

Seeking the word of God for us

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

Although George Washington could not have wanted for more able advisers to sit on his first cabinet, he was greatly disturbed by the outright antagonism that developed between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

A consultation with the cabinet on any subject quickly devolved into an argument of principle between the two, an argument continued later in "unkind whispers and insinuations" that one or the other was fostering ideas which would "undermine and demolish the Republic."

Before taking office, Washington had begged the American people to forget their own "prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and in some instances, to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the community." (D. Freeman, *Washington*, p.503). He could never understand how some allowed personalities, principles or politics to get in the common good's way.

One of the biggest challenges the Synod faces as a consultative process is how to encourage Catholics to express their opinions about how best to carry on the church's mission without the process degenerating into attacks on those who hold different views. Of necessity our opinions are diverse because the issues we face are complex and by temperament and background we are a very diverse people.



Theologian Avery Dulles, SJ, in the most recent issue of *Louvain Studies*, suggests that U.S. Roman Catholics could be divided into four groups according to their views of the American culture.

The first group he labels traditionalists: Catholics who find the prevailing culture so hostile to the faith they seek to minimize its influence. "They seek to preserve at least some zones, such as the family, the neighborhood, the parish and the church-related school, as environments favorable to the transmission of Catholic faith and morals ..." (103)

Neoconservatives are those who find much in our culture to praise, particularly its development of democratic capitalism and its insistence on inalienable human rights. Rather than retreating from the American culture's misdirected parts, these Catholics

want the church to exercise greater influence on the culture — especially since Catholics now constitute more than one quarter of the nation's population.

A third group, liberal Catholics, feel that the freedom found in American culture should find a more welcome home in the church. Without medieval authoritarianism, "dioceses would be governed, at least in some measure, by elected pastoral councils. Throughout the Church there would be subsidiarity, decentralization, and separation of powers. Catholics would be free to dissent selectively from official Church teaching ..." (105)

Father Dulles calls the last group radicals. Marked by a total commitment to the Gospel, voluntary poverty and non-violence, this group comprises Catholics who are highly critical of American society. While serving the poor and the homeless, they are critical of the economic system that made them so, of the consumer culture that seeks its own comfort while exploiting the poor and powerless.

The difficulty with these divisions, of course, is that they are too simplistic and too arbitrary. In fact, to some extent I find myself in all four of these categories while at the same time strongly opposing elements in each one of them. Nonetheless, this schema is useful in helping us to understand American Catholicism's multiple faces.

However, just knowing that this legitimate diversity exists is not enough. The problem for our Synod remains how to respect this diversity while trying to come to some consen-

sus as a local church about how to carry out the church's mission.

It seems to me that consensus is only built by listening and learning from each other. To do so we need to acknowledge that each point of view has something valuable to add to the discussion. But it also requires that we acknowledge that each point of view has weaknesses and limitations. The traditionalist viewpoint can be too rigid and isolating; the neoconservative too privatized; the liberal viewpoint can be naive and uncritical; the radical view can be elitist. It is only by working in consort with one another that these limitations can be minimized and the strong points of each perspective can be enhanced.

When we refuse to listen to each other, clinging defensively to our own plan as the only correct way and slandering those who will not join us, we do harm to the church, deny its catholicity, and refuse to believe that God could ever work through any other group but our own.

Father Dulles wrote: "It is healthy and proper for there to be tensions and arguments in the Church, but it is scandalous for Catholics to impugn one another's motives and integrity, as many are now doing. Unless we have clear evidence to the contrary, we should assume that other Catholics are sincere believers, seeking to serve God and the Church. It may be that the liberal or traditionalist, the neoconservative or the radical to whose views I am most vigorously opposed may have the very word that God intends for me here and now." (109)

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