

# A NATION DIVIDED

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What happened in the presidential election is a mirror of our culture: politically and morally we are a divided people. This isn't good for anyone and it high time we started the mending process. One way to start is to examine the sociological principles that undergird Catholicism and then see what they have to offer the country at large.

Protestantism is rooted more in individualism than in community. For Catholicism, it's just the opposite. Both qualities are functional in a free society: the self-reliance that marks Protestantism is integral to our economic health; and the emphasis on community that marks Catholicism is integral to our cultural health. But if either is taken to extremes, liberty is destroyed. Let me say very clearly that we are not endangered by a hyperextension of community these days. And that is why the answer to our current woes is more likely to be found in the sociological underpinnings of Catholicism.

The way to check radical individualism is to establish procedures that make it easier to achieve a consensus. Politically, this means the worst way to solve the current crisis would be to abolish the Electoral College. Culturally, this means we must finally reject the rights-equals-liberty equation that has guided our vision of freedom for the past four decades.

The Electoral College allows for a consensus to be achieved much more easily than in a direct election. That is one reason why it was instituted. Secondly, it safeguards against the triumph of irrationalism that often emerges during times of depression or war; demagogues may win in a popular vote but can be defeated when the vote passes through the filter of the

Electoral College. And thirdly, without an Electoral College, small states would be ignored worse than they are now. But it is the first reason that is important to the point I am making here.

If the Electoral College were abolished on a Monday, dozens of political parties would be founded on Tuesday. There would be a party for every interest, ranging from senior citizens to environmentalists. In a multiparty system, if the winner emerges with, say, 27 percent of the vote, the nation would be all but paralyzed given that 73 percent voted against him. That is why we need the Electoral College—the unit rule of winner takes all makes it easier to forge a majority and thus a consensus.

In the culture, our biggest problem is that we have become so intoxicated with individual rights that we have forgotten that rights are not the end of liberty, but a means toward it. For example, take the First Amendment right of freedom of speech.

What the Framers of the Constitution meant by freedom of speech was the right to freely engage in political discourse. They did not mean the right to watch child pornography on the internet in a public library. Political discourse means the right of people to agree and disagree on how to make society better. It doesn't mean "freedom of expression."

A culture that cannot achieve a moral consensus is not going to make it. Remember, the word consensus does not mean unanimity—it means general agreement. We must finally get it through people's heads that they can't have it all. Living in society ultimately means that we as individuals must often bow to the greater needs of the common good.

That's why we have zoning ordinances: if you live in village X and the consensus of those who live in X say you cannot paint your house red, then you can't paint your house red. If it bothers you that much, then move. That's what pluralism is all

about. But what you don't have a right to do is to veto the moral consensus of X by brazenly asserting your individual rights.

If there is one vice standing in the way of a moral consensus in our society today it is the near celebration of narcissism. We have now raised two generations to believe that any infringement on their appetites is grossly unfair. Indeed, we have made such a fetish out of individual wants, desires and rights that we have become all but anesthetized to the interests of the public weal, never mind to the sufferings of others.

It is all fine and good to blame the popular culture for our condition. But the schools have let us down as well. Ask a student about his rights, and he can rattle them off by the dozen. Ask him about his responsibilities, and he is likely to look at you cross-eyed.

Catholicism's emphasis on community recalls us to our roots. We are, at bottom, social beings, not autonomous entities. Our nation would be well served if there were less chatter about rights and more talk about the common good. And there is no better time to start than Christmas, a season where giving is elevated above getting.

Merry Christmas to all!