

## Catholic Citizens: A New Era of Mission in the United States of America

Argentina celebrated its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a country in May 2010. Then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, S.J.—now Pope Francis—wrote a pastoral letter for the bicentennial titled “We as Citizens, We as a People.” Although written for Argentina, the letter has implications for the United States—and for missionaries in the U.S.—as we stand on the eve of the 2020 presidential election.

All those living in our country have inherited both the successes and mistakes of earlier generations. We, as an intergenerational cohort of “citizens” must, as Bergoglio wrote, “take charge of all its achievements and all its imperfections because this is precisely the starting point from which we must make our contribution to the future.”

The challenge, according to Bergoglio, was individualism, which was described by his friend Alberto Methol Ferre as a “libertine, hedonistic, amoral, consumerist individualism that had not ethical or moral horizon.” The solution, according to Bergoglio, was to become a “citizen within a People.” “Citizen” is a logical category to us, whereas “people” is a mythical and historical category. “Being a people is to share life, values, history, customs, language, faith, and dreams,” he wrote. It is the citizen who seeks the common good, who works for justice, but justice “within a People.”

Bergoglio identified four principles necessary for an “integral citizenship.”

- 1) Time is primary and supersedes space.
- 2) Unity is primary and supersedes conflict.
- 3) Reality is primary and supersedes the “idea” or ideal.
- 4) The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

These principles are the tools necessary to address the three tensions within human society: the tension between plentitude (abundance) and limitation (scarcity); the tension between the idea and reality; and the tension between globalization and localization.

As citizens facing a national election, we must ask, what time is it? Perhaps it is time to take seriously the essential civic responsibilities of our country—the identification of common concerns, the civil debate on how to best address those concerns, and the civic humility to assess the strengths and limitations of any policy initiative. Perhaps it is time to nurture “integral citizenship” focused on the common good, one that is rooted in the real and not in ideology, either social or individual. Perhaps it is time for Catholics to transcend partisan politics, calling each party to their “better angels.”

This type of engagement will require advanced skills in conflict mediation, resolution, and reconciliation. The mythical eras of revolution, civil war, emancipation, military superiority, and civil rights need to give birth to a new age of encounter, dialogue, and collaboration. “We the People” can defy economics and the tragedy of the commons to advance the triumph of the common good by balancing the needs of the one with the needs of the many.

Missionaries can play a unique and vital role in promoting “integral citizenship.” Missionaries can give witness to the power and richness of diversity as well as the challenges and messiness of intercultural living. In worship, art, and ministry, missionaries can accompany women and men in their efforts to articulate the culture of a diverse yet unified “people.” Missionaries so often serve as teachers and healers. What would it be like if we caught introductory courses on civics, economics,

and law so everyone in this country would have a basic civic education? Imagine a collaborative effort among pastors, missionaries, universities, high schools, and elementary schools that offered, as a curriculum, integral citizenship to anyone who wanted it.

Having lived and worked among so many different peoples, missionaries know a lot about dialogue. Could the political discourse in America shift from partisan posturing to authentic dialogue? Given the disparities in wealth and income, what would it be like if the Church focused its efforts on economic, ecological, and racial equality? Finally, could the Church bring its faith, hope, charity, prayer, and energy to reconciliation within the United States of America? Could the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church serve the needs for unity in America?

Perhaps it is time for the church in the United States of America to take a much longer view of things, rather than focusing on the particulars of one political race or another, one election or the next. Perhaps the focus needs to be on the formation of an integral citizen capable of engaging others and of seeking dialogue and understanding on the real issues facing the commons, one who can do so with the belief that “we the people” is also a prayer, a dream, a possibility planted by God in the soul of America for the good of all.

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