

Beginning last weekend, continuing today and for the next three weekends, our second reading is from the New Testament writer who calls himself James. Written near the end of the first century of the Christian era, the letter addresses “social issues” affecting the early church. James addresses the connection between faith and its outward expression. James states that it is not a question of either/or but both/and. “Indeed someone might say,” James states, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works” (Js. 2:18). The question did not end in James’ day. At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century there were strong advocates to have the Letter of James expunged from the Bible because of his insistence on “works” as being a natural expression of faith. Some still today are very uncomfortable with James’ social applications.

How do James’ words translate into the relationship between the “State and the Church”? In an address to a group of bishops from our country this past January Pope Benedict stated: “*The Church’s witness, then, is of its nature public: she seeks to convince by proposing rational arguments in the public square. The legitimate separation of Church and State cannot be taken to mean that the Church must be silent on certain issues, nor that the State may choose not to engage, or be engaged by, the voices of committed believers in determining the values which will shape the future.*” (January 19, 2012).

Politics, by definition, is the way society chooses to organize its governance. An essential element of politics is the values that underlie its organization. The Bible and the church, have a political dimension. Jesus not only proclaims that the Kingdom of God is first found in the heart of the believer, he then goes on to state that this Kingdom present within is publicly manifested in the words and actions of the one who has accepted it. Jesus’ own life demonstrates this fact. The prophet Isaiah’s vision of a time of healing (eyes of the blind opened, ears of the deaf cleared) is a vision of a renewed society. Jesus’ act of curing the deaf man in the gospel proclaims and demonstrates that the Kingdom of God, this new politic, has arrived. This miracle, like all of Jesus’ miracles, is a political action. The Beatitudes, the Corporal Works of Mercy from chapter 25 of St. Matthew’s gospel (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked,

caring for the sick, etc.) all are public actions springing from eternal, divine given practical expression in the hope that such values will, in turn, influence the values and lifestyles of the wider world.

While the Church is called to proclaim and demonstrate the values of the Kingdom in its own organization and lifestyle, the Church as an institution is **not** called or organized to assume the prerogatives of the organization and civil governance of society, or in the context of our system of government in this country, to be engaged in partisan politics. Church teaching is that civil governance belongs to the lay members of society. This is their particular call and duty. The Church is neither Democrat nor Republican. As Pope Benedict XVI states, the Church's role is to serve as a guide, as a 'conscience' in helping governments, its leaders, and in our system we who elect them, in the establishment and enactment of law. To this end the Bishops in 2007 issued the document *"Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship"*. This document was reissued in 2011 with a revised introductory note. The document **IS NOT A VOTER'S GUIDE**. It is a teaching document with the purpose of **HELPING US TO FORM OUR CONSCIENCE** in making an informed decision in terms of voting. This weekend's bulletin contains a summary of the Bishop's document. I urge you to read it and reflect on it as we evaluate the choices before us. Along with offering teaching on how to form conscience the document reiterates several core human life issues to which we must bring conscience to bear in regard to the sanctity and dignity of human life that the bishops in union with the Pope see as fundamental in terms of societal organization and governance.

The Second Vatican Council, reiterating long-standing Church teaching, states that human conscience is inviolable. It is the voice of God echoing in the deepest part of our being. However, we have the obligation to rightly form our conscience. We cannot let public opinion, party loyalty, media advertising—some even claiming to represent the Church—much less feelings, determine our conscience. Conscience formation is hard work. It is to this work that our Bishops and the Holy Father invite us. We make our prayer that of today's gospel: "Ephphata! Open our ears, heart and soul Lord to understand and do your will."