White House in Washington Nov. 2, the day before the U.S. presidential election. (CNS/Reuters/Erin Scott)

These memories are dangerous in that they reveal uncomfortable truths that many in power would rather just forget. But as people of faith, we must call for redress and authentic reconciliation that demands the preservation of truth, which can only take place through formal channels of investigation and even prosecution.

Finally, one of the contributing problems to our division is the reduction of individuals to abstractions. We have lost a sense of the uniqueness, complexity, historical background and diversity of social location that informs and shapes each person. Our information and social-media silos have further contributed to the labeling of others and our comfort with putting people in boxes. This helps explain the rise in dehumanizing discourse in so many areas of our society.

We will not be able to achieve meaningful reconciliation or move beyond infighting and division without a restoration of the fundamental belief that other people are worthy, valuable people with intrinsic dignity bestowed to them by God. They are

not "enemies" and "others," but as Francis reminds us, those we may disagree with are always our sisters and brothers.

Our time is one in which the world is deeply divided, where fear is commonplace and distrust reigns supreme. Like St. Francis of Assisi, we must be bridge-builders and reconcilers, people who seek wholeness and unity in our communities and throughout the world. It is no accident that the prayer, which asks God to makes us "instruments of peace," is attributed to St. Francis. But we can only be such agents of God's peace if we avoid cynicism, preserve dangerous memories and restore our sense of shared humanity.

Editor's note: *This story has been updated to more accurately reflect the possible outcome of the election.*

[Daniel P. Horan is the Duns Scotus Professor of Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where he teaches systematic theology and spirituality. His recent book is *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology*. Follow him on Twitter: @DanHoranOFM.]

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This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 13-26, 2020** print issue under the headline: We can only move forward if we acknowledge 'dangerous memories'.