November Reflections 2016

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Although some Americans are satisfied with their binary choice for president of either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, many are not. Anecdotally, a friend told me: “In a country of over 320 million people, you would think we could find two stronger candidates.” Polls consistently show unprecedented high disapproval ratings; over 50 percent for both candidates. Voters are responding in various ways: supporting one of the candidates solely on partisan grounds; deciding not to vote; voting for an alternative candidate; choosing between the lesser of two evils; and making a choice emotionally apart from any rational or ethical considerations.

The Catholic tradition on political issues offers helpful guidance for all those seeking a moral framework for making their electoral decision. This tradition accepts a proper separation of church and state which does not seek a return to Christendom but does treasure the opportunity to participate in the ongoing debate on public policy. It views politics as a noble profession and participation in the political process as a moral responsibility. Politicians cannot let special interests deter them from serving the common good, nor should cynicism keep citizens from voting.

In this election, some Catholics have claimed that abortion is a “non-negotiable” issue that rules out voting for Hillary Clinton because of her pro-choice position. The American bishops have rejected this simplistic single-issue approach to complex electoral issues. In their 2015 teaching document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops do not speak of non-negotiable issues, but of “intrinsically evil acts,” which include not only abortion and euthanasia, but also racist behavior and targeting noncombatants in warfare. In this regard, we can recall the admonition of Pope Francis that Catholics should not obsess over abortion, contraception and gay marriage but should place such moral prohibitions in the larger context of love of God and neighbor, including care for the poor and marginalized. For their part, the American bishops, following the teaching of Pope Benedict, say Catholics could vote for a candidate who supports an intrinsically evil act, not because of this position but despite it, on the grounds that the candidate is “most likely to pursue other authentic human goods.” As in the past elections, they ground their moral position on “the consistent ethic of life,” which protects human life at all stages of development from conception to natural death and supports policies designed to help human beings flourish. The bishops go on to say the candidates should be judged according to their commitments, integrity and character, especially the practice of the four cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude.

Today it is common for moral theologians to retrieve the teaching of Thomas Aquinas (1224-1275) on the virtues as a way of examining an authentic moral life. For Aquinas, virtues are like a second nature which inclines us to do good in various circumstances with relative ease and spontaneity. According to the Aristotelian tradition, which greatly influenced Aquinas, we can best understand a particular virtue by observing a person who practices it. With this in mind, we can reflect on presidential versions of the cardinal virtues, keeping in mind the good example of two of our greatest presidents, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Prudence, according to Aquinas, inclines us to analyze the situation, to figure out the best means to accomplish a good goal, and to devote ourselves to act on that insight. Prudent political leaders practice statesmanship, taking into account various perspectives, calculating what can be accomplished, keeping in mind the good of all and discerning how to motivate citizens to implement the most viable plan. They are farsighted and ready to learn from those more experienced.

After losing two races for the U.S. Senate, Abraham Lincoln, a self-educated lawyer from Illinois, was elected the 16th president of the United States in 1860. Facing the huge task of holding together a badly fractured country, he made a daring, radical, prudential judgement to include in his Cabinet three of his rivals for president, New York senator William Seward, Ohio governor Salmon Chase, and Missouri politician Edward Bates. It seems Lincoln hoped to tap their experience and talent, to have immediate access to diverse opinions, and to develop a united front in maintaining the Union. Despite intense infighting, Lincoln made this “team of rivals,” as historian Doris Kearns Goodwin called them, work for the good of the country by treating each one as an individual worthy of respect and keeping them focused on the great cause of preserving the Union and ending slavery.

Our next president is going to face the immense challenge of healing an extremely polarized country suffering from political gridlock. We cannot expect another Lincoln, but we can try to judge which candidate is more likely to act prudently to overcome divisions and bring us together.

Justice, as Aquinas described it, enables persons to maintain “a stable and lasting willingness” to give everyone what is due them. Just leaders oppose all forms of discrimination and strive to make sure that all groups and individuals are treated fairly and have adequate access to common resources.

Democratic governor of New York, Franklin Roosevelt was elected the 32nd president in 1932 in the midst of the Great Depression. Despite his own aristocratic background, he had great empathy for “the forgotten man” suffering economic hardships. He often spoke out on their behalf. “We cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living may be, if some fraction of our people – whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth – is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure.” “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” “It seems to me to be equally plain that no business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country.”

In order to secure justice for those suffering from the depression, Roosevelt inaugurated the New Deal, which created many new government agencies and programs. For example, the WPA, which at one time employed more than 8.5 million men and women, constructed over 40,000 public buildings and infrastructure projects, such as roads, buildings, schools, libraries, stadiums, utilities, firehouses, and theaters in communities all over the country. Most significantly, Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act in 1935, which continues to provide benefits to retired workers today, enabling many Americans to avoid poverty in old age.

Our next president will face various forms of injustice: racism, sexism, unemployment, underemployment, and both wealth and wage inequality. Which candidate is more likely to create greater economic opportunities and overcome unjust discrimination?

Temperance, as Aquinas teaches, inclines us to moderate our desires and control our appetites especially for food, drink, sex and acclaim. Moderating desire enables us to act reasonably and to stay open to spiritual concerns. Temperate leaders avoid an overreaching pride that refuses to accept unavoidable limitations. They tend to show clemency toward offenders, avoiding harsh enforcement of the letter of the law. It is especially important that political leaders be humble, willing to learn from others and from their own mistakes. Humble leaders, motivated by faith convictions, reverence God as the Source of all gifts, which inclines them to esteem the talents of others more than their own and to restrain their desires for greatness.

President Lincoln was greatly respected as a humble man who actually admitted mistakes and learned from others. His humility was rooted in his deep faith in Divine Providence. He did not join a church, but he understood the biblical truth that God is in charge of the world and its history. Wiser than many theologians and clerics of his time, he insisted that the question was not “is God on our side, but are we on God’s side.” This conviction helped him avoid a prideful overreach and often drew him to his knees in reflective prayer.

Our next president will face intractable problems that cannot be solved by military power or economic superiority. As Americans, we live in a pluralistic world, religiously and culturally diverse. Despite globalization, we cannot impose our will on the world or serve as the world’s policeman. Which candidate is more likely to show restraint in world affairs and to cooperate with other countries, cultures and religions for the good of all?

Fortitude, in the Thomistic tradition, enables us to persevere in doing good even when threatened by difficulties and serious dangers. Courageous leaders endure the pressures of difficult situations without flinching. They stand their ground when attacked unreasonably. Moreover, effective leaders not only endure through hardship, they are also proactive, daring to attack dangers in an effort to eliminate them or reduce their power. They maintain a calm spirit and a balanced approach to both enduring and attacking dangers. They act with confidence and a firm resolve to follow through while avoiding the extremes of fearfulness and rashness.

On a personal level, Franklin Roosevelt demonstrated great courage in his ongoing struggle to gain some minimal use of his legs after being paralyzed by polio at age 39. In his First Inaugural Address after being elected president in 1932, he began by saying the times demanded he “speak the truth, the whole truth frankly and boldly,” honestly facing the dire situation created by the Depression. He went on: “So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” He noted some of the problems: high taxes, frozen markets, depleted savings, widespread unemployment, and low wages, but insisted our forefathers handled difficult problems because they “believed and were not afraid.” Roosevelt had a remarkable capacity to inject his own courage and optimism into the minds and hearts of the American people. He was able to mobilize the “warm courage of national unity” in both the struggle against the ravages of the Depression and, later, in the war against Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany, which required such great commitment from brave soldiers and self-sacrificing citizens.

For the foreseeable future, the United States will be engaged in a high stakes struggle against international and domestic terrorism. Voters have the opportunity to choose which candidate is more likely to provide the firm, balanced, bold, courageous leadership needed to guide us through what promises to be a protracted, complex, multifaceted, asymmetrical battle against an ideologically committed foe.

Ideally, our president would combine the cardinal virtues in a balanced integrated way that could inspire the nation to move toward our highest ideals. Realistically, no president has that complete package, and approximations like Lincoln and Roosevelt appear rarely. This year the gap between presidential ideals and the actual candidates has created unusual levels of doubt and confusion.

Nevertheless, we have an obligation to vote as wisely as possible, which means examining more carefully the general positions of the candidates on important issues. For example, Clinton favors comprehensive immigration reform with a path to citizenship, while Trump emphasizes securing the border and ruling out any form of amnesty; she sees global warming as a major problem and supports the 2015 Paris Agreement, while he views it as a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese government; she supports Roe v Wade and will appoint Supreme Court judges who will uphold it, while he says he will nominate judges who will eventually overturn it; she supports the Iranian Nuclear Agreement and promises strict enforcement, while he would withdraw from the agreement and negotiate a better deal; she wants to preserve the main features of the Affordable Care Act and to reduce the costs, while he wants to replace it with a rather vague better plan; she pledges to maintain our NATO commitment, while he has hinted that our defense of European countries might be dependent on them paying their fair share; she wants strict enforcement of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, while he has suggested it could be in our national interests for Japan and other countries to have a nuclear arsenal.

By examining more carefully the policy positions of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump we can gain a better sense of how they would actually exercise the cardinal virtues as president.