

## Faithful Citizenship

### Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good

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#### Faithful Citizenship *between* Elections

##### Reflections from an Exponent of Broad-Based Community Organizing

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[1] I began organizing with the IAF in 1972. I had been working with a community development agency in San Antonio, where I had the dubious distinction of helping to bring the first Latino-owned McDonald's franchise to the city. After organizing for a period in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Lake County, Indiana, I moved back to San Antonio to build COPS – Communities Organized for Public Service. After spending two years organizing COPS, I was asked by the IAF to build similar efforts in East Los Angeles, Houston, El Paso, the Rio Grande Valley, Austin, Dallas, Phoenix, and New Orleans, among others.

[2] Contrary to some interpretations, these are not faith-based organizations. Although our organizations are anchored in institutions which come out of faith traditions - synagogues, churches, temples, and congregations – we also have institutional members which embrace the great tradition of democratic values – teacher/parent organizations, voluntary associations, unions and so forth. Describing us as “faith-based” considerably narrows what we are trying to build unless the term “faith” is considered in the context of John Dewey's definition. For Dewey, faith means we are committed to something beyond ourselves and to the habits which cultivate the democratic practices of a free and open society.

[3] People learn these habits and practices, which we think of as the skills of public life, in institutions – both faith-based and secular. Alexis de Tocqueville, an early observer of American political life, was the first to understand the important role of institutions in American politics. He was also the first to link them to the kind of culture requisite for the functioning and survival of democracy. In studying American politics, de Tocqueville developed a concern for what he called the Augustinian Soul in American life. In this Augustinian Soul, De Tocqueville recognized the tension between an inclination toward self-absorbed narcissism and, at the same time, a tendency to overreach in an attempt to dominate. Fortunately he also believed that the institutions of American life provided a place where people learned the skills of public life and relationality. These mediating institutions created a culture in which the inclinations of the Augustinian Soul were balanced through the face-to-face contact and engagement that went on in local politics. This face-to face political engagement, according to de Tocqueville, was the antidote to our tendency for self-absorption.

[4] The other part of the Augustinian Soul that concerned de Tocqueville was our capacity to overreach, to make larger claims on life than were appropriate. De Tocqueville thought that our enterprising culture, though valuable and important in terms of providing opportunity, had the potential for greed and thus to produce large amounts of inequality. This inequality, in turn, would create concentrations of wealth and power that undermine the political process. But again, de Tocqueville thought he saw the antidote. He believed America's intermediate institutions curbed this inclination by connecting us and helping us understand the social nature of our existence and development, thereby enlarging our understanding of our own self-interest (or as he put it "self interest, properly understood"). He believed these institutions would challenge us to think beyond that which is immediate and narrowly individual.

[5] The labor market intermediaries of the Southwest IAF organizations for example, which have trained and placed more than 10,000 people in high wage jobs over the last decade, came to be because the leaders of the Southwest IAF went about the business of developing the capacity of families to have conversations with one another about issues of work, education, and health care, to forge relationships of trust that cross lines of race and class, and to move into action in the political arena.

[6] On average, the wages of these 10,000+ graduates more than triple their earnings prior to entering training (increasing from an average of \$9,960 to \$31,975 annually). Perhaps more importantly, the jobs they enter upon graduation include benefits and are connected to a career path, advantages rarely associated with positions paying less than \$10,000 annually. Because participants are overwhelmingly the heads of young families, their increased earnings benefit at least two generations, and will accumulate over an average of 34 years remaining in their projected working life.

[7] When Ben Bernanke, Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, gives a speech in Omaha, Nebraska about the danger rising inequality poses to market capitalism, we know our nation has gone well past the need for churches to organize food pantries. If Chairman Bernanke is concerned about inequality, then that means the banks (and I'm not talking about food banks) need to be concerned about inequality and what it means for our national economy in

the global marketplace. This isn't about charity; it's about economics. If we are to compete, we cannot sacrifice the talents of a single citizen.

[8] We can not wait for Washington to solve our problems. The next President, whoever he or she may be, will have his or her hands full just trying to rebuild FEMA, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Justice Department and so forth. Furthermore, given the massive deficits generated by the Bush Administration's tax cuts, it is unlikely that the financial markets will allow any Congress – Democrat or Republican – to come to the rescue in any meaningful way any time soon. To change that reality, we need to create powerful local and statewide constituencies for both programs at the community level and national policy changes to make possible the resurgence of a genuine middle class.

[9] To create these constituencies, leaders and potential leaders need conceptual resources to develop an alternative to the dominant, commercialized culture. Some of the most effective frameworks for thinking about an alternative are our faith traditions.

[10] Catholic social teaching talks about our personhood, that our selves are formed through relationships with others. The challenge of all our faith traditions is to understand that our moral universe cannot just include people who look like us, talk like us, or live like us. When our institutions of faith are at their best, they help people get inside one another's moral universe through sharing their stories and experiences. Inside the IAF organizations our development of leaders requires these kinds of conversations – conversations between Hispanic Catholics from the Texas-Mexico border and African-American evangelicals from Houston and Anglo Jews from Austin. We create the opportunity – and in fact teach the skills necessary – for people of a wide range of ethnic, geographic, religious and economic backgrounds to engage one another in conversation and learn one another's story.

[11] *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* references prudence. In the same way that we cannot develop our personhood without relationships, we also cannot develop prudence in isolation from one another; it's not intrinsic to us. It requires formation. One's formation draws upon pre-political institutions such as families, neighborhoods, congregations and schools to develop our capacity to be relational and to go beyond ourselves. Furthermore, this transformation requires us to engage with political institutions and with people whose interests, context, and situations are different from our own.

[12] Both Eucharistic and Covenantal communities presuppose the existence of a mixed multitude that draws us out of our narrow space, our Egypt – so that we are challenged to engage and understand the world of the Other. This engagement opens us to God's spirit as we begin to practice the virtue of *besed*, the ability to put yourself in the other person's situation and embrace their context and their reality.

[13] One of the most important qualities of leadership we try to cultivate is the ability to be angry at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner. The kind of anger we cultivate in our leaders is rooted in loss and grief. This is different than hatred or violence; it comes out of an understanding of specific wrongs done not only to self or to those with whom we are in relationship but also to the Other, wrongs which when rectified can lead to forgiveness. This kind of anger is the antidote to resentment or hatred. When it is connected to power, this anger precludes the development of impotent rage, which can emerge when

people are agitated to become angry about things that they can not address. This kind of anger leads to action and forgiveness, which is what the classic fathers meant by the virtue of prudence.

[14] The Eucharistic and Covenantal communities are also supposed to teach us about charity and justice. To the extent that they narrow the teachings on charity to the unilateral giving to “the poor” from our bounty, the faith traditions are given short-shrift. Rather, the notion of charity should reflect both our generosity and our capacity to participate in political friendships that enable the virtue of *philia* to develop. *Philia* comes about only through the habits and practices of relationships, conversation, debate, negotiation, compromise and a commitment to action. Both *phila* and charity are related to justice, though perhaps not always taught in that context. At their best, the Eucharistic and Covenantal communities develop both a broader and a more concrete notion of justice, which goes beyond mere charity.

[15] Hannah Arendt recounts a story in her book, *Men in Dark Times*, in which Pope John XXIII asked one of the Vatican gardeners “How are things going?” The worker replied, “Badly, badly, Your Eminence,” telling him what he earned and how many family members he had to support. “We’ll have to do something about this,” said the Pope, only to be told later that raising the wages would cut the funds available for charity. The Pope’s response: “Then we’ll have to cut them. For . . . justice comes before charity.”

[16] Justice is not an arbitrary standard. It emerges out of the context and situation that people are in. In a philosophical sense, it is the notion of giving people their due – something which is not set in Heaven, but here on Earth. In Adam Smith’s mind, a just economy would be one that allowed people to make enough money to appear in public without shame. In Smith’s time that meant making enough money to afford a linen shirt. Today I would argue that it means having indoor plumbing, a car, access to health care, and money for retirement.

[17] In Matthew 25 we read the words “I was a stranger and you took me in.” The phrase “to take in” comes from the Greek term *synago*, which means making someone a member of the community. In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism, the synagogue was the center of community life. It was not just a house of worship, but the place where important decisions were made. One of the Hebrew synonyms for synagogue is *bet ha-knesset*, or house of assembly. Today the Knesset is the parliament of Israel. Thus to be taken into the synagogue community meant to be included in the center of political and economic life; it represented a commitment to a shared prosperity in which everyone participates.

[18] This is the standard of justice that emerges when we teach people the depths of both faith traditions and the traditions of democracy. Shared prosperity does not emerge automatically by proclamation or by preaching it. It occurs when people learn the tools of deliberation, argument, and negotiation – and develop the ability to do politics and organize for power.

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