

# Religion News Service

## What Catholics can teach America about polarized politics (COMMENTARY)

Jacob Lupfer | May 4, 2015

WASHINGTON (RNS) Americans of all stripes bemoan political polarization. For people who claim to derive their political values from their religious traditions, polarization raises vexing questions. More than perhaps any other group, faithful Catholics struggle to reconcile their church's teachings with the platforms of the two major parties.

Last week at the University of Notre Dame, an ideologically diverse group of Catholic leaders gathered to discuss how political polarization affects Catholic life in the United States. Under the theme "Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal," the conference sought to change the tone of political engagement by priests, lay people and the hierarchy.

What distinguished the Notre Dame conference is the fact that it went beyond hand-wringing and actually engaged the reality of polarization. For better or worse, we have two parties that are now ideologically distinct across a range of issues. Partisanship is, for many, a foundational social identity. Party loyalty is strong, usually fixed by early adulthood, and quite stable across the life span.



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Congregants pray during Catholic Mass at St. Therese Little Flower Parish in Kansas City, Mo., on May 20, 2012. Religion News Service photo by Sally Morrow

Conservative evangelicals can be faithful Republicans because their churches affirm the GOP's social conservatism and sexual traditionalism but they speak only timidly on matters of economics, deferring to and accepting (if not outright sanctifying) market forces. Mainline Protestant denominations' political teachings align neatly with the Democratic Party's platform. This includes robust support for abortion rights and, increasingly, same-sex marriage.

Moderate evangelicals, black Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox traditions cut across the two major parties. But since the Catholic Church spans the breadth and depth of America's political landscape, it is important for Catholics to model Christian political engagement in a context of partisan and ideological polarization.

Robert McElroy, the newly installed Catholic bishop of San Diego, gave a brilliant speech last year about the moral dilemmas of partisanship. While acknowledging the parties' role in nurturing mass participation in politics, he cautioned against the ways both parties can be hostile to human dignity and the common good.

For the Christian citizen, parties pose a paradox. It is a good thing that we have ideologically distinct parties that will, when in power, pursue different policy goals. But when partisans — whether elected officials or ordinary voters — abandon their religious principles in order to fall in line with their party, Christian political engagement ceases to exist.

Nothing serves the interests of political parties more than interest groups that use religious rhetoric to promote secular ideologies and add, "Thus saith the Lord." And Washington is full of them.

American Catholics see how partisan polarization has strained their church and their consciences. Yet unlike religious ideologues of the right and left, they are uneasy with this new development. Neither party offers a platform that stands in solidarity with unborn children, the poor and hungry, undocumented immigrant families, the environment, and people without access to medical care.

It is naive to wish a Catholic-friendly Christian Democrat party will emerge in the U.S., or even that today's ideologues would support it. Some Catholics resist partisanship, preferring instead to support specific policies that align with Catholic values. To its credit, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has generally followed this path. Bishops do a pastoral disservice when they appear to favor one party over the other.

But most Catholics will continue to identify as Republicans or Democrats. Catholics should fight for space in both parties for the whole of Catholic social teaching.

I am increasingly convinced that, compared with secular ideologies and other churches' political pronouncements, Catholic social teaching offers the most comprehensively and authentically "Christian" ethic, and the one that is most oriented to human dignity and the common good.

Whenever ecumenical and interfaith consensus exists on political questions, the Catholic Church stands at its center. Catholic social teaching is a gift not just for the church, but for all of society. By comparison, other sects' political thinking is thin and underdeveloped. Many non-Catholics admire the church's "consistent ethic of life." And even when they do not agree, they concede the impressive philosophical theological rigor of Catholic political thought.



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Polarization challenges Catholics more acutely than it challenges many other religious adherents. They should seek ways to promote fuller expressions of their church's humane teachings in both parties. In elevating principles above party loyalty, they can witness to their faith and model authentically Christian political engagement.

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