

Father Robert Sirico's Homily for November 6, 2016  
Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish,  
Grand Rapids, MI

The challenge of putting into a homily a deep and broad vision of the role of the Church in the world – especially in the modern world – is a daunting task.

We are standing before what appears to be what some call “an historical moment” in terms of the American elections on Tuesday. I know many of you are disturbed by this. It has occupied your thoughts and conversations and even your dreams (or should I say nightmares?). The very fact that we need to be attentive to our children's watching presidential debates or hearing news reports of the election is sufficient in itself to say something is terribly wrong.

On one level the phrase “historical moment” is a misnomer because all of history is, after all, one moment followed by another. So, in this sense, Tuesday is a historical moment just as last Wednesday was and the Thursday before that, etc., etc.

Yet, we would be obtuse if we cannot see that some sort of cultural tectonic plates are shifting in society. While in the middle of it, like those living in the period of the demise of the Roman Empire, it's very hard to gain a perspective of the shift and significance of this shift.

I hope that by the end of this homily you will be able, to some extent, to both grasp the principles of Catholic engagement in civic life and have better clarity on a few critical matters; but I hope also, and more importantly, that by the end of this homily, you will be able to look up from the immediate urgencies crowding us to see a broader vision of who we are as a Church and as a parish.

Elections and political campaigns have a way of making the urgent appear *all* important. This is not to say that certain urgencies are unimportant. It is just that when the basement is filling with water, while you certainly will want to dry it out, one hopes you will not forget to locate the broken pipe and stem the income of the water in the first place.

So, this is a good moment to review what the Catholic criteria are for evaluating what candidates and policies we can support and retain our communion with the Church. Let us be clear that there is no binding Church dogma on the majority of matters that come before us as voting. How much tax millage you should or should not support for the maintenance of a zoo or a museum was not revealed by Christ to the Apostles, taught consistently by the Magisterium of the Church down through the ages and affirmed by the modern popes.

This is because as important as these questions are to our local contingencies, the Church is wise enough to permit a wide array of acceptable opinion on these prudential matters on which good Catholics may agree to disagree.

This is why the Church really does not endorse candidates for political office.

What the Church does do, however – indeed, what the Church must do, is preach the Gospel, and in regard to the fundamental teaching of the Church on matters pertaining to intrinsic evil, the Church cannot remain silent. Sometimes, because of the Church’s obligation to preach the Gospel on these things, she will be accused of entering the realm of politics, but this is a misconception.

After all, it is not as though the Church updates her teachings in light of the current political fashions. It is rather, that from time to time in various epochs and periods of history, the **constant** teaching of the Church can run counter to a **current** political trend.

And so it is today. The **constant** teaching of the Church with regard to matters related to the inherent dignity of human life and the normativity of the marital union between husband and wife runs counter to certain **current** trends in our society, trends which we earnestly hope are transitory.

Let’s be clear why the Church, even at the risk of opposition and even persecution, must be constant in raising her voice on these critical matters: It is simply because the right to life of a human being, the nature of marriage which in the context in which every human person has to right to enter into the world and other issues closely tied to this (like embryonic stem cell experimentation and the like), touch the very foundation of society because they touch upon the nature, reality and dignity of human life.

It is simply the case, **and always has been the case**, that no Catholic can support or aid or even vote for others who support and advance things like abortion on demand (even up to the 9<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy), or same sex marriage, or experiments on nascent human life. Let me underscore, it is not merely one’s personal support for these matters which excludes one from communion with the Church, but even helping others who advance or support these intrinsic evils as well.

If you have done something like this unknowingly in the past, I urge you to go to confession and clarify the matter for the good of your conscience.

So, all that is the water in the basement. Let’s look the broken pipe.

What we have been doing here at Sacred Heart for the past few years is to build an authentic Catholic parish that understands, promotes and forms in others the inheritance of Truth received from the Apostles. That is what we reaffirm every Sunday when we recite the Nicæan Creed and profess “one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic faith.”

These beliefs that we are about retrieving and implementing in our parish life and Academy are really the bedrock ideas that formed the basis of Western Civilization. They have to do with an understanding of the human person made in the *imago Dei*, who has a responsibility to the God in whose image we are created and which reflects itself in our reverence for God (exemplified in the Liturgy, which we take seriously because it is our belief in action) and in our

reverence in our neighbor through our social engagement: in tending to those in need, welcoming the stranger and alienated as well as protecting and defending the vulnerable.

This is a broad vision of the Natural Law which, through reason that recognizes the reality of the world that surrounds us and that yields coherence, meaning, and purpose. This vision and the culture it produces is rightly called the Culture of Life and a Civilization of love. And because it is indeed a Culture of Life it vivifies itself (as you often hear in the echoes of squirming babies within these walls).

The sad fact in today's American culture that much of this legacy is in the process of being forgotten or lost. Many, though not all, public leaders are either too intimidated to defend or reaffirm these Truths (truths that were once simply taken for granted across a broad swath of society). Some completely reject these ideas and actively oppose them. Our leadership today, in politics, in business, in education and even sometimes I am especially sad to admit, within religious circles, is flawed – perhaps even more flawed than at most other times in history.

We can (and should) lament this fact – but I insist that it is not a cause for despair – if for no other reason that despair is a mortal sin.

You see, there is another reality at play at this moment in America society, and that is the fact that we have many resources at our disposal – resources both practical and spiritual – and this is particularly the case here at Sacred Heart.

Let me speak locally as a pastor to his specific folk today. Those who are visiting today are welcome to eavesdrop.

For any who have been parishioners for a while, it is obvious that something somewhat unusual is taking place here. I myself cannot explain the whole of it, but I have a few ideas. For those who may not have been with us very long – you are probably here because you have detected that something special is going on.

Now, we need to be careful in talking about all of this on a number of levels:

The first is that we must never be self-congratulatory because any good that is happening is happening because of grace, and not because of us. It would be too easy to fall into the sin of pride and destroy the good that is happening.

Nor is all this happening because of personalities or emotionalism – were that the case, none of this would be sustainable over the long haul, and if it is one thing we know we are about here, it is that we are looking to the long haul. We are not building for the next election cycle, but for the next generation, and the generation after that and the generation after that.

I believe that in this parish we are simply attempting to respond faithfully to the prompting of the Holy Spirit (a prompting over which we do not, by the way, have a monopoly – it is just that God prompts different people, in different place, in different ways and at different times). We are trying desperately to yield ourselves to God's Spirit who is calling us to manifest all his gifts, virtues and fruits and to utilize our talents and our time, our resources, our wealth, our time and our intelligence, to build something that will be a durable counter-witness in this

present culture. As things become more and more confused, our experience and life will have new currency and attractiveness to people looking for what we have been entrusted with.

And *what* is that it is called by various names: The Permanent Things; the First Things, or just the Good, the True and the Beautiful. The Good pertains to a coherent interior and exterior moral life; the True pertains to the use of our reason and our reception of God's Revelation of Himself to the world in his Son; and the Beautiful is simply all of those esthetic adornments that reflect the transcendent and spiritual reality of the Creator who is our origin and final end.

In conclusion, I trust you will forgive me somewhat long homily on the eve of our presidential elections, but I felt there was a deep sense of foreboding about what all this portends, and I wanted offer what I hope would be some clarity of what is happening and what we need to be doing in the face of it. I also wanted to offer some solace in this midst of all this, so I hope too that you will pardon this somewhat extended quotation from Thomas Babington Macaulay who was an English historian and Protestant. He penned these lines the role of the Catholic Church in the sweep of history in October 1840. I offer this to reorient our perspective at this dismal and downhearted moment, to the force, resiliency and potency of the Church:

“There is not, and there never was on this earth, a work of human policy so well deserving of examination as the Roman Catholic Church. The history of that Church joins together the two great ages of human civilisation. No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to the times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon, and when camelopards and tigers bounded in the Flavian amphitheatre. The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday, when compared with the line of the Supreme Pontiffs.

That line we trace back in an unbroken series, from the Pope who crowned Napoleon in the nineteenth century to the Pope who crowned Pepin in the eighth; and far beyond the time of Pepin the august dynasty extends, till it is lost in the twilight of fable. The republic of Venice came next in antiquity. But the republic of Venice was modern when compared with the Papacy; and the republic of Venice is gone, and the Papacy remains. The Papacy remains, not in decay, not a mere antique, but full of life and youthful vigour. The Catholic Church is still sending forth to the farthest ends of the world missionaries as zealous as those who landed in Kent with Augustin, and still confronting hostile kings with the same spirit with which she confronted Attila.

The number of her children is greater than in any former age. Her acquisitions in the New World have more than compensated for what she has lost in the Old. Her spiritual ascendancy extends over the vast countries which lie between the plains of the Missouri and Cape Horn, countries which a century hence, may not improbably contain a population as large as that which now inhabits Europe...

Nor do we see any sign which indicates that the term of her long dominion is approaching. She saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot on Britain,

before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished at Antioch, when idols were still worshipped in the temple of Mecca. And she may still exist in undiminished vigour when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's." (From "Essay on Von Ranke's History of the Popes". Edinburgh Review, 1840)