

Signs of the Times: Resisting Destructive Political Culture

by Russell Testa | March 2, 2016 |



The essay below is the fifth in a series of “Franciscan Response” reflections by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province’s response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the U.S.

These essays are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations involved with creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. Because it is hoped that this initiative generates dialogue, friars are encouraged to provide comments about the content of this and all essays in the series. These essays do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.

As Franciscans concerned about the well-being of persons and all of creation, the political culture of our world is of utmost importance. It is through political decisions that choices are made regarding the distribution of resources and about human rights. Unfortunately, in the current political culture of the U.S., we see a level of polarization that emphasizes the supremacy of voicing individual opinion over the need for dialogue. We witness the scenario about which Pope Francis warned us in his speech to the U.S. Congress: “individual delusion or ideological extremism... (leading to) a simplistic reductionism which only sees good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and the sinners.” In this scenario, political or public dialogue becomes impossible because there is no room for compromise or the development of partial solutions.

While we believe everyone deserves the right to individual opinions and choices, we recognize that not all opinions are necessarily equal and based on fact. People seem to draw conclusions to justify their current status without regard to how others are affected, often in harmful or even deadly ways. Further, with the rise of the internet and other social communications, we are prone to echo chambers that reinforce and add perceived credibility to our choices. This often prevents us from feeling humility and from recognizing that we might be wrong or at least not completely correct. All of this gets reinforced by political party and sub-party structures, and by organizations that reflect these personal and social structures, that discourage dialogue. The result is a political climate that sees any compromise or dialogue as weakness because each person, organization and/or party refuses to recognize that anyone besides itself has value.

Called to Preserve Dignity

This lack of honest dialogue and openness to compromise is a problem because it runs counter to our understanding of the role of government. Pope Francis reminded us of this role in his speech to Congress. He said:

Your own responsibility as members of Congress is to enable this country, by your legislative activity, to grow as a nation. You are the face of its people, their representatives. You are called to defend and preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good, for *this is the chief aim of all politics*. A political society endures when it seeks, as a vocation, to satisfy common needs by stimulating the growth of all its members, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk. Legislative activity is always based on care for the people.

From the pope's statement, we feel a profound sadness that our current system seems to have as its goal not the care of the people, but the betterment of individual interests without regard to its impact upon others, especially the most vulnerable. These actions are exacerbated by the pervasive influence of groups and individuals with large sums of money and power, often manipulating and preying on others' insecurities and fears to further their own means. In the end, it feels like our nation is in a place where the common good is impossible to advance.

As Franciscans, we are called to be *in* the world, to help bring a sense of the greater call for the common good. We do this by naming the problem and inviting and encouraging people to make personal and social conversions to allow for the common good. We enter into this process knowing that it will be a long road and will require our Franciscan realism — a sense that we must make imperfect steps to get ourselves and the world closer to sharing the common good. How are we to do this?

Recognizing the Value to Dialogue

First, we must constantly remind ourselves and others that each person brings insights and value to the dialogue. However, people also have to be reminded that they have, at most, only a piece of the truth of a particular situation; thus, they must be open to compromise and living the humility that is the foundation for conversion.

By entering into this dialogue, holding firmly to the need for compromise, and recognizing that even imperfect solutions can move us closer to sharing the common good, we can begin to change the political culture of parties and other organizations. In other words, each group needs to be changed by a diversity of people adding their voices to the conversation. Only then can political parties themselves add value to public discussion. Practically speaking, one could suggest that voting for someone who is not willing to enter into open dialogue and compromise is morally questionable. We must demand more of our elected officials and of ourselves.

Second, as we try to do our part to change the larger conversation, we must do so in public view. This means we must understand how to use secular and social media. We can recall that St. Francis and his early followers spoke in the public square; if we want to help bring about the social and political conversion needed for our nation, we must do the same. We will be accused of not respecting the separation of church and state, but, in fact, we can remind our detractors that we are only calling for elected officials to do their jobs — pursue the common good.

Finally, we need to set up our ministries as places for open, frank and humble dialogue. We need to welcome all parties and sides to the conversation. We need to remind people of the goal of our conversations — achieving the common good. We all must work to live the dialogue, compromise and sense of political risk that we wish to witness in the public square. May we all work to model the leadership that we want to see in the halls of our government.



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