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What Now?

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Distinctly Catholic

The American people have rendered their verdict. After four years of some of the most divisive partisan politics imaginable from "You lie!" hurled at President Obama during the State of the Union to repugnant television ads from MoveOn.org, after \$6 billion spent on this election cycle, after an exceedingly close margin in the popular vote, the American voters ended up ratifying the status quo last night. President Obama, Senate Democrats and House Republicans all held their own. So, this morning, we must look through our bleary eyes and face the question: What Now?

President Obama won a resounding victory in the electoral college. As of this writing, he has banked 303 electoral college votes, and looking at the results in Florida, where most of the uncounted ballots are in Democratic leaning precincts, he is likely to end up at 330. That is decisive. When President George W. Bush won re-election with 286 electoral votes, he said the result gave him new "political capital." Mr. Obama emerges from this election with even greater political capital, but it remains to be seen if he will know how to use it, or what he will use it for.

The nation remains very divided and it is the better part of leadership for the President to take some steps to unite the country. His victory speech last night set the tone. He should also contemplate asking Governor Romney to undertake a high profile task. After the 1940 election, Franklin Roosevelt sent the man he defeated, Wendell Willkie, on a mission to the United Kingdom. FDR sent a note to Churchill via Willkie that noted his election opponent was "truly helping to keep politics out over here" a reference to the then-looming question of American support for Britain in the war. Given Mr. Romney's unfortunate trip to London this summer, perhaps sending him to the UK is not the ticket, but I can imagine Obama announcing an initiative to streamline government operations and entrusting it to Mr. Romney.

President Obama is well advised to reach out to the grown-ups in the Republican Party and solicit their

support for comprehensive immigration reform. Jeb Bush should be his first call, followed by Senator Marco Rubio and Governor Suzanna Martinez. Democrats do not have the votes in the House or Senate to pass immigration reform on their own. And, if the Republicans do not change their manner of treating Latinos, they are doomed to demographic extinction. Latinos provided the margin of victory for Obama in Colorado, Nevada, Virginia and, if he wins it, Florida. How does a Republican presidential candidate get to 270 when the Democrat is winning Latinos by a margin of 70%?

Most of those Latinos are Roman Catholics. Obama will also need the support of the U.S. bishops to pass immigration reform, and issue that garners virtually unanimous support from the episcopal bench. Mr. Obama could ease his tense relationship with the bishops by re-visiting the issue of the HHS contraception mandate. Sr. Carol Keehan, head of the Catholic Health Association, has pointed the way forward, calling for the administration to expand the narrow exemption for religious institutions and permitting women who work at exempt institutions to procure their contraceptive coverage via Title IX funding or via the exchanges set up by the Affordable Care Act. It is worth noting this morning that the Affordable Care Act is now a done deal. Congress passed it. The president signed it. The Supreme Court upheld it. The voters have now ratified it. When historians write the history of Obama's presidency, surely the ACA will be seen as his signature achievement. All Catholics can exult at the prospect of 30 million more of our fellow citizens finally having access to affordable health care. Why sully that achievement with an unnecessary fight over the HHS mandate?

The fiscal cliff looms over the next two months like the Ghost of Christmas Past. The President will have one huge advantage when he enters into negotiations with congressional Republicans: He can remind them that he is the only person at the table who never has to face the voters again! More importantly, the President needs to do something he has failed to do in his first term, he must set the difficult choices in context, and explain those choices to the American people. The context for facing the nation's fiscal mess must be, repeat must be, the growing inequality of income and wealth accumulation that has dogged American society for the past thirty years. There are federal programs that have outlived their usefulness. There are other programs that have not proven equal to their objectives. These can and should be cut. Taxes on the wealthy should be raised ? the President campaigned on the issue and he won. Only once these steps have been taken should anyone be messing with entitlements.

Senator Mitch McConnell did not seem in tune with the feelings of the electorate. ?The voters have not endorsed the failures or excesses of the president's first term, they have simply given him more time to finish the job they asked him to do together with a Congress that restored balance to Washington after two years of one-party control,? McConnell said. ?Now it's time for the president to propose solutions that actually have a chance of passing the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and a closely divided Senate, step up to the plate on the challenges of the moment, and deliver in a way that he did not in his first four years in office.? McConnell's obnoxious partisanship was undaunted by the fact that his party failed to pick up any seats in the Senate. Shame on him. If this is truly his posture, the Democrats should consider reforming the filibuster that Senate Republicans have abused these past few years.

Mr. Obama won and elections have consequences. But, he must not only reach out to the center, he must be seen to reach out to the center. The nation's business awaits.

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