



"The American people may rest assured that whenever a question arises involving fundamental principles, Catholics will always be found on the side of liberty, fair play and equality."

- Servant of God Isaac Hecker (1819-1888)
Founder of the Paulist Fathers

A PAULIST REFLECTION FOR THE 2020 U.S. ELECTIONS

At the beginning of every election cycle, pundits declare that "this election" is an exceptional moment of decision. In 2020, that statement is true. In this year of the worldwide pandemic, we do face a unique and perilous turning point in American history.

Americans now face three crises at once:

- the COVID-19 pandemic
- high unemployment and economic collapse for some businesses in the wake of Covid-19
- the open wound of systemic racism following the violent deaths by police of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others

Americans want to renew their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. Rightly, Americans cry for "equal justice under the law," particularly African Americans and other people of color. The Paulist Fathers, the first order of Catholic priests founded in the United States in 1858, have thought long and hard about how to vote in this crucial election. In this document, we offer our discernment to our brother and sister Catholics and other people of good conscience.

With respect for the basic wisdom and soundness of the quadrennial voters' guide put out by the United States Catholic Bishops, ***Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*** (2007, 2011, 2015, 2019), there seems to

be a need for greater insights and more specific guidance during this unprecedented year of crises in health, the economy and our racial/social equilibrium. It is in that spirit that we Paulists feel called and challenged to help all citizens of good will to discern the “signs of the times.”

The Signs of the Times

- The COVID-19 pandemic continues in the United States. Our death toll continues to climb with no end in sight. At the time of publication of this document, we mourn the loss of some 190,000 women, men and children to the virus. It appears that the “new normal” for schools, businesses, travel and play will not be a simple return to 2019 patterns. Wearing face masks in public, continuing to social distance, and changes in our patterns of intimacy and touch seem here to stay for the foreseeable future.
- Because of multi-month ‘sheltering in place’ here and around the world, businesses and the economy have taken a serious blow. They will have to be rebuilt. With millions of Americans currently unemployed and many businesses on shaky ground, restarting and reenergizing our economy will not be easy, simple, or quick. It will require full cooperation on the part of business, government, and all citizens. No one party or person is to blame. No one party or candidate can fix it all.
- The systemic racism revealed by the recent violent deaths (of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Ahmaud Abernathy and others) are not new issues. Nor are they merely a matter of flawed police standards, outdated departmental practices or errors in judgment by a few over-zealous officers. The problems of class and racial bias in the United States are deeply rooted and long standing. They impact social and political access, education and healthcare, fundamental rights and equal justice under law, particularly for Black Americans and other people of color. Women and members of the LGBTQ community also face long-standing bias. Lack of justice or equality for one race, ethnic or socio-economic group reveals the flaws in our common life. **Our common good needs to be better.**

In the various versions of ***Faithful Citizenship***, the bishops highlight eleven acts that are intrinsically immoral: (1) abortion, (2) euthanasia, (3) human cloning, (4) embryonic stem cell research, (5) genocide, (6) torture, (7) wartime targeting of non-combatants, (8) racism, (9) treating workers as mere ends (subjecting them to subhuman living conditions), (10) treating the poor as disposable, and (11) same-sex marriage.

Numerous Catholic voter guides put out by various Catholic groups tend to choose certain priorities to emphasize from this list. Some Catholics tend to choose abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, stem cell research and same-sex marriage as their baseline list of most harmful public behaviors or policies. Some Catholics may tend to underplay one or another of these five, while stressing genocide, torture, wartime targeting of noncombatants, racism, treating workers inhumanely and treating the poor as disposable as the evils with wider social consequences. In point of fact,

“All the life issues are connected, for erosion of respect for the life of any individual or group in society necessarily diminishes respect for all life.

The moral imperative to respond to the needs of our neighbor – basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work – is universally binding on our consciences and may be legitimately fulfilled by a variety of means.” ***Faithful Citizenship*** #25

Upfront, we wish to state our belief that there is no perfect political candidate for Catholics.

There is no perfect political party for Catholics. There is no perfect choice.

One way to do Christian discernment as one approaches the voting booth is to start with core Gospel values (such as life, love and justice) and try to weigh each candidate, issue and policy accordingly. Or, since the ***Declaration of Independence*** is built on the founding principle that “all men are created equal,” we might adopt as a core maxim that “every human life has inherent and abiding dignity.” From this, we can derive that each person ought to be treated fairly and equally under the law of the land.

Such *positive* efforts to declare what we are **for**, more so than what we are **against**, serve both our Catholic-Christian tradition as well as the American quest for “the common good and welfare of all.” The 1965 Second Vatican Council document ***Church in the Modern World*** tells us that in every age believers and people of good will must discern the relation of such eternal truths to their own historical context, namely, “the signs of the times.”

If we use as our discernment principles:

- the inherent and abiding value of every human life,
- equal justice under the law
- the overarching goals of love and justice,

how might we evaluate the “signs of the times” for this 2020 election cycle?

PUBLIC HEALTH, THE PANDEMIC & ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE

In late 2019, the newly evolved corona virus quickly spread across the globe. The disease hit our shores particularly hard and remains. The number of new infections and deaths remains troubling. Hot spots continue to arise in various places.

At this time, we are still moving by fits and starts to contain the virus. Disagreement among many Americans on wearing a mask and other basic protocols has further complicated efforts.

COVID-19

Did our national leadership as well as state and local governments meet this challenge promptly and effectively, or too slowly and timidly? If your federal and/or local government responded well, they deserve to be commended and, in many instances, rewarded by your vote for re-election in November. If, however, you are dissatisfied with the performance of your government at whichever level (federal, state, county or local), then voting for change or new leadership at that level seems apropos. Handling the Covid 19 pandemic: how well did our leaders do? In the present, how well are they leading and modeling best practices going forward?

Healthcare

Closely related to the pandemic and seriously affected by it is the issue of healthcare in this country. Who has access? Who does not? Is it affordable? Whose responsibility is it? Since after World War II, the American health system has primarily relied on near full employment, with access to reasonable healthcare provided by employers as part of one’s payment package. The government – through Social Security,

Medicare and Medicaid – tried to supplement those not earning enough or too fragile to garner health insurance benefits from an employer.

The passage of the Affordable Care Act during the Obama administration added more than 20 million new Americans to the list of those insured as well as establishing protections for those with preexisting conditions from being dropped by their caregivers. This piece of legislation was only the first step toward a more comprehensive solution; it is imperfect, not bi-partisan and in need of further improvements. From the Church's perspective,

"Affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right. Despite an increase in the number of people insured, millions of Americans still lack health care coverage. Health care coverage remains an urgent national priority."

Faithful Citizenship #80

Some advocates champion single-payer "Universal Healthcare Coverage" for all in this country. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who still argue that healthcare is a privilege, not a right, that it should be left up to individuals and employers to dicker about this as part of one's compensation package (i.e. the law of the marketplace).

Presidential candidate Joseph Biden believes that healthcare is a right. He believes that the Affordable Care Act, while flawed, is a step in the right direction. His goal is to revise and reform this law, to widen the pool for eligibility by offering a "public option" at an affordable price, and by striving to limit drug and medical costs.

At this point, President Donald Trump and the Republicans in Congress are seeking to limit healthcare costs and drug costs, as well as to overturn the Affordable Care Act in the Supreme Court as unconstitutional. They promise to create a better, more inclusive, less expensive alternative plan. But, thus far, there is no draft or proposal on the table for replacing what they hope to abolish.

It is up to voters to discern:

- Is healthcare a basic human right?
- Which candidates and/or party seem committed to the common good and greater access to affordable healthcare for all Americans?

REINVIGORATING & GROWING THE CURRENT ECONOMY

Prior to 2020, one might more easily have asked, “Are you better off [economically] than you were four years ago?”

Often our elections are based on economic factors – the markets, business prosperity, agricultural stability, jobs, wages, the price of goods and so on. For most of the years of the Obama administration, as well as the first three of President Trump, our economy seemed to be slowly-yet-steadily growing. But with the ‘stay in place’ orders necessitated by COVID-19, the American (and worldwide) economy has tanked – with massive job layoffs and unemployment, large and small businesses teetering on bankruptcy, the need for the infusion of here-to-for unimaginable amounts of federal stimulus money (a bipartisan effort). Still, our economy is only beginning to reopen, in fits and starts, amid pauses and second lockdowns.

No one is neatly to blame. Who, which party, at which level, and with what policies will lead us to a fair and equitable recovery? For all? For the many? At all levels of society? As an underlying principle the Bishops have said,

“Welfare policy should reduce **poverty** and dependency, strengthen family life, and help families leave poverty through work, training, and assistance with childcare, health care, housing and transportation.”

***Faithful Citizenship* #75**

The various pieces of fostering and promoting an economic recovery for one and all are not found neatly in business manuals or economic charts. Which candidates, which party and which proposed programs seem to you to be best able to “lift all boats,” and to do so quickly, safely, and fairly? This is not a matter of “survival of the fittest” nor government takeover. Whose leadership and proposed policies seem to promote the “common good,” fairness for one and all?

RACIAL AND ETHNIC TENSIONS ACKNOWLEDGING THE REALITY OF “SYSTEMIC RACISM”

In an effort to reunite our nation after the Civil War, much of the essential work needed to implement the 13th, 14th & 15th amendments was left undone. This was done by the primarily white, male landowners and investors (North and South) who were in control. Racism, systemic bias and unfair patterns, long a part of our underlying colonial ethos, were glossed over.

The long history of post-civil war racism: the KKK, Jim Crow laws, decades of lynchings, voter suppression, a two-caste society, the racial strife of the 1950s and 1960s were only partially redressed by litigation and legislation. Our country still yearns for Dr. King’s dream of judgments based on the quality of one’s character rather than the color of one’s skin.

The wounds of racism continue to fester. Our American bishops drew attention to this core, underlying public issue in their 2018 pastoral ***Open Wide Our Hearts***. Sadly, public documents and statements rarely precipitate change and public reforms. However, the violent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and so many other Black men and women, often at the hands of excessive police authority, violence or brutality, are part and parcel of this long white-dominated, mutually-biased and bigoted system. Slavery ended, but not racism. And, though many are loath to admit it, the seeds and depths of racism are deep, systemic, not always conscious, too often unrecognized or denied.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, African-Americans and other people of color have been disproportionately impacted because of patterns of systemic racism and poverty. Studies show that African-Americans are three times more likely to be infected by the virus and two times more likely to die from it than Caucasian Americans. In addition, many people of color are employed in jobs which require they work in person. Many of those jobs have disappeared. Those who remain employed are subject to at risk situations of commuting to work on public transportation and then performing their jobs sometimes without adequate protection, while more affluent Americans can elect to work from home.

Fueled by the recent violent deaths in this time of pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged much like the Me Too movement of women who have been sexually abused. “Stop! Notice what is happening! Our lives matter!” has been the call.

Who, which party and what programs speak to this core need for evolution, resolution, with a measure of nonviolent revolution?

Who of those running for office seem to “get it”? To realize that these tragedies followed by multi-racial, multi-generational protests across the land bespeak a real crossroads or turning point?

Who seems to want to tamp things down, gloss them over, or simply put a lid on reform one more time?

Concurrently with reform of our police departments must be reform of our criminal justice system. The United States with five percent of the world’s population has 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. African Americans make up 13 percent of the total population but make up 40 percent of the prison population. Mass incarceration has profoundly negative effects on African American and Hispanic communities.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops point out that, while people who commit violent crimes need to be separated from society, some of those incarcerated are serving prison sentences disproportionate to the crimes committed. Others have been wrongly convicted.

The pandemic has underlined the overcrowded state of most prisons. With the privatization of prisons, they are now an industry that exists for profit rather than a place for reform and rehabilitation.

Which party or candidate recognizes the need for criminal justice reform and the need to overhaul the current prison system?

Which party or candidates respects the basic human dignity not only of the victim but also the offender?

Immigration Reform

Closely linked to the racial equality issue are the needs of those at our borders: refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers. The U.S. Catholic Church has always been a church of immigrants, with this memory in mind the U.S. Bishops have immigration reform as a top priority.

“The Gospel mandate to ‘welcome the stranger’ requires Catholics to care for and stand with **newcomers**, authorized and unauthorized, including unaccompanied immigrant children, refugees and asylum-seekers, those unnecessarily detained, and victims of human trafficking. Comprehensive reform is urgently necessary to fix a broken immigration system, and should include a broad and fair legalization program with a path to citizenship; a work program with worker protection and just wages; family reunification, policies; access to legal protections, which include due process procedures; refuge for those fleeing persecution and violence; and policies to address the root causes of migration.”

***Faithful Citizenship* #81**

The U.S. Bishops hold as a dual priority the welcoming of economic immigrants and the security of national borders.

Which party or candidate offers a way for both these priorities to be honored?

Which party or candidate offers an immigration policy that includes a path to citizenship, worker protection and keeps families together?

LEST WE FORGET . . .

While the above social issues seem to be the most central for us to consider in 2020, that is not meant to dismiss or diminish our concern about the other issues mentioned in ***Faithful Citizenship*** or in our own consciousness. Four of them we wish to highlight here, to emphasize their ongoing importance:

- **ABORTION:** We stand in solidarity with mothers, fathers and families confronted with unexpected pregnancies. We advocate and pray that all unborn children are brought into our world, and all people come to understand that human life begins at conception and should end at natural death. We also advocate and pray for a society in which mothers, fathers and families confronted with unexpected

pregnancies have the support they need. We believe that being pro-life means advocating for good prenatal care, obstetrics, neonatal advances and the availability of after-birth childcare.

We also recognize that many current efforts and much progress in curbing abortions has shifted to the state governments. State by state policies and laws are being expanded and reviewed by the courts in incremental ways.

We call on all voters, believers and non-believers, to a more precise evaluation of candidates who label themselves “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” These labels, on the surface, seem to mean one thing. However, the actions of those elected sometimes amount to ambiguous and even contradictory results. Voting involves not only moral evaluations but also practical, political judgements.

We do not disregard those voters who cannot, in good conscience, vote for any candidate who supports legal abortion. However, we recognize that some pro-life voters, after study and prayer, have concluded that a declared pro-life candidate may not always become an elected official who will work for the essential supports needed by mothers, fathers and families who are confronted by unexpected pregnancies.

- **ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS:** “Care for creation is the duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people, especially the poor, who ‘both everyday experience and scientific research show’ suffer ‘the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment.’” This sentiment from *Faithful Citizenship* #51 finds its roots in the Biblical story of creation, the writings of all recent popes, and in particular in Pope Francis’ groundbreaking 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*. Denial of the scientific realities of global warming and climate change seem to us to be unconscionable. Care for God’s creation, the only home of humanity, needs to be a central concern of our political agenda, with the economy and profit-making taking a back seat to sustainability in future discussions and planning.
- **GUN VIOLENCE:** Given the ongoing catastrophic shootings in schools and public places, and given the overwhelming support among the electorate for some kind of gun restrictions and reform, **now** is the time to act. Limiting the sale of assault weapons, requiring stronger background checks wherever guns are sold, monitoring the access to guns of the mentally ill or domestic violence perpetrators, and fostering a culture less focused on accepted anger and defensive violence – these seem like common sense incremental steps to us. The “right to bear arms” of the 2nd Amendment is surely not a Gospel or

Christian value. It is a *political* right at best and needs to be balanced by concern and protection for the more *fundamental* rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

- **LGBTQ CIVIL RIGHTS:** The June 15, 2020, Supreme Court ruling, declaring that LGBTQ people in this country have civil and work-related rights under the “sex” clause of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was a landmark ruling. All citizens deserve these legal safeguards in the workplace. We humbly suggest that this is an area where careful listening, discussion, discernment and pastoral care seem the order of the day.

CHARACTER, INTEGRITY & LEADERSHIP

Finally, elections are as much about candidates – their virtues and values – as they are about specific issues or policies. “At all levels of society, we are aware of a great need for leadership that models love for righteousness (***Wisdom*** 1:1) as well as the virtues of justice, prudence, courage and temperance.” (***Faithful Citizenship***, 2019). WHO is running is a question unto itself, in addition to what are his or her political positions? Fortunately, at the presidential level we have no strangers.

- President Trump and his administration have been in office since 2017. His personal strengths and shortcomings seem clearly known. His handling of the three 2020 crises (Covid 19 pandemic, the economic freefall, and race relations and violence) are there for Americans to see and judge. Has he led us well? Is he a man of thoughtfulness and virtue? Is he a leader we would point to for our children to admire and emulate?
- So too, former Vice President Biden is no stranger to public life. His career in the Senate, followed by eight years as President Obama’s vice-president, give us a fairly readable personal and political history. So, in addition to his positions on issues, is Mr. Biden a man of good character, compassion, and deeply held values? As Vice President did he assist well in leading us? Is he a man of thoughtfulness and virtue? Is he a leader we would point to for our children to admire and emulate?

As we go down the elective ballots – through the U.S. Senate, Congress, governors, state legislature, county seats, mayors, city councils, school boards, etc. – WHO is running matters very much alongside WHAT she or he proposes to do. The current pandemic has given many of us a firsthand look at our

local leadership. Did our governor or statehouse or city and mayor rise to the occasion? Did they make good decisions, based on solid science and public health, or based more on personal concerns and political gain? Whether they started out well or not, did they learn across the months of shelter-in-place and social distancing? Did they grow? Are they good leaders? It really matters how he or she led us locally through reopening and the beginnings of economic recovery. So too, is she or he evenhanded, fair, just, and a person of integrity when it comes to the current issues of racial tension, police tactics, and due process under the law?

Discerning qualified potential leaders and listening to their proposed ideas and solutions is not easy. It is a tightrope to walk. We are each influenced by many factors and groups we belong to. We suggest that **Gospel** values, **American** values, and core **human** values ought to undergird and guide our election choices:

- “There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons.” ***Faithful Citizenship*** #35
- “Sometimes morally flawed laws already exist. In this situation, the process of framing legislation to protect life is subject to prudent judgement and ‘the art of the possible.’ At times this process may restore justice only partially or gradually.”

Faithful Citizenship #32

CONCLUSION

We set out to write a brief document, a Paulist point of view on the 2020 elections. Simple lists of “thou shalls” and “thou shall nots” are helpful, but often deceptive and not nuanced. Still, there is no desire for a *magnum opus* laying out all the pros and cons of various positions on a plethora of issues and topics. So we have tried to highlight “the signs of the times” we live in. We have pointed to some core Christian and humane values to serve as our underpinnings and guiding principles. We have laid out three main question areas, with four sub-issues and some comments on the virtue and character of good leadership.

We hope this is of some help to you. ***Please*** continue to discuss this with others, read broadly, pray and finally discern your own conscience, humbly but forthrightly. Whether you pull the lever, mark a ballot or vote by mail, 2020 is a watershed election. The candidates and their positions on the issues really do differ AND really do matter.

Prayerful good wishes, fellow citizens of the United States of America.