

The Church and Politics: Speaking to the National Conscience

By The Most Rev. Daniel E. Flores, Bishop of Brownsville

Whenever I write or speak in defense of the right of the unborn child to life, I invariably get letters suggesting that the bishops of the Church should stay out of politics. Similarly, when I speak or write about the need for a just reform of our national immigration policy, I get letters (from different people) suggesting that the bishops should stay out of politics. The pro-life issue is often (incorrectly) identified as an issue coming from the right side of the political spectrum; the call for a just immigration reform is often (incorrectly) identified as an issue coming from the liberal side of the political spectrum.

All politics, in the noblest sense of the term, is about a common search for a society ordered in a way that promotes “liberty and justice for all”. The Catholic and the non-Catholic living in the United States share a basic conviction in the dignity of the human person. We agree that a just society builds on this conviction, and tries to enact laws that protect and promote this dignity. Our disagreements arise when we differ about what constitutes justice in particular areas of human relations.

The Church does not think in terms of right and left, of conservative and liberal. The mind of the Church is formed in a different manner. It is formed by the conviction that human dignity is not something a society awards to people; it is something with which we are “endowed by our Creator”. Although all of us, believers and non-believers alike, share a sense of the importance of human dignity, historically, it has been the Christian Gospel that has most inspired our nation to overcome the limitations that our personal perspectives on justice often impose on us. Because the Gospel preached and lived in every age is an announcement of God’s love for us, and our call to love one another, it has power to stir the national conscience to the more perfect recognition of the claims of justice in human relations.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, spoke to promote political reform; he preached to end our nation’s tolerance of racism and discrimination. He did so out of a deep Christian conviction that human dignity is not something granted by a government, but is rather to be safeguarded by it. Many Catholics have spoken directly to the national conscience in a way that has broken down many of the hostilities that have historically divided our nation. Dorothy Day’s persevering love for the poor comes to mind as a powerful example of this service to the national conscience. And who can forget how Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta came to this nation to speak to us about our national poverty of conscience that permits the destruction of our own unborn children?

This tradition of Christian service to the national conscience is rooted in the fact that we believe that Jesus is the True Son of God who became truly one of us. This profession of faith in the identity of Jesus intensifies and clarifies the basic human intuition about human dignity. Surely, anyone who has the grace of faith in the person and mission of Jesus Christ lives with an abiding conviction that to be human is to partake of a great dignity. To be human must be a tremendous gift, for God himself chose to become a sharer in our humanity. In the great truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God is made known with all clarity that whenever we offer a drink of water to anyone who comes to us with their thirst, we offer a kindness and a justice to the person of Jesus himself: *Whatsoever you do to the least of mine, you do to me*. In Jesus, the love of God and neighbor are united, and what God has joined, let no man tear apart.

And so it is that the Church has an obligation to speak out of her conviction that human life is always to be valued and protected, whether it is in the earliest stages of development in the womb, or whether it is in the last stages of infirmity, facing the approach of death. And so it is that the Church will consistently call the nation to remember that immigrants are worthy of being treated with respect, even when their documentary status is considered irregular by the state. It is cruelly ironic that both unborn children and undocumented immigrants are vulnerable to attack because they do not have a recognized legal status. But a Christian knows, and a Catholic is bound to believe, that human dignity is not something the government bestows, it is something God gives, and it is something a just society acknowledges.

When we insist that our laws should reflect an abiding respect for life in the womb, we are insisting that a truly humane society will do all in its power to protect innocent human life. When we ask for a just reform of immigration law in this country, we are asking that laws be enacted to insure a proper respect for immigrant families, and for an abiding recognition that most immigrants come to this country seeking to live by her laws, and contribute to the good of society. Without a reform, we have no way to distinguish those immigrants who might come with criminal intentions, and those who come fleeing criminal intentions. Surely a just society can find a way to distinguish between those who are here because life at home means something close to death, and those who come marketing death to our young people in forms of drugs and violence

For us, these issues are not right versus left, or conservative versus liberal. They are the serious consequences of faith in the Incarnation of the Son of God. This faith is our first loyalty, though not our only loyalty; because we love our country, we will work to make her more just. God so loved the world that He became one of us, and his Gospel enlightens every man and woman to our common obligations to one another as human beings. Thus, the Church will speak to the national conscience in favor of the unborn, the poor, the immigrant, and the elderly. I pray that the consciences of many will be receptive to the truth of human dignity, and might always live and act in conformity to this truth. I pray also that by the grace of God having come amongst us as a man, the flicker in each human heart that recognizes a brother or sister in anyone who shares our humanity, might be fanned into a flame of conviction that expresses itself even in the political arena.