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Pro Unity and Pro Voice by [James Martin, S.J.](#)

Catholics in the era of Trump

Ernesto Vega of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Hispanic ministry, listens as Archbishop Jose H. Gomez leads an interfaith prayer service for the immigrant community Nov. 10 at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. The service was organized as a sign of unity and solidarity amid uncertainty after President-elect Donald Trump's victory Nov. 8. (CNS photo/Patrick T. Fallon, Reuters)

How does a Catholic move ahead after the election of Donald J. Trump as president?

For many Catholics this not a problem. Indeed, the [majority](#) [2] of Catholics voted for Mr. Trump and are presumably delighted by his victory. White Catholics, perhaps responding to his message to promote job growth, shake up a political system widely seen as corrupt, and his opposition to abortion, came out heavily for him. For millions of other American Catholics, however, the election evoked disappointment, sadness, even fear. The [majority](#) [3] of Latino Catholics, for example, perhaps alarmed by his comments on immigration, overwhelmingly voted for Hillary Clinton.

No matter who you are, the election evoked intense emotions. The last time I remember so many people coming to me for counsel was the day after 9/11. Moreover, I have never seen the United States so bitterly divided. So let me offer a way forward for members of my own community: American Catholics. There are two paths, which highlight two aspects of our life as Catholics in the modern world: the need for reconciliation and the need for legitimate dissent.

Reconciliation

Our country is divided most painfully. And the more we are divided, the less room there is for true progress and the more room there is for hatred and violence. Thus, even if some of us are angry, we must seek to lessen the divisions. What can be done to increase unity?

1. Reconcile by giving people the benefit of the doubt. At the beginning of his classic text, *The Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius Loyola, the 16th-century founder of the Jesuit order, offers important advice: “Let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbor's proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it.” In Jesuit circles, we call this giving someone the “plus sign.” In common parlance, it means giving someone the benefit of the doubt.

In other words, as we seek to draw the country together it should be “presupposed,” hard as it may be, that both Trump supporters and Clinton supporters were seeking the good of the country. Giving someone the “plus sign” is a prerequisite for listening. Because how can you possibly listen to someone if you think they have bad intentions? It's hard, but necessary.

It's also important because we tend to judge others by their actions and ourselves by our intentions. Remember that the other person probably believes themselves to have good intentions, like you. Besides, trying to reconcile is impossible if you think the other person is up to no good. Try to give them, as far as possible, the plus sign.

This is a hard thing to write. For I know that many of Mr. Trump's critics wonder how his supporters could have voted for someone who made racist, misogynistic and xenophobic comments. People have asked me: How can someone give Donald Trump the benefit of the doubt, given what he has said? As one friend put it today, "If someone says they're going to punch you in the face, would you say, 'See what happens?'"

That is a fair point. Many of our brothers and sisters are frightened by the election of someone who said, both in public and in private, hateful comments. But the only path to reconciliation, as Jesus shows us, is meeting someone who seems like your enemy with charity. "Love your enemies" is not something new. Or as Dorothy Day said, "It is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that saddens us."

What happens if people prove untrustworthy? If our leaders do? If we give them the benefit of the doubt and they fail us? More about that in the second part of this essay, on dissent.

2. Reconcile by listening. Many Americans seem increasingly incapable of listening. Perhaps it's because we are more informed of news through "narrowcasting"—TV stations catering to our own interests and social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter, where we follow only those who agree with us and only people who share our opinions. Consequently, we tend to think we already know what to think. So why listen? Sometimes when you're speaking to a person you feel that all they're doing is waiting for you to stop talking, so that they can speak. This causes further division, as fewer and fewer people can even understand one another.

I'm guilty of this myself.

To reconcile, try listening. I mean really listening. If you want a surefire tip on how to do so, try what we used to call in spiritual counseling, "reflective listening." See if you can summarize or "reflect back" what a person has just said. It will force you to listen. For example, "It sounds like you're worried about what immigration will do to this country, is that right?" Or "It sounds like you feel the poor are being neglected by the government. Am I getting you?"

You'll be surprised how much this not only helps the other person feel heard but increases your capacity to listen, and to understand.

3. Reconcile by avoiding name calling, ad hominem arguments and hate speech. This campaign season was filled with name calling at every level. *Ad hominem* arguments—that is, "against the person," rather than about a particular topic—were rampant. "Nasty woman" was the least of these comments. Yet a little known, and less observed, saying of Jesus puts this kind of speech in focus.

“If you call your brother *raca* [idiot],” says Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, “you will be liable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says ‘fool’ will be liable to the fires of Gehenna” (5:22).

New Testament scholars say that when the Gospels preserve Aramaic words, like *raca*, we can be almost 100 percent sure they came directly from the lips of Jesus and were not added in the later editing of the Gospels. The words themselves made such an impression on the original hearers that they remembered the precise Aramaic phrase and passed it along in oral retellings.

In other words, the preservation of this Aramaic word for “idiot” means that it is one of the most historically authentic of Jesus’s sayings. Yet it may also be the most overlooked. Quite literally, Jesus says that if you call someone a bad name, you’ll be liable to either the Jewish council or, worse, the “fires of Gehenna.” Gehenna, the site outside Jerusalem’s city walls, where garbage burned incessantly, was the image Jesus often used for hell.

So if you call someone a name, or engage in hate speech, you’re not only coarsening our discourse, you’re not only being uncharitable, you’re also going to hell. Says Jesus. Remember this if you’re a Trump supporter and you’re tempted to call a Clinton supporter a “baby killer.” Remember this if you’re a Clinton supporter and tempted to call someone a Trump supporter a “fascist.” Name calling does nothing to advance reconciliation, whether in person or in social media. It simply perpetuates, and usually intensifies, hate.

4. Reconcile by forgiving. The Gospel reading the day before the election (Lk 17:1-6) recounted Jesus’s saying that if someone offends you seven times in one day, you should forgive him or her. Yes, it’s difficult, probably the most difficult of all Christian teachings. And it runs against the grain of revenge, bitterness and score-settling that seems to dominate American culture and our political world. Particularly unsettling were cries from Democrats and Republicans during the election about how they could never, and would never, work with “that man” or “that woman.”

Forgiveness is more essential than ever. And it’s a double gift. It is a gift to the one forgiven, because it enables healing to take place between them and yourself. And it is a gift to you, because it frees you from the burden of resentment that can sour a soul, and a country.

Forgiveness must be a part of our reconciliation.

5. Reconcile by praying. You have to pray. Why? First, to ask for God’s help. Most of what I’ve just suggested requires grace. God needs to help you to give someone the benefit of the doubt, to listen, to avoid name calling and forgive. It’s hard. Prayer is a reminder that we are reliant on God. We need help.

Thinking about the Creator of the Universe is also a reminder that you can’t do it all. Dozens of people have asked me in the last few days about how they can help reconcile the country, to heal divisions. They seemed overwhelmed by the task. You can help, of course, but you can’t do it by yourself, whether you’re in public office or not.

And God doesn't expect you to do so. As a wise Jesuit I know likes to say, "There is Good News and there is Better News. The Good News is: *There is a Messiah*. The Better News is: *It's not you*." You can't do it all, because you're not God. So just do your best.

So you need to pray—for grace, wisdom and courage. Reconciliation and unity are hard work. And while you're at it, pray for those American you used to consider your enemies, but who are really your brothers and sisters.

Dissent

Reconciliation is important. But as Catholics we are called to do something else as well. We are called to voice legitimate dissent, to oppose repressive policies, to stand up for the poor and the marginalized. Catholics, for example, are called to be "pro-life." And I myself am pro-life, standing in defense of all human life from natural conception to natural death. Because pro-life means being for life at all stages: this includes opposing the death penalty and euthanasia. This is one reason I didn't agree with Hillary Clinton on everything that she espoused: she was strongly "pro-choice."

But I also stand with the poor and marginalized, with anyone who feels excluded, and this was my greatest problem with Donald Trump's campaign. Not his bluster and bombast, but his fear-mongering and his division of this country into categories of us and them.

Now that the election is over, Mr. Trump's policies are a legitimate target for critique by the church. Before an election such a harsh critique would have been seen as "endorsing," which the church should not do. Now, however, as has always been the case in the political sphere, the church and its members, may offer legitimate critique about political leaders.

We should pray that Mr. Trump has a successful presidency, because that will mean success for the country, for all Americans. But we should also not be afraid to speak out, no matter what the costs. And when Mr. Trump says he wants to erect a wall to keep out Mexicans, forcibly deport undocumented immigrants and oppose ventures to help stop the effects of climate change, we should take him at his word. It is foolish to underestimate either him or his resolve.

In that vein, Catholics should oppose, vocally, forcefully and actively, those aspects of his political designs that would seek to marginalize or exclude people. Catholic social teaching asks us to stand in solidarity with the poor. And Catholic tradition has been filled with saints who stood up against repressive political systems: Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Oscar Romero, in modern times; as well as Joan of Arc, Thomas of Becket and Thomas More in the past. The Catholic has an absolute moral duty to dissent. To be "pro voice." So stand up.

1. Be pro voice, on behalf of the poor. It was not surprising that many people believed that Donald Trump’s election would boost the economy. His public reputation is that of a master businessman. Nor was it surprising that he was seen as a man who would shake up the economic system, so that it might be made fairer, less corrupt, more inclusive. This was a man whose most famous utterance on his reality TV show was “You’re fired.”

But will his policies help the poor? I doubt it. So do many [economists](#). [5]

There is a saying in East Africa, *Wapiganapo tembo, nyasi huumia*. “When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” In other words, in the middle of great political battles, it is the poor who always lose out. We can pray that things work out differently, but from my vantage point, it seems likely that the poor—the homeless, the unemployed, the underemployed, the disabled, the sick—will be the ones most to suffer in the coming administration. All the more reason for Catholics to speak up on behalf of the materially poor when it seems like their interests are being trampled, like grass.

2. Be pro voice, against racism. Mr. Trump’s election was celebrated by David Duke, the former “Grand Wizard” of the Ku Klux Klan. “This was one of the most exciting nights of my life!” he [said](#) [6]. And today it was announced that at least one “chapter” of the KKK was holding a [celebration](#) [7]. During the campaign Mr. Trump initially refused to disavow the support of the KKK, going so far as to say he [didn’t know](#) [8] what “white supremacy” meant. There have been numerous incidents of Mr. Trump’s election providing at least encouragement for racist elements in our country.

Racism is a [sin](#). [9] Period. It must be opposed by Catholic at every turn. Even the hint of racism, even thinly veiled racism, must be fought.

3. Be pro voice, against xenophobia. Mr. Trump’s rhetoric often demonized refugees and migrants. Perhaps his most famous comments on the campaign trail was saying that the community of Mexicans immigrants in this country included criminals and “rapists.” It was another example of his tendency to divide people into “us” and “them.” Building a wall to keep “them” out was a key focus of his campaigns.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, however, have consistently been [urging](#) [10] people to consider the needs of these migrants—not only Mexicans, but Syrians expelled from their country, and indeed everyone hoping for a better life. Indeed, just a few days after the election, Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, [acknowledging](#) [11] the fears of migrants in the wake of the election, called for greater attention to the needs of undocumented immigrants.

Pope Francis was correct last year when he [said](#) [12], in response to Mr. Trump’s plans that “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel.”

Xenophobia, the fear of the stranger, should be anathema to Catholics. Especially to American Catholics. We are a nation of immigrants. And we ourselves were tarred with the same foul brush of xenophobia and [nativism](#) [13]. We should not perpetuate this hatred. “You shall not oppress a resident alien,” as God says to the Hebrew people, “you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 23:9).

4. Be pro voice, for the environment. Mr. Trump has [said](#) [14] that he believes global warming is a hoax concocted by the Chinese. It is not. It is a clear and present danger, and as Pope Francis noted in “[Laudato Si](#) [15],” an encyclical that is now part of the body of Catholic social teaching, we are required to care for “our common home” and pay attention to the ways that climate change disproportionately affects the poorest among us. Why does this happen? For the simple reason that their lives are already fragile, and they cannot afford to move away from imperiled areas.

Of course, the profit motive, which Mr. Trump has championed, is seen to outweigh care for the environment. Pope Francis understands this clearly: “Economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment.”

The environment is very low on Mr. Trump’s list of concerns. In fact, he has proposed to lead the transition in the Environmental Protection Agency [someone](#) [16] who refutes the notion of climate change.

Catholics are called to reverence and advocate for God’s creation. Indeed, Pope Francis proposed as [one](#) [17] of the new beatitudes, “Blessed are they who protect and care for our common home.” Be pro-voice, then, for the environment.

5. Be pro voice, for all the marginalized. Undocumented immigrants were not the only ones who expressed fear in the wake of Mr. Trump’s election. And by this I do not mean that they profess his election to be somehow illegitimate. Rather, they are fearful for their livelihoods and their lives. L.G.B.T. people, women, African-Americans, and many minorities, ethnic groups, and other communities who feel marginalized, now fear for their future. Those who are marginalized often feel and often are voiceless. All the more reason to speak out in favor of minority and marginalized groups when they feel that their communities and even lives are being threatened. These are the “least” of our brothers and sisters, and Jesus asks us to stand with them (Mt. 25).

These two paths—of reconciliation and dissent—may seem contradictory. But this was Jesus’s dual path, and he invites us to follow him. He urged people to come together. “That they all may be one,” he said (Jn 17:21). But he was not afraid to speak out, even if it offended people. Even if, paradoxically, it caused disunity. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Lk 12:51).

Catholics have a special responsibility to work with charity to reconcile in the midst of this divisive time. They also have the responsibility to stand up, clearly, loudly and passionately, for the rights of the poorest and most marginalized among us.

Be pro unity and pro voice.

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