

To Form a More Perfect Union. . .

Thanksgiving Day Reflections on Diversity, Tolerance and the role of Religion in Society

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Introduction

Good evening everyone, and Happy Thanksgiving. Let me begin by thanking the Winnetka Interfaith Council for the kind invitation to serve as the preacher for tonight's interreligious observance. I also want to thank Msgr. Robert Dempsey, the pastor of Saint Philip the Apostle Parish for hosting us. This national holiday has a religious quality which is different from our other national days. I'd assert that the difference lies in the Thanksgiving story, which is a narrative of welcome. I would also suggest that this narrative is an expression of American's unique spiritual sensibility. Thanksgiving highlights certain religious values which support our civic life.

In tonight's sermon, I want to reflect on what I see as the central religious values which constitute America's spiritual sensibilities as a way

to understand how our practice of religion in the public square helps shape a society which is both equal and free. I'm going to look at these through the lens of our hopes for the next generation of Americans. The values which I see as religion's unique contribution are respect for the dignity of the human person, tolerance, and human solidarity.

A Disclaimer

Before I say any more, I need to offer a disclaimer. I wrote this sermon on November 6, 2016. I travelled to Europe. What this means is that, except for this disclaimer, all my comments were written before the election. I'm going to begin with a campaign ad which raised many of the issues around values that I want to speak about. But, I do not intend to do a post-mortem of the election. I want instead to focus on the enduring values, supported by our different religious traditions, which contribute to the promotion of equality and freedom in this land. Since I am making the claim that the religions are particular sources for these civic virtues, I especially want to hold up religious freedom as necessary because of what the religions are capable of contributing to society. I will begin by telling you about the campaign ad which is my illustration for tonight's sermon.

What we can learn from a campaign

Throughout the campaign, I said that I was in favor of Zoe for president. Zoe is a one year old Hispanic girl, featured in a very clever ad for the YMCA. In the ad, she announced her candidacy for the 2064 election. I told people that pondering a Zoe candidacy now, (even though she is under the minimum age for assuming office) could provide an important reflection on the future of America.

In addition to being Vicar, I am the academic dean of a graduate school of theology. As such, I am interested in demographics at the local and macro levels. To give you an example, our student body of seminarians is forty percent foreign born. Demographic studies by our national accreditation agency tell us that in 2041, the population census of the United States of America will show that no single demographic group will constitute a majority within the population. Diversity will be the new norm. If no racial or ethnic group will constitute a majority then only pluralities will exist in our body politic. As I stand before you tonight, I feel confident that I can say that at the level of our civic consciousness, we are not ready for this.

Ready or not, Zoe is coming. Social scientists tell us this demographic shift is as certain as a baby's birth nine months after conception. And diversity is coming to Northeastern Illinois faster than anywhere else in the republic. Right now, the Chicago area is the most religiously diverse piece of ground in these United States. Only Toronto in Canada is similar. So, while the rest of America waits for 2041, we can expect a premature delivery of diversity here in Chicagoland. That's why

Zoe's candidacy expresses precisely the values I want to explore, values which deserve our thanksgiving to God. The ad shows a little person on the floor, under a red, white and blue blanket. She sits up, sticks her head out from under the blanket, and the announcer says:

This is Zoe. She's one, and she's running for president, potentially, in 2064. Because if she's kept safe and eats well. If she has the opportunity to learn and grow. If she has help getting ahead and is supported along the way, then, Zoe could be president, like her hero, Ababam Bincon.¹

¹ YMCA, "Zoe for President" www.zoeforpresident.net Retrieved November 6, 2016.

We then hear from the candidate, who manages to say “I Zoe” and to read a caption which concludes, “and I approved this ad.”

The logic of Zoe’s campaign reflects a deep respect for human dignity, present in the American civic conscience. What is central is that this respect is not a vague unfocused notion. No, it has specific contents which reveal a kind of social responsibility which can be described and measured. Being kept safe and eating well perhaps should remind us of what was most important that first Thanksgiving Day. Food, shelter, and safety remain the foundational elements of respect for human dignity. Being helped and supported along the way, express human solidarity. If we are committed to welcoming diversity into our identity as Americans, then that welcome must follow the example of the Indians in the Thanksgiving story, who helped provide food, shelter and safety to the settlers.

[The new idea of America](#)

Those settlers came to these shores for a variety of reasons. Among the most important reason was the intolerance they experienced in England because of their non-conformity in religious matters. Tolerance became

one of the central values of our body politic, and yet one which must be reinvented in each generation. We should not allow the myth of the first Thanksgiving to erase the reality. The first colonists, with the exception of William Penn and the Quakers, were not interested in tolerance or religious diversity. They were interested in having their own religion as the faith of the colony. As far as freedom for someone else's religion, they were not so much in favor of that. They expressed the old European approach that whoever is in power gets to define what is acceptable religion for everyone else. It is interesting that although this was the approach of the early colonists, gradually a new idea, uniquely American, developed. That idea was simply that equality did not lie in defining what everyone could do, but in the freedom of one person to do something different from another. Tolerance, as the American notion would develop, was not putting up with something you personally disagree with. No, it is the fundamental conviction that respect for individual human dignity requires respect for the person who may hold ideas and engage in practices which are different from our own and even abhorrent to us. Tolerance is for the person, even as we disagree with his or her ideas. That's why human solidarity is grounded in respect for persons, not agreement in

ideas. This seems to be a lesson we need to re-learn in each generation. This is why it is vital that each generation have the opportunity to learn how to exchange ideas in ways that are, to use Martin Krislov's words, "respectful, thoughtful, analytical and responsible." Education, in the home, at schools both public and private, and in through our guiding institutions is the principal venue for handing on the skills which make tolerance possible.

Obstacles

One of the main obstacles, as I see it, to progress toward such tolerance is the practice of demonizing a person who holds different ideas. Here I am reminded of what Ebo Patel calls "collecting scalps." Collecting scalps refers to the notion that if a person is not one hundred percent in sync with my views on public policy issues, then I have to "take them out." Not only that, I must further display my victory so that my fellow true believers will know my purity of heart. As an aside, Patel's insight proves that ideological orthodoxies have just as much of a tendency to run inquisitions as any religion. Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Corp,

names this attitude and practice of collecting scalps as the principal obstacle to real tolerance in America.

What is ironic is that this problem seems to be the result of the civil rights movement. Because the victories were earned in the courts and not the legislature, they came about without minds being changed through debate and compromise. The winner took all. The sad truth we have learned in the years after civil rights is that a change of law does not produce a change of heart. Therefore, our nation can both elect a Black president and still suffer from deep racism. I believe this means that the civil rights movement is far from over. While the change in law was necessary to establish justice, alone it has not succeeded in forming an attitude of equality. But just like the attitude of religious tolerance, which developed over time in the colonial period, we will need to journey together toward racial, ethnic and cultural tolerance. This will be critical for our civic unity. As a nation, we are best when we reach virtuous compromise, in other words, when everyone surrenders something of their ego for the greater good of the community.

Toward a more perfect union

If we hope to form a more perfect union during our journey towards 2041, we will need to experience a conversion of mind and will. Taking responsibility for the needs of others civilizes us. Therefore, for most people, marriage and family are the key shaping experiences which overcome individualism and cultivate in them a sense of what my tradition calls human solidarity. Family is the primordial society. Again, using some language from the Catholic tradition, we speak of marriage coming about through the “voluntary and complete surrender of two individual lives in the interest of a wider life they will have in common.” At the same time, we hold a notion of complementarity, whereby, the individual gives up nothing of his or her particularity but offers it for the completion of the other. Particularity is strengthened and fostered through relationship, by a mutual exchange of gifts.

This exchange of gifts forms a “more perfect union” which both strengthens the individual, while uniting him or her with others, ideally so that all are enriched, and none are compromised.

To clarify further, I want to mention the old idea of America being a melting pot. It was an image of cultural assimilation popular at the

beginning of the 20th centuries. Jews, Catholics and other immigrant groups embraced assimilation as a way of entering American society. In our own day, many are critical of assimilation approaches, in part because they are not effective at helping the new community contribute its religious and cultural heritage to the improvement of American culture. Instead, we experience a kind of watering down of values, with the accompanying social problems. What we are left with is law, which I have already described, can change behavior, but not minds and hearts.

In Chicagoland, however, we have, for the most part, always rejected this assimilation notion. A local philosopher (by which I mean a newspaper columnist whose name I have forgotten) once said, "America might be a melting pot, but in Chicago, we don't melt. We make stew. All the individual ethnic flavors are there, but together, they make something more. A melting pot just gives you steel. It's hard and cold. Stew gives you supper, and supper nourishes the family." That philosopher was anticipating the current culinary phase of "fusion" restaurants, which illustrate my point quite well. Fusion cuisine allows what is best on one culture to influence and change another.

While maintaining the food metaphor, I want to circle back to demographics. I am not able to guess who's coming to dinner in 2041. But I do know this, if we keep children safe, insure that they eat well. If we see that they have the opportunities to learn how to be respectful, thoughtful, analytical and responsible. If we support them emotionally, socially and spiritually and if, along the way, we learn to serve not only turkey but also fusion stew, Thanksgiving dinner in 2064, after Zoe's successful run for president, will go just fine.

Conclusion

I said at the beginning of this sermon that this national holiday has a religious quality which is different from all others. I asserted that its uniqueness has its origin in the experience of being received by this new land. I also made the claim that Thanksgiving Day expresses the best of what we might call the America's spiritual sensibilities.

While a complex reality, these American spiritual sensibilities are an expression of certain values which each religious community in our nation can recognize as identical to their own. They don't have to be converted to these values because they already hold them as part of their particular

faith. In my remarks, I have reflected on the central values carried by the different religions which make up the American mosaic and how three in particular can help to shape a society where particularity is not threatened by diversity, but rather supported by it. Neither equality nor freedom have a veto over one another. A more perfect union is established by supporting both at the same time.

What allows us to give thanks each year are the three fundamental values which I have named as respect for the dignity of the human person, tolerance and human solidarity. Respect for personal dignity, tolerance (the more difficult virtue of for ideas different from our own) and solidarity give the rationale for a more perfect union which leads to practices of social contribution. As we return to our own communities, to our religious congregations and our families, let us commit ourselves to making our best contributions to renewing our society in human dignity, tolerance and human solidarity. These values, and what they represent for the next generation, are our reasons for giving thanks.

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