

Called to Dismantle Polarization

by Marcus Mescher

“The spiritual stature of a person’s life is measured by love...Yet some believers think that it consists in the imposition of their own ideologies upon everyone else, in a violent defense of the truth, or in impressive demonstrations of strength. All of us, as believers, need to recognize that love takes first place: love must never be put at risk, and the greatest danger lies in failing to love (cf. 1 Cor 13:1-13).”

– Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 92.

Returning to our polarized camps would be easiest after the election. We might celebrate with others, rejoicing at the outcome or sharing relief that “our side won.” Alternatively, we might band together in commiseration with other folks, lamenting that our candidate lost or catastrophizing over the impending doom of what their opponent will accomplish while in office. Yet the temptation to surround ourselves with others who voted as we did or to scroll through newsfeeds compounding our elation or stoking the fires of our dread leaves us stuck in social distrust and division. In his appeal to advance compassion and kinship, Pope Francis confronts polarization as the result of manipulation and a failure to resist “the satisfaction of short-term partisan interests” and over-identifying with a political issue, candidate, or party.¹ We should be careful not to assign too much credit or blame to a person, group, or party and remain vigilant against attempts to distract us from the dignity of the human person and our shared commitment to the common good. Partisan loyalty or critique should not be strong enough to fracture the bonds we share as siblings in God’s family (Gal. 3:26-28).

For more than ten years, Pope Francis has championed building a “culture of encounter” as a central duty of Christian discipleship. We are called to encounter others because this is what Jesus did in his teaching and healing ministry—he encountered people with respect and tenderness, summoning them to join him as “builders of a new social bond” marked by inclusive solidarity.² We belong to each other as members of a covenanted people whose relationship with God is measured by how well we love one another, especially those whose dignity, rights, and participation in society are in jeopardy (Matt. 25:31-46).

The principles of Catholic Social Teaching remind us that human rights correspond to responsibilities to advance peace and justice. While we might think of peace as most needed in areas of intractable conflict or persistent violence, Pope Francis reminds us that every Christian has a vocation to live as “an artisan of peace, by uniting and not dividing, by extinguishing hatred and not holding on to it, by opening paths of dialogue and not by constructing new walls.”³ These days after the election are crucial for us to break through the echo chambers of shared emotional highs or lows, ideological convictions, and partisan messaging. To be an artisan of peace is to go beyond one’s comfort zone, reaching out of one’s typical geographical orbit and digital networks. It means drawing near others to listen and learn, looking for what we hold together in common. After all, St. Augustine reminds us that a virtuous community is not merely comprised of individuals who share common beliefs or interests but is in fact a diverse collection of individuals united by shared objects of love.⁴ Finding common ground in our

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shared loves—care for human life, for our local community, our region, state, or country, and the entire planetary community of God’s creation—is an essential first step toward the fullness of life that Jesus desires for all (John 10:10). Here are three ways we can put love in action to dismantle polarization in and around us:

- 1. Assess our interior life.** Given the rapid pace of our daily routine, the volume and velocity of content we are exposed to, especially via the screens that claim an increasing amount of our attention, makes it hard to escape a state of being rushed and stressed. When we are hurried, it is easier to make snap-judgments about others and be reactive to their behavior without being curious about their intentions, values, or circumstances. The Dutch clockmaker Corrie ten Boom opined, “If the devil can’t make you sin, he’ll make you busy.” In a state of hurry, connection languishes. It is easier to think that people who hold opposing positions are ignorant or uninformed. We might reduce complex issues to simplistic slogans or superficial solutions. Without thinking, we can normalize apathy or despair, or even worse, get swept along with a “relentless criticism of everything, a constant sowing of suspicion that results in distrust and confusion” where the “complaint that ‘everything is broken’ is answered by the claim that ‘it cannot be fixed,’ or ‘what can I do?’ This feeds into disillusionment and despair,” as Pope Francis warns.⁵ We must slow down to recognize that people can differ on specific policies while sharing similar values. We can ask ourselves what our thoughts or feelings have to teach us; for example, if we are anxious about having difficult conversations with others, it is likely an indicator of how much we care about the people who will be impacted. Suppose we react strongly to a particular candidate, group, or party. In that case, we should look for ways to “lower the temperature” to keep a healthy perspective about what is at stake and what is within or beyond our control. Whether the election has us feeling triumphant or despondent, we cannot let the results eclipse the unshakeable goodness of each person—regardless of how they voted—who is created in the “image and likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26). It is not possible to dismantle polarization in our communities unless and until we take steps to depolarize within ourselves.⁶
- 2. Encounter others with empathy.** Throughout the ongoing synod on synodality, Pope Francis has called on everyone to help build a “church that listens” in order to “leave no one out or behind.”⁷ He reminds us that listening is an act of love realized when we draw near others and “look at reality through their eyes, and listen with an open heart to the stories they tell.”⁸ When we make assumptions about others, judge or discredit them, and reject or trivialize their perspective, we reinforce the beliefs and assumptions that separate us. When we fail to practice empathy or seek to understand others, we fall short of the minimum standard for following the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Brené Brown contends that empathy requires more than “walking in someone else’s shoes.” She explains, “Rather than walking in your shoes, I need to learn how to listen to the story you tell about what it’s like in your shoes and believe you even when it doesn’t match my experiences.”⁹ This is related to respecting the freedom of conscience, a point of emphasis in Church teaching on the primacy of conscience.¹⁰ Conscience means “to know together,” indicating that we come to know what is right, true, good, and just through prayer (as a conversation with God), consulting Scripture and Tradition as sources of moral

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wisdom, and in dialogue with others. Encountering others ought to be undertaken in the spirit of humility, open to what we can learn from others whose perspective differs from our own, as well as Catholicity, a celebration of unity-in-diversity. St. Paul's advice to the earliest Christians seems particularly relevant for how we might begin to mend our fraying social fabric by adopting the "same attitude" as Jesus Christ by doing "nothing out of selfishness or vainglory; rather humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for one's own interests, but for those of others" (Phil. 2:3-5).

- 3. Cultivate more inclusive relationships.** Polarization is a symptom of homophily, a social tendency where people seek out and connect with those who are similar to themselves. Americans live in increasingly homogenous neighborhoods, and social media algorithms direct our gazes to content and contacts that reinforce our preferences while rarely challenging our worldview. These trends, along with the well-established prevalence of individualism in the United States, are serious obstacles to solidarity. In Catholic social teaching, solidarity is sometimes referred to as "social charity" or "social friendship."¹¹ This reminds us that solidarity is not a vague appeal to unity or sufficed by an individual attitude; it always takes root in a relationship. Solidarity is a moral measure to evaluate whether and how our relationships and institutions promote the intrinsically social nature of the human person, the equal dignity and rights of each human being, and a just social order.¹² Solidarity is the fruit of efforts dedicated to healing relationships damaged or broken by sin; it demands that we proactively address settings where people may question whether they are known, understood, valued, and included. Solidarity is accomplished when disciples carry out Christ's call to serve as ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Reconciliation is not only how we redress harm; it also means giving others the benefit of the doubt by presuming good intentions and offering generous interpretations of what they might say or do. Reconciliation starts with practicing authenticity and vulnerability to create the conditions for people to feel safe and modeling genuine concern for others to build trust. It requires courage to share life with others across differences—in beliefs and values, priorities and political affiliations—and build friendships that "open us to others who expand and enrich us."¹³ Practicing hospitality to make room for others and extend God's welcome by breaking bread together or sharing stories is a concrete way to resuscitate our fragile and fragmented social bonds ritually. As inherently social beings created in the Imago Dei, our deepest vocation is to receive and reflect the communion of love we see in the Trinity. In this way, our effort to forge friendships across differences is not just a way to deliver on the moral demands of solidarity but how we grow in social holiness.

Reflection Questions:

1. Reflecting on my thoughts and feelings as I process the election results, what do I want and need in this moment? If I feel victorious, how can I have a heart for those who may feel distraught? If I am tempted to despair, where can I look for what is good in and around me as inspiration to look forward with hope?
2. If I envision myself as an "artisan of peace," what natural gifts or talents do I bring to the dynamic process of helping others

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feel seen and heard, respected and invited? Who are the people most challenging for me to reach out and connect with—and why? What would it take for me to make myself available to them?

3. What steps can I take to break through my typical social networks, whether at work or school, at my parish or in my neighborhood, or my sources for news? What values, interests, or hobbies can I contribute to a club or group where I can build relationships outside my own socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, culture, age group, geographic region, or faith tradition? Who can I invite to join me in moving from Pope Francis' call to foster a "culture of encounter" toward a more inclusive "culture of belonging"?

Prayer:

Dear Jesus,

You prayed that we may be one (John 17:11).

We join you in making this our deepest desire.

We ask that you fill us with love,

so that we can see others as you see them: with pure delight and endless joy.

We ask that you fill us with courage and strength,

so that we can overcome temptations to fear, despair, or indifference

and vigorously respond to the call to be artisans of peace and ambassadors of reconciliation.

We ask that you keep us hungry for justice, peace, and solidarity

so that we will never tire of working for a world that delivers

on the dignity of each, the rights of all,

and our shared responsibilities to the global common good.

Amen.

About the Author:

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Endnotes:

1. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 232.

2. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 66.

3. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 284.

4. See, for example, Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.xxiv.

5. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 75.

6. Check out Braver Angels at <https://braverangels.org/> for programs in this vein.

7. Gerard O'Connell, "Pope Francis: Rigidity in the church 'is a sin against the patience of God'" *America* (20 September 2021), <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/09/20/pope-francis-synod-241467>.

8. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 261.

9. Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (Random House, 2021), 123.

10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1776-1778.

11. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 99, 106, 142, 180-182.

12. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, nos. 36-37.

13. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 89.