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Election Day: a call to unity and action

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Distinctly Catholic

Election day is finally here. The campaign has hardly been edifying. Precious little time was spent discussing the plight of the poor ? this in a country that prides itself on its high rates of religious observance. Did I miss the ads on climate change, a problem about which the policies needed are obvious but unpopular and, so, goes unaddressed. And, of course, once again, we Catholics are forced to choose between candidates who lack the intellectual and moral consistency of Catholic social teaching.

Whatever the results tonight, the leaders of the Catholic Church in the U.S., first and foremost our bishops and secondly prominent lay commentators, must look back to the documents of the Second Vatican Council and remember that the Church is called to be a sacrament of unity in the world, and that it can only be such if the unity of the Catholic Church is itself nurtured and respected. In his inaugural address after winning the nastiest campaign in American history, the election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson said, ?We are all Federalists. We are all Republicans.? It is incumbent upon all of us Catholics to look at our fellow Catholics whose politics have not been ours and say, ?We are all Catholics.? We need to go further, I think, and say, ?We are all pro-life Catholics. We are all social justice Catholics.?

Cardinal Timothy Dolan hit precisely the right note about Catholicism in the public square when he spoke at the Al Smith Dinner. He said that the Church stood with, and expected society to stand with the ?un?s? ? ?the unemployed, the uninsured, the unwanted, the unwed mother, the innocent, fragile unborn baby in her womb, the undocumented, the un-housed, the unhealthy, the unfed, the undereducated. Government, Al Smith believed, should be on the side of these un?s.? Those who are at the margins of society are the treasure of the Church. In our fast-paced, consumer culture, that celebrates the acquisition of wealth and those happinesses that are for purchase, the Church celebrates the poor, the marginalized, the downtrodden, the humble. There is an old joke, ?Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, but that?s okay because we can just beat them up and take it back.? That is the ethos of America today. It is

not the ethos of the Catholic Church.

Everyone one of us who votes today must have satisfied themselves that they are voting for the person they think is best able to lead the nation. There are good reasons, good moral reasons, to prefer either candidate. I do not believe, as some have suggested, that voting for Obama makes one a bad Catholic. I do not believe voting for Romney makes one a bad Catholic. I wish to commend the vast majority of the US bishops whose statements about the campaign were thoughtful and restrained. A few bishops, who garnered more attention than they should, made intemperate, and often theologically mistaken, claims, but most did not. (Those noisy bishops, incidentally, do not make it easier for Cardinal Dolan and the USCCB to do their work!) And, I hope that all Catholics, no matter how they vote, will not give away their vote cheaply.

Dear Catholics on the Left ? Challenge the Democratic Party. Challenge the President. He threw the Catholic Left under the bus with his HHS mandate and he should be made to know that you voted for him in spite of that decision, not because of it. He has adopted the incoherent, and immoral, pro-choice position that a baby is only a baby when we say it is. Challenge the president and his party on these issues. Rome was not built in a day. But it would never have been built at all if someone was not making bricks. What are the bricks that will create a pro-life wing of the Democratic Party? 20 percent of the country thinks abortion should be legal in all cases. Another 20 percent thinks it should never be legal. The 60 percent in the center are deeply ambivalent about abortion. How do we give voice to that 60 percent? The Hyde Amendment, which prohibits federal funds from being used for abortion, is an example. It is a small step but a step. I can see why non-Catholics do not share our commitment to the belief that life begins at conception, but, really, why are third trimester abortion permitted here without restrictions? In Europe, hardly a backwater, abortion is much more restricted after the first few weeks of a pregnancy.

Dear Catholics on the Right ? I admire the tenacity of your commitment to the unborn. But, should not your concern extend further, to the undocumented and the other ?un?s?? The Republican Party has a libertarian wing within it that should scare the daylights out of any Catholic. Yes, Mr. Ryan was not a libertarian the way Congressman Ron Paul is a libertarian, but the idea that we would mess with Medicare which may be the most obvious example of a policy that enacts the common good in our nation, that is an idea all Catholics should resist. Catholics on the right are correct to insist that a preferential option for the poor does not necessarily entail a preferential option for big government. But, the market has had plenty of time to secure the basic human right to health care and it has failed to do so, which makes it incumbent upon government to secure that right.

I hope that Catholics on both the left and the right will embrace and think about the consequences of one of the more interesting policy developments in recent years, the establishment of a Faith-Based Office. Building on the idea of ?charitable choice? in the welfare reforms signed by President Clinton, the Faith-Based initiative was started by President George W. Bush. President Obama not only retained the office, he ramped its activities up. Here is a model that helps us transcend the debate between rival claims of ?big government? versus ?individual responsibility.? The resources of government, exercised through the taxing power, are used to enable a flourishing civil society, funding a host of religious and charitable and community groups, each trying to address important social needs. The institutional integrity and autonomy of these religious and community organizations must be respected by the government: A Church-run anti-poverty program should not have to secularize itself in order to get a government grant, as some liberals insist. Home work for liberals: Read Justices Alito and Kagan?s concurring opinion in *Hosanna-Tabor*. Conversely, conservatives need to recognize that no amount of charitable activity can replace government programs entirely: Christian charities were around in the nineteenth century, here and abroad. The modern social welfare state emerged because those charities could not keep up with the

dreadful social consequences of the industrial revolution. When poverty was a largely rural affair, in a simpler world, private charity was sufficient. In the world we have been living in for the past century and a half, private charity is not enough. Homework for conservatives: Read Dickens. Homework for everybody: Read Lew Daly's "God's Economy" and study how Christian Democratic countries approach these issues.

Sunday, at Mass, I was treated to a wonderful sermon in which the priest reminded us that an unnamed scribe, encountering Jesus, together remind us of what is ultimately important – to love God and neighbor. Yes, our political engagement must flow from these twin commitments to love God and neighbor. But, our political commitments do not exhaust those commitments. What we share in our baptism, in our Creed, in the Eucharist, in the Scriptures, in the traditions and the Tradition of our Church, this is more important than anything that will be decided tonight. The American people will elect a man to serve in the White House for four years. Momentous challenges await whoever is elected. But, that unnamed scribe in the Gospel encountered the meek rabbi Jesus, whose reign is without end – eternal without temporal end and universal without geographic end. Indeed, the only place and time where Jesus cannot reign is where and when we, by our thoughts or deeds, reject him. Our hearts can be closed. We can ignore the often radical implications of the words "Thy will be done," words which are challenging and counter-cultural enough to stick in the throat of any full-throated partisan! But tonight, after the polls close, after one man gives a concession speech and the other gives a victory speech, I urge all Catholics to ask themselves two questions. First, how can I help reach out to my fellow Catholics to make sure the partisan divisiveness we have just witnessed does not infect our Church? Second, how can we, whether our candidate won or lost, help to bring the Church's concern for the "un's" to the attention of those who will be elected? That is work for enough for us.

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