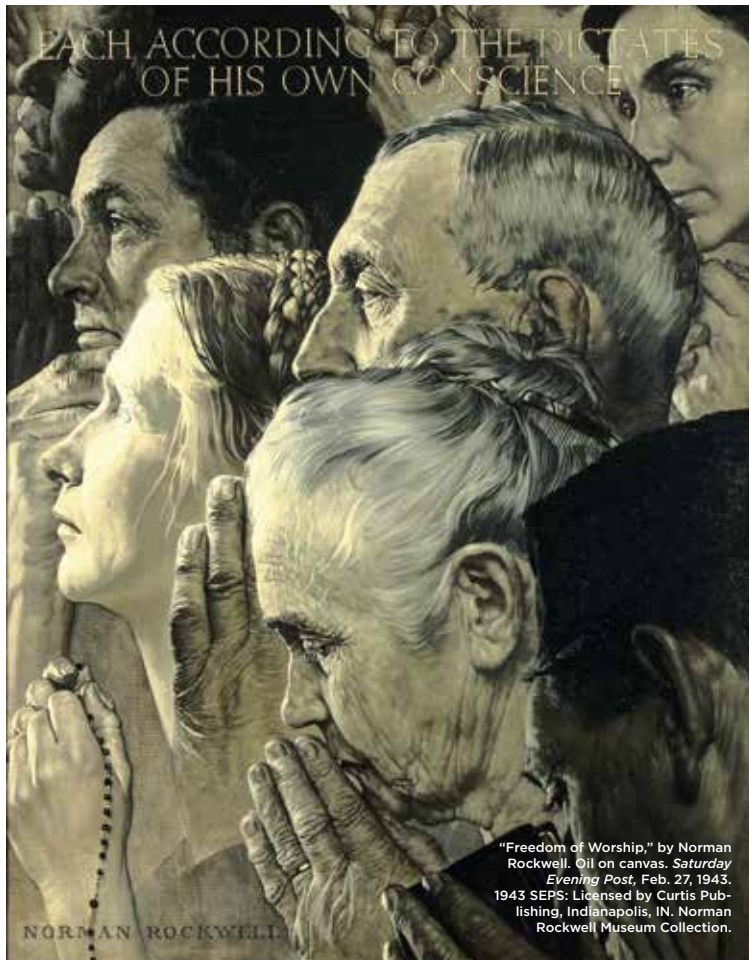


Why prayer is the *ultimate political act*



Dear Father Kerper: When it comes to politics, I feel confused and frustrated. Some candidates seem to have morally good positions on a few issues, but have really bad positions on others. And I am deeply troubled by candidates who act rudely, even cruelly, yet present themselves as good Christians. Everything seems jumbled. I even think about not voting at all. Why doesn't the Church give Catholics clearer directions about how to vote?

Many faithful Catholics share your unease as they navigate through the noise and bitterness of contemporary American politics. Moreover, some well-meaning Catholics try to convince other Catholics to vote as a bloc for or against specific candidates or parties. This violates the Church's long-standing defense of freedom of conscience in politics. There is no Catholic party.

In the past, Catholics experimented with building their own political parties, especially after World War II. Back then, Catholic parties, usually called "Christian Democratic," emerged throughout Europe and Latin America. Some had much success, notably in Germany and Italy. The Church, however, paid a high price by becoming closely identified with unpopular policies and politicians.

This failure of overt political activity caused Church leaders to revisit and imitate the strategy of early Christians. These saintly believers, many of them martyrs, practiced *respectful and prayerful independence*.

St. Paul formulated this strategy in two letters by the Holy Spirit: 1 Timothy and Romans. The first contains the core "political program" followed by ancient Christians; the second commands respect for the state.

St. Paul issued this command: "I urge, then, first of all that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving should be offered for everyone, for kings and others in authority, so that we may be able to live quiet lives with all devotion and propriety." (1 Tm 2:1-2)

Note that prayer is the first and absolutely crucial political act. This prayer, however, has no ideological twist, no attempt to sway political leaders about policies, and no favoritism of one over another. Instead, St. Paul simply entreats Christians to pray "for everyone, for kings and others in authority."

Amazingly, this prayer completely embraced the apparatus of the Roman Empire, which had much brutality, corruption, injustice, violence, widespread slavery and an idolatrous state religion. And who could forget that this same system authorized and carried out the execution of Christ, St. Paul's Lord and Savior? Moreover, St. Paul and many leaders of the early Church would likewise be swallowed up by Roman power.

Why, then, did St. Paul require Christians to pray for political office holders who frequently acted unjustly, even cruelly?

First, St. Paul firmly believed and taught that all political power, regardless of its ideology or even religion, comes from God. He wrote: "Everyone is to obey the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God and so whatever authorities exist have been appointed by God." (Rom 13:1) And Jesus himself affirmed this when he said to Pilate: "You would have no power over me at all if it had not been given you from above." (Jn 19:12)

St. Paul made his rather shocking endorsement of all governing authority because the state, even with its serious flaws, produced social stability and order. Ancient people, including Christians, greatly valued state-enforced order as opposed to chaos.

Second, St. Paul believed that prayers offered up for

the sake of others truly establishes a mysterious bond between God and them. Through this mystical link, God's grace flows into people and gradually transforms them into better and holier people. Hence, praying for office holders, including bad ones, can improve the political system by gradually sanctifying those who hold power.

Only people with great faith will share St. Paul's confidence in the power of prayer within the political realm. When raw political power appears to be the only effective means of shaping society, well-meaning Catholics may exclude the spiritual from their political calculations and tolerate bad behavior and unjust policies as "the only alternative." But we must never believe that *political life* is paramount. It's not. And this key point brings us to St. Paul's desired outcome for Christian respect and prayer for the state. He puts it simply: That Christians "may be able to live quiet lives with all devotion and propriety."

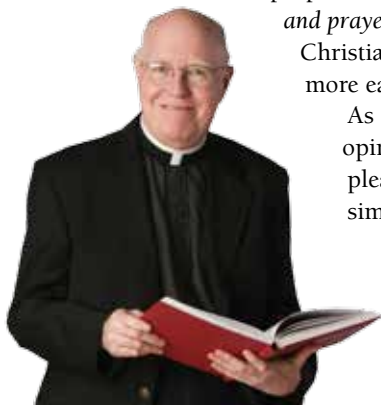
This Christian plea for freedom and independence seems selfish, concerned only about self-preservation through self-imposed isolation. Not true. Rather, ancient Christians wanted peace and freedom — unimpeded by the state — in order to *do good and be good*.

A key tenet of Christian faith underlies this pursuit of freedom: *Morally good societies are not constructed primarily by legislatures, courts, schools and political parties. Rather, moral goodness emerges from within families and communities filled with God's presence and grace.* Indeed, great moral goodness may even spring up within states that have evil laws.

Look at abortion. After the U.S. Supreme Court legalized it in 1973, the abortion rate in the United States suddenly doubled. Yet despite *Roe v. Wade* and efforts to "normalize" abortion, the rate, which peaked in 1981, has steadily fallen and is now lower than it was in 1973. *Political power* produced — and preserved — bad laws. But the *spiritual power* of millions of good and courageous people has gradually undermined the "culture of death." This happened within the "non-political space" where Catholics and people of goodwill "may be able to live quiet lives with all devotion and propriety."

We live in a democratic society; politics has its importance. But we must always keep everything in proper balance. By imitating *the respectful and prayerful independence* of ancient Christians, we will achieve that balance more easily.

As to your anxiety about forming opinions and casting your ballot, please remember that the Church simply calls on people to pray, discern and act according to his or her conscience. But by faithfully following St. Paul's command to respect and pray for all those in politics, we will have done our Christian duty, trusting in God above all worldly powers. ■



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

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