



CIVILIZE IT



DIGNITY BEYOND THE DEBATE

The Word from Lansing:
This Election Season, “Civilize It”

By Paul A. Long
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Over 2.2 million Michiganders voted in the Presidential Primary Election in March. In the wake of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), daily routines have changed significantly, but the importance of making our voices heard remains critical. Throughout 2020, voters will have further opportunities to cast their ballots, including the upcoming May 5th Election in some areas of the state, the August 4th State Primary Election, and the November 3rd General Election.

Election season can be challenging. Increasingly, political conversations are marked by unkind words, distrust, and bitter division. Campaign ads are filled with personal attacks, rather than inspiring messages about a better future. In light of this division, avoiding people with different opinions to prevent arguments can sound appealing. The election is also playing out in a time of anxiety, fear, and frustration. Communities are struggling with the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. For the isolated or those trying to make ends meet, the election may be the furthest thought from their minds.

However, the choices made by elections matter. Those choices determine the officials who will make significant decisions for communities, impacting everything from the state of the roads to the vitality of schools, from the availability of grant funding for communities to the emergency response actions taken during disease outbreaks. Catholics can add a great deal to the election process: a concern for human dignity, a focus on values and issues over partisanship, a heart for the needs of the poor and the vulnerable, and desire to respond to all with love.

A person’s fellow community members matter too, whether or not they agree with his or her positions. Jesus did not interact solely with people of a similar perspective to him; he modeled the way for treating *all* with kindness and respect, even in the midst of suffering. Today’s Catholics, too, have the opportunity to follow His example.

During the 2020 election, the U.S. Catholic bishops have called for people of faith to model compassion in an intentional way through the nonpartisan “Civilize It” campaign. The campaign urges Catholics to pledge “to promote civility, love our neighbors, and build community,” recognizing that all are children of God. Communities benefit greatly when their members seek “to dismantle stereotypes and to build productive conversation” instead of to divide or attack (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*).

The “Civilize It” pledge is simple, with three main elements:

1. *Civility: to recognize the human dignity of those with whom I disagree, treat others with respect, and rise above attacks when directed at me.*
2. *Clarity: to root my political viewpoints in the Gospel and a well-formed conscience, which involves prayer, conversation, study and listening. I will stand up for my convictions and speak out when I witness language that disparages others’ dignity, while also listening and seeking to understand others’ experiences.*
3. *Compassion: to encounter others with a tone and posture which affirms that I honor the dignity of others and invites others to do the same. I will presume others’ best intentions and listen to their stories with empathy. I will strive to understand before seeking to be understood.*

This pledge does not direct people to be silent about the issues that matter; instead, it reminds Catholics how to act when discussing those issues. The “Civilize It” campaign sends a signal that honest debate, sincere reflection, and kindness in the face of differences are valuable traits.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reemphasized the importance of civility. Michiganders have seen how support can lessen feelings of isolation in spite of physical distance. They have seen how the tireless efforts of health care professionals, the food service industry, and so many across various sectors have allowed communities to continue receiving the things they need. Finally, Michiganders have seen the benefit of actions that put others before themselves. These actions, such as social distancing, have saved lives.

Let’s continue to build on these moments of civility, taking the time to improve this Election and public conversations in the months to come. I’ve signed the pledge- and others can too. Visit www.CivilizeIt.org to do so today.

The Word from Lansing is a regular column for Catholic news outlets and is written by Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) President and CEO Paul A. Long. Michigan Catholic Conference is the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in this state.