

Untimely Ruminations on Faith and Politics*

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Suppose I were to tell you that I am opposed to the use of the death penalty, and refuse to vote for any political candidate who approves of it? Would I be a “one issue voter?” Suppose I say that I think that the sanctions we are using against Iraq are unjust, that they have doubled the infant mortality there, and I refuse to vote for any political candidate who will continue to use them to promote our “national interest?” Perhaps then I am a two issue voter? Suppose I say that I think our law must protect human life from conception to natural death, and that I will not vote for any candidate who does not support that position. Would I then be a one issue candidate, or a three issue candidate? Suppose I say that we live in a culture of excess that materially oppresses the least powerful in our own nation, but also and especially the poor of other nations. If I am convinced that both the Republican and New Democratic economic policies promote that excess, and I refrain from voting for either, am I an irresponsible citizen?

But what has all this to do with *faith* and politics, the topic of my essay? Well suppose I don't have at my disposal any arguments for my positions couched in terms commonly acceptable to the broad pluralistic culture within which I find myself? Suppose all I can say of the death penalty is that when Cain murdered his brother Abel, he knew he justly deserved death for such a horrid crime, and yet God spared him, teaching us that there is no justice without mercy. Suppose on the sanctions against Iraq all I can say is that Christ tells me to love my neighbor as myself, and that my neighborhood does not end at the water's edge but includes the home of my enemy. At least since Augustine my Church has taught that acts of war, in order to be just, must not target non-combatant populations. Suppose I say with the psalmist “for you created my inmost being;

* The thoughts pursued in this essay were occasioned by the invitation to speak on faith and politics to the Creighton University and larger Omaha communities just prior to the elections of 2000. Though timely in that sense, it is my hope that the themes I pursue have a wider range. Now several months later, they are dedicated to Elizabeth Anscombe, our Beatrice for those of us who are Catholic philosophers now. May she rest in peace.

stupidly spend is cruelly taken from us,”” or St. Thomas say the “goods which some have in abundance are owed by natural right to the sustenance of the poor” and “the Lord commands not only that a tenth part, but all that is superfluous be given to the poor.” Unfortunately, the verbal expression that the Church’s renewed commitment to the poor has taken in recent years fails to capture our tradition, for which our duty to the poor is neither a preference, nor an option. To prefer or opt otherwise is nothing less than theft from the poor, and from God.

But in our culture such motives are uncivil and perhaps unamerican, unless they are held in private. If we are normal English speakers living in the United States, we can all fill in the blanks of our civic credo, “I am personally opposed to _____, but I cannot impose my _____ on others.” So, suppose I am like many, even perhaps most people in this country, philosophically inarticulate about the reasons I find our electoral politics so corrupt, but with a clarity of faith that motivates me to try to make things better, what am I to do?

At the heart of the church’s teaching on politics is the principle of the common good. We are by nature social creatures, incapable of providing for ourselves and others as mere individuals pursuing individual goods. We pursue our good in common, and the pursuit of such good is

politics. No doubt there are philosophical controversies about how thick a view of the common good is appropriate in a society that promotes liberty, and whether liberty is the preeminent good of social and political life, or only partially constitutive of it, or even merely instrumental for it. And certainly for the last several hundred years a key difficulty for the Catholic Church's teaching on politics has been how to adjudicate between the good of liberty and the common good. But that is all at the level of theory, and we citizens for the most part are not theorists, thank God.

If we look realistically at our condition, we cannot avoid the fact that we have a common good. But lacking any substantive view of the common good, and lacking any socially acceptable form of arguing about the common good, what becomes our *de facto* common good? "It's the economy stupid." And it is significant that the common coin of our *public* discourse is values, an economic term. Whether we are a corporation, a political party, a university, or even a diocese, we all have some form of mission statement in which we enunciate our values, how we intend to teach those values to our members, and how we intend to find a niche market for those values.

But the problem is that a value is fundamentally a medium of exchange, and it is very different from a good. We find it more or less easy to ask and answer "is art valuable" consider our public apoplexy in the face of the question "is art good." We say a piece of art is priceless, and then sell it at auction. It makes perfect sense to argue about whether all values are subjective. It is harder to ask whether all goods are subjective. Fundamentally the difference is that we recognize goods, but we make values. Questions of values are questions about what I am willing to give you in order to get what I want. Politically we just have to find out what the value is and then negotiate the proper exchange of this value for that. Is there a value to be found in self-interest or in altruism? What value is there in serving the poor? It is only in a culture of values that the "natural right of the poor" becomes a preferential option.

What is, after all, the value of a human life? How are American values to be exhibited in the former Yugoslavia, Kuwait, Rwanda, or East Timor? What is the value of a million Rwandan

lives slaughtered in six months? Our answer was none; though, to be fair to ourselves, I did notice that on our behalf president Clinton went to Rwanda *ex post facto* and apologized for blocking UN action at the time. It seems that American values blew that one, since we were too preoccupied with the values of Sadaam's oil, and Slobodan's threat to the *heart* of Europe. Still, to the Rwandans and the world, we apologize, reassert American values, and once again say "never again."

Values are what goods become in a world in which God is dead. Philosophers and theologians worry about the silence of God. I worry about our silence. *De facto*, because of our self imposed silence, the common good for us just is the commonly agreed upon medium of the exchange of values, the value of values. Charity is good business. But the values approach to our common good encourages and very easily lends itself to a corrupt form of values politics, utilitarian calculus applied to the common good. Not only do I speak as a Catholic, but as a certain kind of Catholic of Irish, American, East Coast, urban and working class descent. For me and mine the phrase that best captures our religious and political experience is "baptized Catholic, born Democrat." But in the politics of values, my party says to me and mine that we need to calculate what we take to be the disvalue of its pro-death stance, and its recent ersatz Republican economic policies against the traditional values it claims to still champion, concern for the poor and the working class. In practice, what the party really hopes is that since we all take such judgments of value to be personal and individual, argument over which causes rancor within the flock, we'll just avoid the conflict, come back to the faith of our fathers, and vote blindly and unquestioningly the way we always have. We won't think with Gov. Casey, may he rest in peace, that the national Democratic Party has become the front office of the National Abortion Rights Action League. We won't recall that the Crime Bill pushed through congress by President Clinton increased the number of federal crimes punishable by death by 60. As we criticize Gov. Bush, we won't recall that president Clinton returned to Arkansas in 1992 in the midst of the New Hampshire primary to oversee the execution of Rickey Ray Rector. As a result of his vicious

crime, Mr. Rector suffered from brain damage; as a result of his brain damage he saved the pecan pie from his last meal so that he could eat it when he returned from his execution, and told his lawyer that he intended to vote for Governor Clinton in the fall of that year. Thus our future president came to preach the good news of the values of the New Democrat—we Democrats now see the value to be found in being tough on crime. And granting permanent most favored nation trading status to China has already had its 15 minutes of fame. I have been harder on the Democrats because I am one, and there are plenty of Democrats to be just as hard on the Republicans.

It is the failure to distinguish between matters of principle and matters of prudence that gives rise to the paper tiger fear of the “one issue voter.” If our political thought is primarily a utilitarian weighing of values one against another, and summing them all to see what we get, of course it makes no rational sense to take account of only one value. There is of course the difficulty faced by utilitarian thought generally, namely, that it usually works best as an after the fact rationalization. As a forward looking decision making process, it poses great difficulties, for one has to limit oneself in what one takes into account. No one, practically speaking, can engage in the sort of wide ranging evaluation of values that one would have to do if one were to closely examine the platforms of the different parties. So each of us draws up a small manageable set of values that we take to be determinative of our choice. The real question that none of us wants to face is what are the hidden values lurking in the shadows that determine for us the values that we allow to see the light of day, and over which we are willing to calculate?

The problem of course is that in this politics of values, we are all just “few issue” voters, and we end up competing against other interest groups to bring our “few issues” to the fore. And all of this works rhetorically to the advantage of the parties. No one wants to be a “one issue” voter because no one wants to be seen as unsophisticated, and incapable of grasping the complexities of several important issues that need to be carefully, judiciously, and reasonably weighed against each other. Putting us in that mindset, a party then simply has to find for each

focus group the issue that in practice outweighs the other few that we have in mind, precisely because it is so difficult to assign some value to each issue, other than “I prefer this to that; don’t ask me why, or how much, I just do.” Prescription drug benefits for the elderly as opposed to tax credits for those in the working class who can afford to save for the college education of their children. So in practice, the parties *want* us to be “one issue voters” even as we allow them to deceive us into thinking we are involved in the complex and difficult process of weighing the competing values of the competing parties. Does anyone else feel as if they are being bought?

In a world of principle and prudence, by contrast, one might pray that one never faces a conflict over one issue, but one should recognize that it could happen, precisely because principles are necessary conditions for good community, not ideals to be sought. If the past is any indication, we know for certain that such conflicts arise, as for instance the case of slavery. The 20th century taught us that there is no guarantee of progress here. We have to be ever vigilant. When it comes to politics, perhaps the fundamental question we each have to ask ourselves in our consciences is whether there is *any* “one issue,” not to mention several, that is non-negotiable. Suppose we found a candidate with whom we agreed about everything except one thing. The sole difficulty with that candidate is that he or she thinks that in time of war, citizens whose ancestors come from the country of our enemy may be imprisoned in concentration camps. Would we weigh that “one issue” against all the others and vote for him or her? Our history tells us that we did this in World War II. What would voters have done if they had had a chance to vote on such a policy before the war? After the war the response is, well that was unfortunate, but we survived, and once again we say “never again.” This is precisely the kind of *ex post facto* rationalization that utilitarian calculus lends itself to. I shudder at the thought that my community is peopled by individuals who can find no such principles in their conscience. My hope, even for those who disagree with me on what those principles are, is that we all have something that is non-

negotiable. Rather than criticize, we should pray for citizens who, if need be in times of crisis, will run the risk of being “one issue,” or “two issue,” or “three issue” voters.

The problem today for people of faith, particularly the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, is that when God saw what He had done, He did not say “it is valuable.”

good.” To be a person of faith and to be silent about the common good is to be unfaithful to God. The principle of the common good does not allow for the sort of utilitarian calculus both major parties hope we will engage in, if we do anything more than vote with blind faith for them. It requires us to make a distinction between commitments of principle, and judgments of political prudence. Commitments of principle have to do with the necessary conditions for even having a community that can pursue the common good. The sorts of concerns I began this talk with are about principles of the common good. Judgments of prudence have to do with the ways in which such a community forms itself as it pursues that common good, and those judgments will differ from community to community. So for example, access to adequate health care is a matter of principle. If as a community we do not care for the sick among us, we simply cannot pursue our common good—“Lord, when did we know you were sick, and not attend to you?” But exactly how to structure access to health care is a matter of political prudence, depending upon circumstance and resources. But notice our parties erect matters of prudence into matters of pseudo-principle, precisely to shield their otherwise manifest betrayal of real principle. So our election turned into one about gas prices, tuition tax credits, and a prescription drug benefit for the elderly, all worthy questions of prudence, but definitely not the infant mortality rate in Iraq, and our responsibility for it.

I have made the judgment that failure to commit to, and act when necessary to protect the principles of the common good disqualifies a candidate for public office, however much I might agree with what appear to be his or her judgments of political prudence. That is because there can be no real political prudence without real political principle. Failure to safeguard the principles of the common good is fundamentally corrupt, and leads to the corruption of political prudence into

the mere utilitarian calculus I mentioned above. The church is not a political community. But speaking as a Roman Catholic, there is no question that our tradition informs us in our understanding of the principles of the common good for political community, even as it provides only general guidance, and not determinate answers in questions of political prudence.

Let me be clear. Though we can never do evil, we may tolerate it for sufficiently good reasons, as we work to eliminate it. It is the politics of values that for so many of us make it next to impossible to understand the ability to tolerate evil while working to eliminate it. Presumably the only sufficiently good reasons for such toleration would be the principles necessary to protect the common good, that is, that failure to tolerate this evil here and now would undermine in a much more grievous way the common good. And we must exercise prudence in determining the lesser of evils to tolerate. But in these judgments we must always remember our prior commitment to the principles of the common good. Precisely because it is evil we are tolerating, we must never cease to ask ourselves whether and how our toleration may have become complicity. Toleration itself is evil if it can never say no. Surely among the lessons to be drawn from the blood of innocents that saturates the 20th century, that is one of them.

Finally, I think it is important when we think about faith and politics to avoid certain traps. We have to distinguish between religious content and religious motivation. Adherence to specifically religious content requires the free consent of the will, that is, the guarantee of religious liberty. And one of the principles of the common good is religious liberty; the common good will promote the conditions within which one can freely consent to religion. But that is very different from religious motivation. Prohibitions against the use of the death penalty, abortion, euthanasia, torture, slavery, and so on, do not have specifically religious content, even as one's primary, perhaps only motivation in supporting them may well be the religious tradition one freely adheres to. To demand such prohibitions, as one *motivated* by religion, is not the same as the "establishment of religion" prohibited by the constitution. The great hypocrisy of the self

proclaimed neutrality of modern democratic society is the singling out of religious *motivation* alone for political evisceration.

We also have to avoid identifying the political community with the institutions of government. We are the political community, and the institutions of government serve us; they are instrumental goods. And, we have to avoid the trap of identifying the nation state as the fundamental political reality in which the common good is incorporated. Too often we look to the national or now global as an excuse to avoid the local—in the words of Chesterton, we learn to love humanity, so that we can hate our next door neighbor. On the contrary, the common good is conceived in the womb, born in the family, and dwells among us. Finally, we have to avoid identifying political action with the electoral politics by which we shape the institutions of government. Voting is important, but it is the least important of the civic responsibilities that the Church teaches are our responsibilities. Our silence about the common good makes it all too easy to think of ourselves as responsible citizens if we just vote in the periodic elections that come up. But we cannot develop the necessary habits of political wisdom, if we only think about them in the voting booth. On the contrary, we act politically whenever we act for or against the common good.

St. Thomas wrote “communication about the useful and the hurtful, the just and the unjust, good and evil makes a home and a city. Therefore, man is by nature a domestic and political animal.” When we care for our children and our parents we act politically. When we commit our time and resources to our neighborhoods, our schools, the soup kitchens, and homeless shelters around us, as well as our work, we are engaged in politics. Whatever one’s party, buying a building and kicking an abortionist out, as happened in my hometown of Omaha, is a much more deeply political act for the common good than voting will ever be for a candidate one hopes will appoint certain kinds of judges to the Supreme Court; so also is providing homes, clothing, and resources to women who face difficult pregnancies as they bear God’s gifts to us. So is praying the rosary for justice and mercy when we execute a criminal.

The great Jesuit St. Robert Bellarmine, whom most of us know from the Galileo affair, speaking particularly of the poor, addressed the more general problem that I am pointing to here. He wrote “if one should wish to argue that what is superfluous need not be given to the poor in strict justice, he still cannot deny that it should be done out of charity. However, it matters little whether one goes to hell for lack of justice or from lack of charity.” My fear is that unless religious people through the virtue of charity act politically informed by their faith, we won’t have to wait for the next life. We will get just what we deserve, what the Holy Father calls “a culture of death,” hell on earth. Do we run the risk of offending the political sensibilities required to live in America today? Well as another Jesuit, John Kavanaugh, wrote, “this is a time to offend