

Companions on the Journey

September 13, 2020

Dear Friends,

It is a little over seven weeks until the November 3rd election for President, Senators and House of Representatives. I find that election time is always difficult for me both as pastor and as person. It is really an important time and I know, like you, I take my responsibility very seriously to cast my ballot and to register my choices. I am also to pastor my people and lead them in truth. Over the years I have received letters and emails from parishioners and others sometimes challenging me because the writer believed I had stepped over the line to tell parishioners how they should cast their ballot, not directly, of course, but by using code (But everyone knows what you mean). Others challenged me because I had not given good leadership precisely because I did not tell people how to vote when it was perfectly clear, at least to some, which lever in the polling place should be pulled.

Let me be clear. I do not tell any of you how to vote or for whom you should or should not be voting. I do commiserate with each person who churns over the whole process or who the various political parties propose for our vote. By statutory law in the United States those who are religious authorities serving communities and which also qualify as tax exempt (which Saint Anthony's is) are not allowed to support publicly a particular candidate without fear of forfeiting their tax-exempt status. Each election the bishop of the diocese reminds his pastors to observe this. I am not naïve in thinking that no other church leaders, of whatever denomination, are as sensitive on this point as we Catholics are. But I actually think it is a good protocol.

The moment I align myself with a particular party I put at risk my ability to speak God's truth to all political parties. My responsibility is to preach the message of Jesus Christ, him crucified and resurrected. Just as Jesus did not align himself with a particular political party in Israel, we try to follow his example. But Jesus was not quiet about issues. He spoke about many controversial subjects—paying the Temple tax, Paying Roman tax, divorce and remarriage, forgiveness, love of enemies, sabbath laws, fairness to workers, the inordinate desire for money, the abuse of wealth, the need to care for the outcast and emigrant, the need to protect the innocent (read widow, orphan, unborn). These moral issues and others were front and central. And I must preach on them, too. And I do preach on them.

One thing you should know about me by now. I am not a big advocate of buzz words or jargon or the hot button items that come and go in our culture. The moment I begin to use such words and expressions is the moment I am easily stereotyped as “belonging” to one side or the other and my word easily dismissed. So I don't do that. I raise the issues in terms of moral choice and personal and communal responsibility. One thing I will be speaking about more in the days and weeks to come has to do with personal sin and how it affects my attitude towards people and situations. It is possible for me to join with others who share a distorted way of thinking. If I do and we begin to design a way of acting or being that embodies this flawed or immoral thinking then the possibility exists that it becomes enshrined in some of our social constructs. There is such a thing as sinful social structures. That has been a target of Catholic moral thinking for a long time. That is why we have to be constantly striving to purify our institutions. Beginning with the Church herself. You know and I know that we have good bishops and weak bishops. We have good priests and flawed priests. We have good people and flawed people. But to assume that someone over there is always the flawed person and that I never am is off the mark. If I don't begin by examining my own heart for prejudicial attitudes towards anyone then I will be like the Pharisees that Jesus accused of being blind guides who had big beams in their own eyes. Self-righteousness and arrogance often go together. Humility is a companion of a very few but it was a hallmark of Jesus of Nazareth. Let it be a hallmark trait of us too. More to come.

In the peace of Christ,

Msgr. McHenry