

Heart ♥ to ♥ Heart



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As national and local elections near in the United States, and perhaps in other countries as well, the experience and effects of polarization can become more and more challenging. How might we, in the spirit of Jesus and of St. Angela, develop the skills and capacities we need to address these challenges, to dialogue with open hearts, and to move through these days with integrity and peace? This issue of Heart to Heart offers reflections on these challenges.



Sr. Mary Ann Dooling, OSU, reflects on the “Transforming Grace” initiative, sponsored by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which invites participants to take responsibility for the personal and collective responses we can make in the challenges we encounter during the national election period.

Members of most of the communities of women religious have responded to the challenge from the LCWR to confront the polarization so visible in our country today. The challenge was issued to all the members of the religious congregations and their associates and collaborators in ministry. The initiative is called “Transforming Grace.” Through prayer, reflections, practices, and input, participants are invited to seek ways of bridging the gap that exists in our social conversation. It challenges us to recognize and consider our own biases as well as those of others.

Last April, 250+ community leaders, justice promoters, and communicators gathered in Pittsburgh for a conference designed to help facilitate the work of “Transforming Grace.” Those attending were invited to consider how our roles help to form our responses to issues with which we are faced. There was an emphasis on the responsibility of each person to respond in openness, just as we would expect another to be open to our position.

One of the most impactful experiences was an exercise in responding to a critical event not as we might in our usual role, but in the shoes of a person in a different role. Thus, a justice promoter might be called to respond as a community leader, and leader might be asked to respond from the perspective of a communicator. The invitation was to view an incident from a perspective other than our own. The push/pull that took place was strong, even when there was



general agreement on an issue. If we had challenges, given this general agreement, how much more challenging is it to be in conversation with those with whom we have disagreement? The tendency to question the motives or understanding of those with whom we disagree comes so easily.

Many polls today indicate that there is far more agreement and commonality within the U.S. population than is generally reflected in our politics. When we begin a discussion with our differences and when we question the motives of others, there is little room for agreement, for achieving goals. One presenter at the conference reminded us of listening, of finding common ground, of considering the “why” before looking at the “who” and the “how.” It was a reminder of a book, *Start with Why*, and the importance of understanding the goals and principles underlying an issue.

The conference resulted in no grand solutions or roadmaps to success. Instead, participants shared ideas and support, and most came away with renewed energy to continue the task at hand of being people of joy and determination in our world.

LCWR continues to make “Transforming Grace” resources available. Each includes a Scripture passage or poem, a short YouTube video of practices that are helpful, music, and questions for reflection. These wonderful online resources are available to anyone who wishes to use them at the LCWR website: www.lcwr.org/transforming-grace.

The following reflections are excerpts from “A Spiritual Politics for Burnt-Out Christians” by Adam Russell Taylor. It is from a February 29, 2024 online reflection from *Sojourners Magazine*. The entire reflection is available at <https://sojo.net/articles/spiritual-politics-burnt-out-christians>.

“...As Christians, we tend to approach exhausting election years with two opposing, but equally unhelpful, theologies. On one side, paraphrasing the words of St. Teresa of Avila, is the idea that God has “no hands but ours.” While rooted in beloved passages of scripture like Matthew 25, which instruct us to care for others as we’d care for Jesus himself, when these Christian teachings are taken too far, we start to feel that the burden of solving all the world’s innumerable problems falls solely on us.

Even if we recognize (quite reasonably!) that none of us can individually solve massive societal problems like poverty, racism, or war, it starts to feel like there’s a never-ending list of ways we need to do more to be God’s agents in the world. As the news stories pile up — End climate change! Cease-fire now! Avert a government shutdown! Save our democracy! — the weight of it all becomes too much to bear. In the activist world, far too many friends and colleagues have suffered mental, physical, or spiritual burnout at the hands of this kind of pressure. The problem with this theology, even though well-intentioned, is that it can result in a savior complex and mislead us into relying on our own limited wisdom and strength rather than to constantly seek to tap into God’s unlimited wisdom and strength.

On the other end of the spectrum, I’ve seen Christians face exhaustion with the state of the world by disconnecting from politics altogether and turning inward. After all, if we believe God is in control and will make everything all right in the end, why worry about anything, including the state of our politics or grave injustice? This approach echoes the Essenes, a movement during the time of Jesus who sought to withdraw from society to focus on their more communal and pietistic life. In 2024, this might sound like Christians who say the church “shouldn’t be involved with politics” or that we just need to focus on soul care. Though these are tempting responses in a world where everything feels like it’s constantly on fire, the problem is that we end up becoming “so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good,” as the adage goes. We cannot ignore that our savior challenged many of the religious and imperial powers of his time, actions that ultimately led to his crucifixion for the crime of sedition. Taking up our cross and following Jesus often does require sacrifice and courage to get in the way of injustice....

For those of you who find yourselves utterly exhausted by the thought of another election year, I have three tips that have helped me combat burnout without disengaging from the world around me:

- **First, learn to recognize the warning signs and know when to pause and be still.** I have found great comfort in a simple but meaningful prayer that Fr. Richard Rohr teaches based on Psalm 46:10. You simply pray aloud the words, “Be still and know that I am God” and then take a deep breath and slowly exhale. Following the same pattern of speech and breath, you repeat the phrase, omitting another word which each repetition: “Be still and know,” “Be still,” and then finally “Be.” This prayer reminds me to be still and gives me space to remember that I am not God — nor should I try or need to be! There is a profound consolation in acknowledging that followed by reflecting more deeply on God’s attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and unconditional love.
- **Second, as we lean into caring for ourselves and those around us, identify a few constructive ways that you feel called to be involved with this fraught election season.** Once again, we aren’t called to do everything, but we are called to do *something*. This could include volunteering to be a poll worker (which are desperately needed across the country), engaging in a voter registration drive, serving as a poll chaplain on Election Day through “Faiths United to Save Democracy,” and so much more.
- **Finally, we must embrace Jesus’ command to love both our neighbors and our enemies, a commitment that has become increasingly countercultural.** This is especially important given how much vitriol and anger people are already feeling. As Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. preached, we must learn how to find the image of God even in our enemies, seeking “only to defeat evil systems.” We must be hard on evil systems, but we also show as much grace and empathy as possible toward people.” (Reprinted with permission from *Sojourners*, (800) 714-7474, www.sojo.net)

For Reflection

How does political fatigue evidence itself in your life? How are you called to move to action?

How can you build a bridge to unity and acceptance in the midst of differences and polarization?