

**January 14, 2024**

**Dear Friends,**



**God's blessings for the coming New Year!** The great season of Advent-Christmas is now completed, and we begin again the Ordinary Season of the Year as we try to live out our faith. The main Scriptural focus is centered this liturgical year on Mark's Gospel – interspersed with many selections from John's Gospel. I hope that the holy days and holidays were good for you and yours. It does seem to go by rather quickly! Once again, many thanks for your constant support of the community here at St. Angels Merici in so many ways – in ministry, prayer, welcoming of others, generosity in time and treasure, and in the many myriad ways in which we grow as a community of faith now in our second century of grace.

**So what about A.D. 2024?** I don't know about you, but the revved up news re politics and elections is amazing to witness. Voting, primaries, caucuses, candidates, etc. seem to fill up so much of the news 24/7. I don't think it's wise for clergy to take sides politically; but nonetheless we are all citizens and voters, and that doesn't mean that we cannot offer some spiritual guidance for one another to the whole process of supporting our freedoms and the understanding of democracy and living in civil community as citizens together.



**Eschewing and shunning partisan politics is the better path in ministry to all the people.** Better a reminder about the gifts of freedom and faith in our country as we follow the leadership of our bishops. Pope Francis has said that democracy demands hard work and patience. Like voting, this is a responsibility. It is also very complex. Let's think: Authoritarianism can be dangerously peremptory and dictatorial – sometimes tyrannical – and populism can at times simply offer 'easy answers' to complex more intricate questions. These are challenging times, so here are some thoughts I read recently from a Jesuit priest whose advice on a spiritual support for the coming year may help us to pray about our political lives as the new year unfolds – no matter what our political affiliations may be. The writer is Jesuit Bill McCormick, S.J., who is a contributing editor at *America Magazine*, chief mission officer at St. John's College in Belize City, and a research fellow in the Department of Political Science at Saint Louis University, in Missouri. Here are some of his thoughts that may be spiritually enriching in times of thorny issues and within the melee and confusion of commercials and variant diverse news reports:



**How to prepare for next year's elections? Here are 3 tips to keep you spiritually sane.**

**The next U.S. general election is on Nov. 5, 2024.** That is about one year from now. What are we doing to prepare for it? Here is my guess: You don't want to tune in, but you

will, and you will do so in ways that unwittingly reinforce your desire to avoid politics. But how can you hope to be a good citizen that way?

**Many Americans are trying to avoid thinking about the election this far out.** But between now and next November there will be a parade of debates, town halls, interviews, negative ads, caucuses and primaries, and possibly a few October surprises. Most of us are not looking forward to that. Indeed, many of us are disillusioned by U.S. politics, or exhausted into apathy. It is not just that we find the campaigns distasteful or depressing; we may not think we have a meaningful voice in the process. Besides, most of us already know how we are going to vote, even if we are not happy about it.

**And yet, we will get sucked in.** We will enjoy it when a candidate we don't like falls into scandal. We will watch viral sound bites that simultaneously enrage and delight us. We will read a social media post and, worse, the comments, and then get into a pointless online fight with a stranger. We will catch disturbing headlines that compel us to dive deeper into an article before we decide we don't want to know any more. Our conscience will push us to engage for a moment, only to be discouraged again.

**Having gone down the rabbit hole (sewer drain?) of U.S. politics, we may emerge no wiser but more frustrated, determined to leave all of it behind.** Then we will repeat the cycle. But does anything else in your life benefit from the boom-and-bust cycle that characterizes our political attention? Dieting? Exercising? Cleaning?



**Citizenship calls for discipline,** or the training of our hearts and minds on what merits our attention, rather than on all things that distract us. Instead of oscillating between apathy and engrossment, what if we learned to follow political life in a sustained and sustainable way? If we elevated the campaign season into a period of discernment and encounter?

**My suggestion: Take the next few months as an experiment.** Pay attention to the campaigns, but decide how much attention you are going to pay, and stick to it. Escape the cycle of engagement and disillusionment. You will find that the discipline satisfies something human in you. Here are some steps on how to do it.

**Read something about U.S. politics.** And I really do mean read. It does not have to be directly about the election. You might read the U.S. Constitution, or Pope Francis' "Laudato Si'," or "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Perhaps there is an article or book you have been meaning to read on race, fiscal policy or American history. Now is a good time to do it. (If you want to get meta, read something about leisure and the need to think. Alan Jacobs' *How to Think* and Josef Pieper's *Leisure the Basis of Culture* are classics.)

**Talk to someone about it.** This is a reality check: Did you fully understand what you read? Either way, you may find this an opportunity to connect with someone whom you respect or admire, whether in person or by sending a letter to an author. This step helps

you to make the move from ideas to persons. Come to grips with what is at stake and why someone would care, especially someone who thinks and lives differently from you.

**Sit and think about it.** This is the hardest part. Don't run away from the thoughts, however unpleasant they are. Create a space where these ideas can come into conversation with your experiences, where the opinions of those you admire can challenge you, or where some of the implications of those ideas for your life can come out. In the best-case scenario, you will discover some questions you want to pursue, or people you want to explore more of the topic with.



**So read something, talk to someone about it, and sit and think about it.** Do this weekly. As with physical exercise, the goal is to establish a routine. I promise: Engaging political life in a disciplined, sustained way will be more fruitful than an on-again, off-again attitude, and it will feel better. Then, when you do think about politics, you will be guided increasingly by a desire to learn more and to interact better with other people, rather than by more common motives of anger, envy or sloth.

**These steps are also of value to people who like to stay “plugged in.”** Again, read about something new, and talk to someone you don't normally talk to. Try to establish the kind of solidarity with people different from you that allows you to see the world a bit differently. Exercising virtuous citizenship is challenging even under the best circumstances. But like so much else in life, it helps to see it as a series of manageable tasks. So I urge you: read something, talk to someone about it, then sit and think about it. Then do that again. You have a whole year to try it!



**Is politics bad? It depends on your view of human nature.**

**Is politics bad?** The headlines certainly suggest so. Violence in Gaza. The threat of civil war in Ethiopia. Paralysis in the face of deteriorating climate change. Infighting in both major U.S. political parties. Rising antisemitism and Islamophobia throughout the West. Anger, resentment, division and exhausted disaffection.

**This tableau of suffering and violence can tempt us to wash our hands and escape politics into something more pleasant.** But it might turn out that what brings out the worst in us is supposed to bring out the best in us.

**What is to be done about these ills?** There are individual solutions to these individual problems, of course, but many thinkers suggest we take a step back and consider the big picture — by, for instance, retooling democracy or solving economic inequality. While they are not without merit, it is curious how often such grand reforms steer politics away from humans and toward something else. Centering our political analysis on the human person matters if we are going to consider a more fundamental question: Is politics necessarily bad?

**Are humans evil?** Differing conceptions of politics imply different anthropologies. That is, many ways of thinking about politics are traceable to how we think about humans. If you think humans are fundamentally good, you might be inclined to think that the right institutions, cultures and practices can lead them to robust peace. You might also think that politics can always get better in the direction of those ideal aspirations. So when politics goes wrong, there is something getting in the way of its healthy state. We need to identify that obstacle and correct for it.



**But if you think humans are fundamentally flawed**, you might think that only the most orderly political system would hold them in check. Perhaps you also have low expectations for how competently or virtuously government can be run. You may feel it is more important for a society to have a modicum of authority than chimerical (fantasy) justice. If politics goes awry, according to this view, that is to be expected. The real question is whether we are able to limit our worst vices, or perhaps channel them.

**But isn't it more complicated?** Isn't it possible that humans are a mix of good and evil? This is undoubtedly true. And this conclusion presents us with two puzzles. First, how is it that humans are such a "tangled weave," as Shakespeare wrote? And given such conditions, how can our politics bring out the best of us rather than the worst?



**One of the best descriptions of the divided human heart I have read comes from Alan Jacobs in his brilliant book *How to Think*.** I have taught with it a few times, and my students love it.

**One of Jacobs's critical insights:** We do not think for ourselves. Humans are social animals, and so we are social thinkers. We are highly influenced by the groups we belong to, and they tell us what to think — or rather, they short-circuit our own thinking in favor of adopting thoughts that the group holds. We think with our in-group not only to save mental energy but also to avoid the risk of social isolation. If we are not "in" with our group, where does that leave us?

**According to Jacobs, politics allows us to connect with others in ways that help us to become fuller versions of ourselves**, but it also leads us to treat other people with contempt. Humans are built for happiness, but there is something else that comes out to play, and especially in politics.



**Thinkers from time out of mind have recognized this tension:** Politics can bring out the best and the worst of humans. This is where the Fall (Adam and Eve), which has been called Christianity's most empirically verifiable teaching, comes in. In the theological anthropology conceived by classical Christianity, humans are created as good but fallen. Christianity thus chastens those who would perfect politics through technical solutions as

well as those who would abandon political life as the irredeemable domain of sin — the “Devil’s playground,” as Jacques Maritain playfully referred to it.

**If you agree that humans are not simply good or bad**, you might still be confused about the second puzzle: Given that insight, how can our politics bring out the best of us rather than the worst?

**How do we live politically after the Fall?** In other words, what do we expect from politics? What should we expect from it?



**Following biblical wisdom, we might put it this way:** Political life ought to have lofty goals, and yet we should temper our expectations for the attainment of those goals. To put it in terms of the German political philosopher Leo Strauss, we could set low goals with high expectations, but that would seem to miss what is great in humans. We could also set high goals and high expectations, but that would seem to be almost inhuman in its demands.

**This is perhaps the best insight from the tradition of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle:** Humans are special, and their happiness is something exalted, yet they are seemingly hampered in the exercise of their reason toward that happiness. We might say that biblical wisdom, at the risk of abstraction, reveals both the nature of human happiness (which is to say friendship with God) and the considerable obstacles to its attainment, the flaws in our reason and will.

**It is nearly impossible to hold these two ideas in tension, much less to live out that tension.** Yet that tension is one of the greatest gifts the Gospel gives the human family. Two things can both be true: When politics goes wrong, that is to be expected, but we can still take action toward a healthy politics. We should pursue virtuous politics, but we should do so humbly, mindful that we are creatures, not the creator.

**Thus, we return to a central challenge of Christianity:** attention to what matters most: seeking first the kingdom of God, keeping the end before us always, and recognizing our principle and foundation.

**So here we are as the new leap year progresses.** Let’s see what this week’s Scripture passages offer us:

## **SECOND SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME— Cycle B**



**COME AND SEE** Texts: 1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19; John 1:35-42

**Ten months from now, our country will elect the person the President of the United States.** Fasten your pew belts, these next months will be filled with rhetoric, sound

bites, debates, and an almost endless stream of advertisements and phone texts. Meanwhile, our economy continues to struggle, our citizens rightly question the role of government, our place in the world of nations, and our highest and most noble values.

**How like God, in a moment of national transition,** to have ordered the lessons we have heard today from God's Word? Though we listen and hear the Word of God each time we gather for worship, perhaps we have known no more important moment than now to hear these texts and to live into them with great courage and faith.

**Sometime in the early years of the 11th century BC,** when the children of Israel had occupied modern day Israel but had not yet become a nation, God came to a boy who lived in the shadow of a wise and trusted mentor. The old man's name was Eli; the boy, Samuel. Eli was, in his day, the towering prophet and sage of Israel. He was revered by the people, even though his own sons were lecherous rascals.



**And so it was, in God's loving providence,** that the boy Samuel came to live with the old prophet Eli in a time of national uncertainty much like our own. Like today, the lesson tells us "visions were rare in those days." In other words, an awareness of purpose, identity, and mission were in short supply among God's people. It was a day when seemingly no one knew the right way forward.

**One night, as Samuel lay sleeping, a voice awakened him,** calling his name: "Samuel, Samuel." Startled, he ran to the old man, thinking Eli had called him in the night. "No," said the prophet, "I didn't call you. Go back to sleep." Samuel fell back asleep only to be awakened again by the calling of his name. He again ran to Eli who again said, "God back to sleep." When he did, the voice called him a third time. When he reported this to wise Eli, the old man "perceived that the Lord was calling the boy." He told his young friend, "If he calls another time you say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

**Sure enough, the voice summoned the boy a fourth time.** Samuel, whose Hebrew name means "listening," did as he was told, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." God spoke to the boy and told him that God was going to use him to bring about a new day in Israel. Samuel, the boy, "grew up," and "the Lord was with him." Samuel became the great prophet of Israel who one day would anoint David to be king.



**Let's go another way.** From John's Gospel, we learn that John the Baptist gives his blessing to our Lord by telling two of John's disciples that Jesus is "the Lamb of God." They follow our Lord. When Jesus sees them, he asks, "What are you looking for?" And they respond, "Rabbi" or "Teacher." "Where are you staying," these two asked Jesus. "Come and see," he said. And they did. And Andrew found Peter, brought him to Jesus, and thus began our Lord's public ministry.

**What are these two, seemingly unrelated stories telling us about this critical, pivotal moment in our lives and the life of our beloved country?** At the very least, these stories remind us that no matter how pathetic human history may get, nor how confusing life can become, God is always calling us to “come and see.”



**The story of Samuel reminds us that within our being, in the secret and private parts of our lives, there is a child God is calling to high and holy purpose.**

The story of those first disciples peels back the curtain of time and shows us that God still asks, “What are you looking for?” What, God asks, is it that we most want? If we are honest, if we would dare awaken the child within, we would say, “Teacher.” We are looking for someone who will teach us how to navigate the menacing, confusing, troubling times of life.

**And what does God say? God stills says, “Come and see.”** Come and see that though our President needs and deserves our prayers, only God can meet the deepest needs of our lives. Come and see that when we lie down to sleep in troubling, uncertain times, God still calls us, bidding us to listen and obey God’s word and way. Come and see that the great longings of our lives will not be met by a new President, a new program, or a new policy. God alone must be our strength and great hope.

**Here, as we begin another year of decision for the future of America,** we who follow our Lord Jesus Christ would be wise to entrust our present and our future to God's good and faithful hands. He calls in the deep of the night and the glory of the day, “Come and see.”



**Now back to my promise from some weeks ago to look again at the Holy Father’s APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE – Rejoice and Be Glad. On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World.** And let’s keep this in mind as we celebrate our parish patron this month on January 27<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of Saint Angela Merici. Now to the Holy Father’s thoughts on holiness of life:

**The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative.** The Fathers of the Church, even before Saint Augustine, clearly expressed this fundamental belief. Saint John Chrysostom said that God pours into us the very source of all his gifts even before we enter into battle. Saint Basil the Great remarked that the faithful glory in God alone, for “they realize that they lack true justice and are justified only through faith in Christ”. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also reminds us that the gift of grace “surpasses the power of human intellect and will” and that “with regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of human beings. Between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality”. His friendship infinitely transcends us; we cannot buy it with our works, it can only be a gift born of his loving initiative. This invites us to live in joyful gratitude for this completely unmerited gift, since “after one has grace, the grace already possessed cannot come under merit”. The saints avoided putting trust in their own works.



**This is one of the great convictions that the Church has come firmly to hold.** It is so clearly expressed in the word of God that there can be no question of it. Like the supreme commandment of love, this truth should affect the way we live, for it flows from the heart of the Gospel and demands that we not only accept it intellectually but also make it a source of contagious joy. Yet we cannot celebrate this free gift of the Lord's friendship unless we realize that our earthly life and our natural abilities are his gift. We need "to acknowledge jubilantly that our life is essentially a gift, and recognize that our freedom is a grace. This is not easy today, in a world that thinks it can keep something for itself, the fruits of its own creativity or freedom".



**Only on the basis of God's gift, freely accepted and humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in our progressive transformation.** We must first belong to God, offering ourselves to him who was there first, and entrusting to him our abilities, our efforts, our struggle against evil and our creativity, so that his free gift may grow and develop within us: "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1). For that matter, the Church has always taught that charity alone makes growth in the life of grace possible, for "if I do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2).

**Still, some Christians insist on taking another path, that of justification by their own efforts, the worship of the human will and their own abilities.** The result is a self-centered and elitist complacency, bereft of true love. This finds expression in a variety of apparently unconnected ways of thinking and acting: an obsession with the law, an absorption with social and political advantages, a punctilious concern for the Church's liturgy, doctrine and prestige, a vanity about the ability to manage practical matters, and an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfilment. Some Christians spend their time and energy on these things, rather than letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love, rather than being passionate about communicating the beauty and the joy of the Gospel and seeking out the lost among the immense crowds that thirst for Christ.

**Not infrequently, contrary to the promptings of the Spirit, the life of the Church can become a museum piece or the possession of a select few.** This can occur when some groups of Christians give excessive importance to certain rules, customs or ways of acting. The Gospel then tends to be reduced and constricted, deprived of its simplicity, allure and savor. This may well be a subtle form of pelagianism, for it appears to subject the life of grace to certain human structures. It can affect groups, movements and communities, and it explains why so often they begin with an intense life in the Spirit, only to end up fossilized... or corrupt.



**Once we believe that everything depends on human effort as channeled by ecclesial rules and structures, we unconsciously complicate the Gospel** and become



enslaved to a blueprint that leaves few openings for the working of grace. Saint Thomas Aquinas reminded us that the precepts added to the Gospel by the Church should be imposed with moderation "lest the conduct of the faithful become burdensome", for then our religion would become a form of servitude.

**To avoid this, we do well to keep reminding ourselves that there is a hierarchy of virtues that bids us seek what is essential.** The primacy belongs to the theological virtues, which have God as their object and motive. At the center is charity. Saint Paul says that what truly counts is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). We are called to make every effort to preserve charity: "The one who loves another has fulfilled the law... for love is the fulfilment of the law" (Rom 13:8.10). "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14).

**May the Lord set the Church free from these new forms of gnosticism and pelagianism that weigh her down and block her progress along the path to holiness!** These aberrations take various shapes, according to the temperament and character of each person. So I encourage everyone to reflect and discern before God whether they may be present in their lives.



### **CHAPTER THREE: IN THE LIGHT OF THE MASTER**

**63. There can be any number of theories about what constitutes holiness, with various explanations and distinctions.** Such reflection may be useful, but nothing is more enlightening than turning to Jesus' words and seeing his way of teaching the truth. Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23). The Beatitudes are like a Christian's identity card. So if anyone asks: "What must one do to be a good Christian?", the answer is clear. We have to do, each in our own way, what Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount.[66] In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives.

**64. The word "happy" or "blessed" thus becomes a synonym for "holy".** It expresses the fact that those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness.



### **GOING AGAINST THE FLOW**

**65. Although Jesus' words may strike us as poetic, they clearly run counter to the way things are usually done in our world.** Even if we find Jesus' message attractive, the world pushes us towards another way of living. The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. We can only practice them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride.

**66. Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves.** Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word. We turn now to the individual Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. Mt 5:3-12).



**"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"**

**67. The Gospel invites us to peer into the depths of our heart, to see where we find our security in life.** Usually the rich feel secure in their wealth, and think that, if that wealth is threatened, the whole meaning of their earthly life can collapse. Jesus himself tells us this in the parable of the rich fool: he speaks of a man who was sure of himself, yet foolish, for it did not dawn on him that he might die that very day (cf. Lk 12:16-21).

**68. Wealth ensures nothing.** Indeed, once we think we are rich, we can become so self-satisfied that we leave no room for God's word, for the love of our brothers and sisters, or for the enjoyment of the most important things in life. In this way, we miss out on the greatest treasure of all. That is why Jesus calls blessed those who are poor in spirit, those who have a poor heart, for there the Lord can enter with his perennial newness.



**69. This spiritual poverty is closely linked to what Saint Ignatius of Loyola calls "holy indifference", which brings us to a radiant interior freedom:** "We need to train ourselves to be indifferent in our attitude to all created things, in all that is permitted to our free will and not forbidden; so that on our part, we do not set our hearts on good health rather than bad, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all the rest".

**70. Luke does not speak of poverty "of spirit" but simply of those who are "poor"** (cf. Lk 6:20). In this way, he too invites us to live a plain and austere life. He calls us to share in the life of those most in need, the life lived by the Apostles, and ultimately to configure ourselves to Jesus who, though rich, "made himself poor" (2 Cor 8:9). Being poor of heart: that is holiness.



**"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"**

**71. These are strong words in a world that from the beginning has been a place of conflict, disputes and enmity on all sides,** where we constantly pigeonhole others on the basis of their ideas, their customs and even their way of speaking or dressing. Ultimately, it is the reign of pride and vanity, where each person thinks he or she has the right to dominate others. Nonetheless, impossible as it may seem, Jesus proposes a different way of doing things: the way of meekness. This is what we see him doing with his disciples. It is what we contemplate on his entrance to Jerusalem: "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey" (Mt 21:5; Zech 9:9).

**72. Christ says: “Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls”** (Mt 11:29). If we are constantly upset and impatient with others, we will end up drained and weary. But if we regard the faults and limitations of others with tenderness and meekness, without an air of superiority, we can actually help them and stop wasting our energy on useless complaining. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux tells us that “perfect charity consists in putting up with others’ mistakes, and not being scandalized by their faults”.



**73. Paul speaks of meekness as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit** (cf. Gal 5:23). He suggests that, if a wrongful action of one of our brothers or sisters troubles us, we should try to correct them, but “with a spirit of meekness”, since “you too could be tempted” (Gal 6:1). Even when we defend our faith and convictions, we are to do so “with meekness” (cf. 1 Pet 3:16). Our enemies too are to be treated “with meekness” (2 Tim 2:25). In the Church we have often erred by not embracing this demand of God’s word.

**74. Meekness is yet another expression of the interior poverty of those who put their trust in God alone.** Indeed, in the Bible the same word – *anawim* – usually refers both to the poor and to the meek. Someone might object: “If I am that meek, they will think that I am an idiot, a fool or a weakling”. At times they may, but so be it. It is always better to be meek, for then our deepest desires will be fulfilled. The meek “shall inherit the earth”, for they will see God’s promises accomplished in their lives. In every situation, the meek put their hope in the Lord, and those who hope for him shall possess the land... and enjoy the fullness of peace (cf. Ps 37:9.11). For his part, the Lord trusts in them: “This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word” (Is 66:2). Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness.



**Thank you, Holy Father! We pray for you each day and at each Eucharist!**  
**Oremus pro invicem. Soli Deo Gloria.**

Fr. Michael J. Lanning, Pastor #8