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Bishop McElroy of San Diego addressed the problem of political polarization in his April, 2018, Bernardin Lecture sponsored by the Common Ground Project. McElroy, who has a doctorate in political science from Stanford University, expressed fears that the current political division with its “nihilism, hypocrisy and anger” will be accepted as normal. We are suffering from a “profound sickness of the soul” that “tears at the fabric of our nation’s unity, undermining the core democratic consensus that is the foundation of our identity as Americans.” Noting the divisions within the U.S. Catholic community between pro-life proponents and social justice advocates, the bishop said that both sides present “skewed distillations of Catholic moral teaching.” They have “hijacked” Catholic social doctrine, “reducing it to the warped partisan categories of our age and selecting those teachings for acceptance that promote their partisan worldview.” McElroy insisted that the “cry of the unborn and the cry of the poor must be at the core of Catholic political conversation in the coming years.”

Bishop McElroy proposed a number of political or civic virtues for dealing with our debilitating political polarization. We can enrich his treatment by raising up the late Senator John McCain as a helpful, if flawed, example of how these virtues functioned in his heroic life.

**Integrity**

Integrity is an important civic virtue according to McElroy. From a Christian perspective, this virtue inclines us to accept the full impact of the whole Gospel in our entire lives, private and political. It rules out the extremes of trying to transform our pluralistic democracy into a Christian theocracy and of privatizing the Gospel so that it’s influence is limited to prayer and family life. Integrity prompts us to live our faith in all situations, including the challenges presented by the political world.

John McCain ran for president twice, losing in the 2000 Republican primary to George W. Bush, the Texas Governor who had the support of the Party Establishment. In 2008, he won the Republican nomination but lost in the general election to Democrat Barack Obama. During this campaign, a woman took the microphone at a McCain rally and said she cannot trust Obama because he is an Arab. The Senator quickly took the microphone and said, “No ma’am, he’s a decent man, citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues.” It was an iconic moment, a spontaneous, unscripted response of a good man exercising the virtue of integrity. He spontaneously rejected any possible temptation to demonize his opponent and score political points. The integrity of Senator McCain came across as a consistent character trait, a commitment to truth, a grounded authenticity. John McCain was a man of his word, dedicated to speaking the truth and ready to admit his mistakes. For the most part, he spoke the truth even when it was inconvenient and unpopular

Respect for the truth is one of the great casualties of our warlike political discourse. When lying is considered a normal part of political discourse, our very democracy is threatened. We cannot have productive political arguments when alternate facts replace empirically verifiable truths. Reflecting on the example of John McCain, we can see the virtue of integrity prompting us to respect truth and to name deceptions. In this post-truth era, ordinary citizens are called to fight for the truth, to defend it vigorously. Personal integrity demands this of all of us. We cannot let lying be the new normal. By developing the virtue of integrity, we prepare ourselves for a long haul fight against deception and for truth.

**Peacemaking Through Dialogue**

According to Bishop McElroy, we should place great importance on cultivating a “Catholic political imagination” that includes “the virtue of dialogue and encounter.” In this regard he refers to the talk of Pope Francis to the U.S Congress where he quoted Thomas Merton, who admitted to being “the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness.” McElroy goes on to say Merton escaped that prison through a “sacred sense of dialogue and encounter, ultimately the only instrument that could change the world.” We cannot bridge our political divide without genuine dialogue in the political arena and in the Church. The bishop goes on to urge us to undertake our vocation as “citizens of peace,” who labor to create a “new public consensus” that “can face conflict head on, resolve it and make it a link in the chain of a new process.” Since McElroy also calls peacebuilding a virtue, perhaps we could combine his two virtues and stress the need for peacemaking through dialogue to counter the polarization that thrives on monologues that simply repeat intransigent positions.

On July 27, 2017, Senator John McCain, suffering from brain cancer, held the deciding vote on the Republican plan to overhaul the Affordable Care Act. With a dramatic thumbs down gesture late into the night, he killed the bill by voting “no.” He did so, as he explained, because the Senate had not followed the regular order that involves sending a bill to committee, holding hearings receiving input from both sides of the aisle, and debating amendments. In short, he voted “no” because the process was not dialogical and bipartisan. For him, the Republicans repeated the fundamental mistake the Democrats made by passing the Affordable Care Act ( which McCain hated) without any bipartisan support. The senator believed that regular order, which involves dialogue and compromise is the only way to govern wisely and effectively.

In today’s conflicted political climate, Christians have a special responsibility to practice peace-making as Jesus taught us. We can cultivate this virtue by practicing it in our personal lives; creating harmony in our families, reaching out to our neighbors and collaborating with our colleagues. Politically, we can break out of our cocoons by trying to understand the viewpoint of those who seem so different. We could, on occasion, listen to their radio talk shows, watch their television news programs, read their newspapers and magazines and follow the arguments of their candidates. We could befriend a political opponent, making it harder to engage in mutual demonization We could take the risk of opening up a political conversation with a family member or friend on the other side of the political spectrum. We could support candidates who are open to constructive dialogue and applaud politicians who strive to be peacemakers.

**Hope**

The virtue of hope is especially important today because, as Bishop McElroy put it: “The native optimism of our country has been swallowed by a coarsening pessimism rooted in the conviction that a better future can come for our nation only if some Americans lose out, are excluded, forgotten or denied.” The virtue of hope refuses to accept the current political division as normal. Hope motivates the Church to make “an unrelenting commitment to rejuvenate our cultural and political life” as a response to hyper-partisanship. Christian hope is based not on an optimistic reading of the current situation, but on trust in God and the conviction that divine grace is more powerful than all the dark forces. Hope encourages us to persevere in the struggle against partisan polarization even when our best efforts are not working. It also alerts us to the small signs of progress in bridging the political divide.

Before his death, John McCain wrote a final farewell statement to his fellow Americans, expressing gratitude for the privilege of serving them for sixty years. He said he found a sublime sense of happiness serving America’s great causes of liberty, equal justice, and respect for the dignity of all people, and then repeated his heartfelt conviction that “our identities and sense of worth are not circumscribed but enlarged by serving good causes bigger than ourselves.” He went on to insist that we are a “nation of ideals, not blood and soil.” We are a “blessing to humanity when we uphold and advance these ideals at home and in the world.” Acknowledging our current problems, he noted that we weaken our greatness when “we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries,” when “we hide behind walls rather than tear them down,” and when “we doubt the power of our ideals rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been.” If we remember that as Americans we have more in common than what divides us, we will presume the good will of our fellow citizens, and together we will come through “these challenging times” stronger than before. He concluded his farewell message on a hopeful note: “Do not despair of our present difficulties but believe always in the promise and greatness of America, because nothing is inevitable here. Americans never quit. We never surrender. We never hide from history. We make history. Farewell, fellow Americans. God bless you and God bless America.”

Senator McCain’s funeral, which he carefully planned, can be seen as an engaging symbolic expression of his hopeful farewell message. It was in some ways a repudiation of the style and policies of President Trump, signaled by the deliberate exclusion of the president, the direct attack on him by the Senator’s daughter, Meghan, and more subtle jabs by other speakers. Nevertheless, the whole event did have an uplifting effect on the American public. The chosen speakers sounded the themes of reconciliation, civil discourse, and bipartisanship dear to the heart of McCain. Choosing George W. Bush and Barack Obama, two men who defeated him in presidential elections, was a great public affirmation of the way our democracy works. The simple gesture of having Nancy Pelosi and Paul Ryan approach the casket together spoke loudly of McCain’s sense of the importance of bipartisanship.

Christian faith provides a perspective for interpreting Senator McCain’s farewell message. It is clear that his own hope is founded on his love of country and its highest ideals. It seems he held a version of what is commonly known as the “American Civil Religion,” with its belief in America as a beacon of hope, God’s chosen instrument for establishing a better world. His relationship to traditional Christianity is not so clear. As a youth, he acquired a good knowledge of his Episcopalian faith, and as a Senator he periodically attended The North Phoenix Baptist Church with his wife, Cindy. When asked about his faith, he typically declared that he was a Christian but was reluctant to talk more about it. On the other hand, he spoke often and passionately about his fierce patriotism and dedication to American ideals.

Christian faith warns us to avoid making an idol out of country and transforming patriotism into an uncritical affirmation of “my country right or wrong.” At the same time, our faith alerts us to signs of hope whatever their source, including the civil religion that inspired John McCain to live a life of heroic virtue and dedicated public service. With trust in God, we can avoid both a polarizing pessimism and a utopian optimism. Empowered by the virtue of hope, we can stay involved in the political process even when discouraged, vote in the midterm elections even when inconvenient, support good candidates even when they are behind in the polls, express our views to elected officials even when they have a very different world view. Inspired by the good example of Senator John McCain, we can follow our “better angels,” as Lincoln advised, by persevering in the crucial task of bridging the political divide and working for the common good.