Alumni Reflections: What Did You Do When You Had Power?

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What Did You Do When You Had Power?

Education and the Common Good

By Robert Casey

In his Republic, Plato describes in great detail how the future public servants, the guardians, should be educated. My education was not as austere — nor as circumscribed — as that prescribed by Plato. However, we are all the products of our families, our faith, our education, our experience and those people who have influenced us. Each of those was, in turn a product of a history, a tradition and a set of experiences going back generations. I think of this when I consider what has influenced me as a person and as a public official. In high school at Scranton Prep, my fellow students and I lived, breathed and absorbed a centuries-old philosophical and educational tradition through what we read, but also through the examples of committed people bearing witness to their faith through their daily work. My years at Holy Cross College brought a more mature and reflective response to education and an introduction to a systematic tradition of theology and philosophy.

When I attended Holy Cross, I was challenged by and inspired by several courses and professors. For example Fr. Robert Manning’s course on liberation theology made it clear to me that our faith must engage the real world; that our love for the Lord is not an abstract concept; it carries with it responsibilities for what we do in our community and for the world. We’re not for the Jesuits at Holy Cross, I probably would not have served in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and Fr. Manning’s course was one of the early sparks in the fire I felt in my heart to serve if given the opportunity. A theology course taught by Fr. Paul Hanrahan challenged me to articulate and reflect upon my faith in a one-on-one setting with a well-trained Jesuit. And Fr. John Paris challenged students in his bioethics class by forcing us to...
analyze and resolve very complex cases which involve law, medicine, theology, philosophy and ethics.

There are many examples of individuals whose philosophical and religious training helped inform their roles in the public arena. Whether it is Thomas More confronting Henry VIII, Cardinal Bernardin reflecting on “seamless garment” Catholicism, while facing the daily challenges of running the Archdiocese of Chicago, or my own father, as Governor of Pennsylvania, challenging his party, I admire action inspired by faith. My father often said that the most important question a public official must ask is “What did you do when you had the power?” As a first year United States Senator, the people of Pennsylvania have entrusted to me the power to represent them. What follows are my thoughts – and hopes – about the use of that authority.

I hope to work toward an America where we are known for what unites us, not what keeps us apart; where we are better defined by our hopes, not our fears; where we measure our success as a nation more by the abundance of those who have much, but by the opportunities for those who have little; and where our moral authority rather than just our military might is what maintains our superpower status throughout the world. America must be a country dedicated to the common good.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Guide to Faithful Citizenship states: “Politics... should be about an old idea with new power – the common good. The central question should not be, ‘Are you better off than you were four years ago?’ It should be, ‘How can we – all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable – be better off in the years ahead?’”

That’s the right question.

Unfortunately, we now live in a country where, according to a recent Pew study, only one third of all par-

ents expect their children to be better off than they themselves are. And around the world, America is losing the moral authority that has made us the standard for other nations to emulate. Many factors play into these changes. But at the core is something quite simple: Many of our leaders have lost their moral compass and no longer seem to believe that the purpose of government should be to promote the common good.

The common good must first be based upon a solid foundation of justice. As Saint Augustine taught us: “Without justice, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers?” Justice cannot abide 34 million people in poverty and 9 million children without health insurance. Justice demands our understanding that the hungry, the impoverished, and the uninsured in this country are for statistics, they are children of God. They are our brothers and sisters, our fellow Americans.

When our government seeks to reward the powerful and enrich the wealthy while ignoring workers, their families and the poor, it is no longer a question of economics or politics. It is a question of justice.

The common good must also be based upon compassion, informed by integrity, bearing witness to the truth. As most people know, I am a pro-life Democrat. I believe that life begins at conception and ends when we draw our last breath. And I believe that the role of government is to protect, enrich, and value life for everyone, at every moment, from beginning to end.

If we say we are pro-life, we cannot say we are against abortion of unborn children and then let our children suffer in degraded inner-city schools and broken homes. We can’t claim to be pro-life at the same time cut support for important

programs like Medicaid, Head Start, child care and health insurance, Women, Infants, and Children’s program. I believe we need policies that provide maximum feasible legal protection for the unborn and maximum feasible care and support for pregnant women, mothers, and children. The right to life must mean the right to a life with dignity.

It is this understanding that draws many Americans to another building block for the common good: service. The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.” Humbling ourselves in service to others lifts us up; giving causes us to receive. Most Americans understand this paradox intuitively. Just ask the priest who runs the midnight basketball league in his community; or the woman who shows up every Saturday morning at the food kitchen, or the church community that builds Habitat homes. These people understand that their interests are served through the common good when they serve others.

Finally, the common good is about community. As Americans, we must confront the great global challenges of our time: the spread of terrorism and the need for international security; the plague of global poverty that brings suffering and death to billions of lives around the globe; the spread of HIV/AIDS; and the dark threat to human life posed by global warming.

I believe my focus on the common good is entirely consistent with my education at Scranton Prep and Holy Cross. I hope that as a United States Senator I can look to my faith as I engage with the real world.

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