

From Pews to Politics

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I admit that as one who does legislative advocacy, there are two words that bring a smile to my face—“sine die.” I imagine many others who work around the Capitol can relate. In fact, I think an audible exhale echoes throughout Helena when the session concludes.

That’s not to say I don’t enjoy the work and engaging in weighty matters with the diversity of Montanans represented in the legislative process. It’s fulfilling and a privilege to play a small part in this effort. But when the legislature adjourns I breathe a sigh of relief. I’ve run the race and crossed the finish line. I pray I’ve competed well.

But what does it mean as a representative of Montana’s Catholic bishops and legislative advocate to have “competed well?”

For Catholics, the obligation to engage in political life flows from our baptismal promises. In baptism we become a new creation and commit to follow Jesus Christ and be his faithful witnesses. Ours is a faith lived and breathed not only within church walls but out in the messiness of everyday life in a world aching for hope and purpose. The idea that a Christian can separate out his or her faith life from engagement in the secular world and prevent those two worlds from intersecting is absurd and conflicts with what we promise.

I firmly believe that a Catholic voice in policy discussions benefits the common good because the Catholic Church provides a unique perspective that can inform legislation.

Despite the dark stain of evil perpetuated by some in our church, it’s also true that one would be hard-pressed to name an institution that has done more to help the sick and the poor, uphold the dignity of the unborn and their mothers and provide welcome to immigrants and refugees. Consider Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, the Little Sisters of the Poor and countless others. This work “on the ground” informs our positions and provides an invaluable perspective for those entrusted with the difficult task of lawmaking.

Yet, our involvement in legislative advocacy does not come without criticism. Too many times have I heard, “The Church is imposing its beliefs on others.” I hear that the bishops are just mouthpieces for the Republican Party or really liberal Democrats at heart. I suspect that such erroneous accusations arise, in part, due to the dysfunctional hyper-politicized environment in which we live and a tragic ignorance of the church’s social teaching.

Rather than imposing our views, we aim to share our perspectives on issues, believing they are of value and ought to inform the choices made by policymakers. The decisions about crafting prudent policies are left in their hands.

Moreover, our positions on any number of social issues do not arise simply out of specifically “Catholic” doctrines but out of fundamental beliefs in what it means to be a human person and what that demands of us as we are called to live in solidarity. We understand certain moral truths to be natural, transcending religious, gender, ethnic and other divisions. This facilitates collaboration with persons across the political and religious spectrum. And while we have opponents in this process we do not have enemies.

Within the same day I might advocate for abolishing the death penalty, requiring abortionists to offer pregnant women the opportunity to view ultrasounds, codifying prohibitions on assisted suicide, and securing legal protection for Dreamers. It’s no wonder I often think, “I have the most interesting job in the world!”

But fruitful engagement in policy deliberations requires a commitment to dialogue. Saint Paul VI, in his encyclical “Ecclesiam Suam,” identified four characteristics of true dialogue—intelligibility, charity, confidence and deferential sensitivity. This encountering through dialogue is really a form of evangelization. Not to be confused with proselytizing, this sharing the “Good News” of Jesus Christ entails witnessing to the truth as we have come to know it, favoring invitation over invective.

In no place should politics be valued above all else—not in the Capitol, the White House, a governor’s office, a church or a family. Politics must always be at the service of persons who are the subject of laws.

Protecting human life and dignity, promoting social conditions that allow all persons to reach their potential, fostering the unity that arises from love of neighbor and allowing social functions to occur at the lowest level possible so that individuals and groups have a true sense of purpose—these are the principles that should guide the content and method of our legislating.

The Catholic Church imperfectly strives to speak this language into our legislative process. Some of our proposals are embraced while others are rejected. But if we faithfully enter into the process, accompany the great diversity of others and show forth the light of Jesus Christ as we do so, then the success of our labors is no longer in our hands and not defined by merely human expectations. That brings with it an eternal sigh of relief not even “sine die” can top.