

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

Number 95, October 11, 2013

CHURCH AND POLITICS

I am clearly headed for uncharted waters. All of my previous chats have centered on internal church issues, and I have avoided dipping into the treacherous pool of politics. But I can't avoid it any longer.

I check my emails every day and, along with the funny ones, junk ones, motivational ones and the personal ones, I get links to the latest news from the Vatican (usually what Francis did yesterday) followed by links to the government shutdown, debt ceiling, the Affordable Care Act and who is calling whom what. You too?

These two streams – Church stuff and politics – each have a vibrant life of their own. My question is: how do they intersect? Just to narrow it down, let's limit the question here to Catholics and politics.

Some say that faith belongs in the private, personal world while politics handles the social, public sphere. Believers who mingle in politics are misguided violators of the separation of church and state principle.

I disagree. Genuine faith is social by nature, demanding interaction with other people and society in general. Church and state must overlap. Our first amendment is wise when it says that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion..." but that does not mean that religion is trapped in the prison of private faith.

So, back to the core question: how do Catholics and politics intersect?

There are genuine Catholics who are Republicans and genuine Catholics who are Democrats. There are, of course, wide variations within both groups in terms of how much their faith influences their politics. Navigating between church and politics, whether you're Democrat, Republican, Libertarian or Independent, is tricky business.

Where to start? Well, I brought it up with our small faith group and we had a ... lively discussion! Then I re-read the *Church in the Modern World*, Vatican II's landmark teaching on the subject. I do not have simple answers to the complex issue of church and politics but here are some current comments:

- The goal for both Republican Catholics and Democratic Catholics is to love their neighbors. They will differ on the means to express that love but it must remain the goal. It is the clear and insistent command of the gospel that does not change when a person chooses politics as a profession.
 - Love means to think well of others, wish them the best, and to do what you can to help them.
 - Catholic voters must cast their vote for the candidate they believe will express this love the best.
 - Any other motive for running for office or voting diminishes the candidate or the voter, and the Catholic faith.

- Politicians who consciously attempt to benefit only one segment of the population violate their faith as well as their political duty.

- Catholic politicians of either party who campaign or legislate on just one issue minimize the gospel, betray their faith, and cheat their constituents.

- Politics is the art of the possible. Faith acknowledges dependence on a Higher Power. Together, they humbly get things done for the common good.

Am I aiming too high? Futile words flung on a slippery wall? Pie in the sky religious mumble jumble? Naïve wish list floating serenely above the hurricanes of today's politics?

In a political world of gerrymandered districts, in your face confrontations where compromise is a dirty word, multi-million dollar, bought campaigns, candidates out-extreming each other, is there any hope that any genuine faith can impact any politician with any real leverage?

In an era when politics is morphing into the Jerry Springer show, is there room for a Catholic reading of the gospel? *The Church in the Modern World*?

At a time when self-promoting pundits pound the airwaves with their profitable, endless, truth-defying tirades, is there a slim chance that ordinary citizens can discover policies that are consistent with the gospel?

Is it doom and gloom? Do we have couch potato seats to the thundering end of a great political experiment?

Not yet. But the rescue is not in the hands of the politicians, Catholic or not. The hope is in the American people, in this case, American Catholics because the blame, ultimately, is in the American people.

How to fix it? First read and pray the gospel from a political perspective. Then disregard the sexist language (it was written in the mid-60's after all) and read the still modern *Church in the Modern World*. You take it from there.