Introduction

With no little delight I have been looking forward to this Convening, and I want to thank President DeGioia for his warm welcome. It is good to be back on the campus of Georgetown, where I spent many afternoons during the 80’s playing squash at the Yates Field House. Thanks also to Cardinal Wuerl for his leadership and support of this gathering, and to John Carr, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought here at the university, to Kim Daniels, our Co-Convener, and all their collaborators for bringing us together. They have made it clear that we are here not just to talk to each other, but to listen and spend time so that we come to know each other. In fact, it is our being together, even more than what will be said, that has the potential of opening some new pathways as we address the topic of overcoming polarization, which John and Kim have invited us to pursue.

Archbishop Gomez and I have been asked to set the stage for this convening by raising some topics and offering some comments that will give direction to our time together.

I want to begin with some remarks about how I understand the word “polarization.” Polarization commonly refers to the division of the population into two sharply contrasting groups holding their own set of opinions or beliefs. So, I see polarization as different from partisanship, which is about a division over ideas and beliefs. Whereas with polarization, it is the people themselves who are divided, living an isolated and siloed existence in their own spheres, depending on different sources of information, and distrustful, if not dismissive, of the other group and their sources of information. Even more, polarization describes a situation in which peoples are so far apart, geographically, economically, and even hermeneutically, that they barely hear what others are saying. Partisanship may divide us in terms of our particular approach to issues, but there was a time, not so long ago, when partisans of different stripes worked together, even while recognizing their differences, and got things done. Polarization threatens the very idea of working with those on “the other side.” Those characteristics of polarization alone should make it clear that if we are serious about overcoming polarization, it is not sufficient to take up this task only on the level of ideas. If there is to be a dialogue it cannot be limited to simply finding common ground as it applies only to positions held. Something has to be done to move people not only to recognize how they may share some common ground on the level of ideas, but even more importantly to move them to see how they are connected to each other as persons.
I want to talk about three resources that I find helpful and which I believe have the potential of opening a pathway for moving in this direction. 1. Pope Francis’ Notion of Dialogue, 2. The American Heritage of Civil Argument and 3. Catholic Social Teaching

1. Pope Francis’s Notion of Dialogue

Overcoming polarization by placing emphasis on connecting people rather than just arguing over ideas is precisely what Pope Francis is proposing when he speaks of dialogue. To be sure, some are suspicious of the pope’s call for dialogue, believing that it is just a strategy to avoid conflict, that it fails to come to conclusions, creates uncertainty about what is true or worse yet, waters down the truth in order to come to agreement or the appearance of agreement. But, this critique misunderstands what the pope is saying. For Pope Francis the first goal of dialogue is to encounter the other, not argue differing ideas, and surely not argue them in a way that obscures the truth or makes it relative.

During his visit to the United States, he urged us bishops “to dialogue fearlessly” but by always first affirming others as persons, realizing “deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain.”

That is the kind of dialogue the pope is urging, one understood as encounter. I personally find the pope’s urging both a helpful corrective and a guide. For instance, I could tell you a lot of stories from our college days in St. Paul when John Carr and I regularly argued various political and social topics. But, I imagine he will have the last word at this convening and so I will exercise some restraint. Let me just say, that I have come to listen to John more attentively because I know him and I realize that just as my words have been mischaracterized and my motives misjudged by people who really do not know me, I have been guilty of doing the same.

The pope’s encouragement also has much to offer me as I now serve in a large urban archdiocese known for its ethnic and religious diversity and political complexity. I cannot speak with any real credibility to union, political, ecumenical and business leaders, editorial boards and other significant groups, about the important issues of the day if I do not take the time to get to know them and listen to them for who they are, how they live and what they care about. For instance, getting to know labor union leaders and the challenges their members face, establishes a level of credibility as I speak about the dignity of work and express the Church’s solidarity with them. But it also creates an opening for me to urge that they extend solidarity and the defense of human dignity to include the unborn and respect for religious liberty so that the church can serve the poor and vulnerable.
In my interaction with elected officials in Illinois, I readily admit that the record of gains and losses is a mixed bag. There are risks and I leave myself open to criticism as I associate and meet with people who take positions or vote in a way contrary to Church policy and teaching. But, there are also opportunities. For instance, our Democrat-controlled legislature passed a bill providing state funding of abortions, which my brother bishops in Illinois and I resisted mightily, and then turned around to override the governor’s budget veto, thereby ensuring that the social services of our Catholic Charities would be funded. At the same time, the Republican governor promised me he would veto the abortion funding bill, but then broke his word, which deeply disappointed us, and yet joined me in working with both sides of the aisle to pass - in a very blue state - a tax credit scholarship program that provided for low income families to receive up to $100 million of scholarships to attend non-public schools. In all of this we did not trade or compromise Church teaching, but worked together where we could and continued to oppose actions that contradict our fundamental values.

Without question there are strong voices who want me to go beyond clear teachings and principled advocacy and lob an occasional grenade and condemn people who take positions in opposition to Church teaching, and they consider me weak for not doing so. But, my experience over these twenty years as a bishop and watching the example of the three popes who appointed me to various sees, convinces me that such tactics most often backfire, close the door to the possibility of doing good in these and other areas and most importantly, are just not the Gospel at work.

The importance of getting to know someone applies to the pope. People should know something about him before dismissing what he has to say about dialogue. His entire life is a product of the Ignatian Exercises, which is the reason he reflects an admirable serenity and good sense of humor in the midst of some enormous challenges. His urging of a dialogue as encounter finds its roots in the so-called “Ignatian Presupposition”, a central tenet of the Exercises. It reads: "Let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbor’s proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it; and if he means it badly, let him correct him with charity."

This surely should make anyone pause before labelling someone a bad Catholic or heretic, or for that matter reject out of hand what the Holy Father has to say, either because of his authority or before they understand who he is.

2. The American Heritage of Civil Argument

In addition to what Pope Francis says about dialogue, I believe we can also tap into our American tradition of civil argument as a resource for opening a pathway forward in overcoming polarization.

Some weeks ago, you may have heard Senator John McCain read this excerpt from his recent book The Restless Wave:
I'd like to see us recover our sense that we are more alike than different ... We argue over little differences endlessly and exaggerate them into lasting breaches ... whether we think each other right or wrong in our views on the issues of the day, we owe each other our respect ... We're citizens of a republic made of shared ideals forged in a new world to replace the tribal enmities that tormented the old one. Even in times of political turmoil such as these, we share that awesome heritage and the responsibility to embrace it.

When I heard him recite those words, I was struck by his observation that it was precisely the drive to find a new way to deal with the tribal enmities of the old world that gave rise to this new world, this republic we call America. That commitment to deal with our differences and diversity by ever forging a more perfect union is the unique heritage of this nation we should embrace. In fact, I found his words particularly reminiscent of the opening pages of Fr. John Courtney Murray’s classic, *We Hold These Truths*. There Murray noted that America’s experience of pluralism is uniquely different from the old world. “Pluralism,” he wrote, “was the native condition of American society. It was not, as in Europe, and in England, the result of a disruption or decay of a previously existent religious unity. This fact,” he continues, “created the possibility of a new solution; indeed, it created a demand for a new solution. The possibility was exploited and the demand was met by the American Constitution.” P. 27

The point is that the American heritage is not that we are divided by our differences, religious and otherwise, but that we are united in arguing about them for the purpose of creating new solutions, forging a more perfect union, which Murray reminds us is never a done deal, but something we aspire to as a nation. Our heritage is to value public argument and not shy away from it as if we were terrified of conflict or worse, prone to retreat into our own polarized camps, safely living in isolation with those who affirm our views. “Society is civil,” Murray observes, “when it is formed by people locked together in argument.” And even when we reach agreement, he urges, we should continue to argue, because our heritage has always been about creating new solutions, forming that more perfect union. Listen to these riveting words that still have currency in our time: “…the American consensus needs to be constantly argued. If the public argument dies from disinterest, or subsides into the angry mutterings of polemic, or rises to the shrillness of hysteria, or trails off into positivistic triviality, or gets lost in the morass of semantics, you may be sure that the barbarians are at the gates of the City.” And I would add, if public argument dies because people choose to slink away into their social enclaves and are afraid or just too lazy to engage in civil argument.

Public argument does require hard work and commitment but also a certain level of friendship, Murray, notes. Not the friendship of close relationships, but one that is respectful and considerate of the other. Charles Taylor in his essay, *The Politics of Recognition*, makes a similar point in arguing that along with a commitment to the equal dignity of individuals, there must be a commitment to a politics of recognition as a precondition to dialogue and the way we negotiate our identity in community.
3. Catholic Social Teaching

Finally, Catholic Social Teaching offers us a helpful resource for charting a path forward in overcoming polarization. The centerpiece of the Church’s social doctrine is a commitment to the defense and promotion of human life and dignity from conception to natural death. And it is important to understand that this commitment is to integral human life, meaning that it takes into account the whole person, all the complex and interrelated dimensions that make up the human person, spiritual, social, psychological, physical, educational and economic. St. Pope John Paul II broke new ground in advocating for an integral approach in defending human life and dignity, by persuasively making a case for solidarity and how human beings are interdependent on one another. Pope Francis builds on this understanding of humanity as interdependent in his recent exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate. He reminds us that God does not save humanity as individuals who have no bonds between them. As a result, “we are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people…Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community. God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people.” The point is that Catholic Social Teaching reminds us that polarization ends up making us less human.

In fact, St. Pope John Paul II was unabashed in calling polarization sinful, simply because it raises seemingly implacable obstacles to fulfilling God’s plan for humanity He writes: “It is important to note … that a world which is divided into blocs, sustained by rigid ideologies, and in which instead of interdependence and solidarity different forms of imperialism hold sway, can only be a world subject to structures of sin.” This is so, he notes because all of this creates a sense of hopelessness in the world. “The sum total of the negative factors working against a true awareness of the universal common good, and the need to further it, gives the impression of creating, in persons and institutions, an obstacle which is difficult to overcome.-(Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 36)

Catholic Social Teaching puts into perspective the dehumanizing costs of polarization. But it also has the power to provoke a healthy examination of conscience for all of us, which just might be the first step we all need to take in the effort to overcome this sin in our own lives.

Conclusion

A dialogue understood as encounter, a retrieval of our heritage as Americans and a unswerving fidelity to Catholic Social Teaching, I believe have much to offer as we explore a pathway in overcoming polarization. Let me close by observing that from time to time I see people and institutions already employing these insights in the way they discuss challenging issues in our day. One of them is Archbishop Gomez. The very title of his book Immigration and the Next America is revealing in itself. He tells us that we should understand the fears and frustrations of people, especially as our leaders have shown little courage in addressing the issue of immigration. He chooses words not to condemn but to inspire America to reclaim her identity and for Catholics to see this issue through the lens of the Gospel. “We need to work,” he writes,
“to make sure that immigration reform is part of an even more comprehensive reform — a project for American renewal aimed at forming a new national identity and civic culture dedicated to the universal values of promoting human dignity, freedom, and a community of the good. We need to take the next steps toward realizing the dream of America.”
That is the kind of invitation I make to you today, to join in this effort and take the next steps in bringing together this nation we love.
Good morning, my friends!

I am honored to be here to talk about these important issues of Catholic social teaching.

And I want to begin our conversation with a brief snapshot of our experience in Los Angeles.

As you know, we are the largest Catholic community in the country. We cover a territory about the size of New Jersey — we have about 5 million Catholics in an overall population of 11 million.

Our churches are filled with people who come from other nations. Every day we carry out our ministries in more than 40 languages.

Our Church is young and it is daily growing. Just to give you a sense: in Los Angeles we baptize about 60,000 infants every year. That is more than the total number of infant baptisms in Chicago and New York combined.

I tell people: if you want to see what the Church will look like in the future, you should come to Los Angeles.

But my friends, there is another side to LA, a more sobering set of statistics.

Every night in the Los Angeles area, we have 55,000 people who have no place to call home. They are sleeping on sidewalks and under bridges, in parking lots in their cars. There are “tent cities” now in many of our neighborhoods, even in the suburbs. The fastest growing category of homeless is children.

In the shadow of our Cathedral downtown, we have one of the world’s largest prisons. All told, we have about 20,000 men and women behind bars, the vast majority are black and Latino.

And just down the road from the Cathedral, in a neighborhood that is almost entirely Spanish-speaking, there are nine abortion clinics within a one-mile radius. Sadly, they are busy. More abortions are performed in Los Angeles than any city except New York — and most of the women targeted are poor and minorities.
Everywhere we see signs of the breakdown of marriage and the family. We have 30,000 kids in the LA foster care system.

Nearly 20 percent of the people in Los Angeles live below the poverty line. And every day it seems like the distance is growing between those who have what they need to lead a dignified life, and those who do not.

We see this in obvious and also not-so-obvious ways — like the high rates of pollution and groundwater contamination in our poorest communities.

Finally, there are more than 1 million undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles. And every day we deal with the realities of deportations. That means mothers and fathers being torn from their homes, from their children and loved ones.

So, that is a snapshot of Los Angeles “by the numbers.” And of course, for those of us in the Church, every one of these “numbers” represents a soul who has been made in the image of our Creator and redeemed by the sacrifice of God’s only Son.

The point I want to make is this: The issues we deal with in Los Angeles are unique only in scale. Every day in every city across the country, Catholic communities confront these same types of injustice and insults to human dignity.

The question we all face is this: where do we start in the face of so much human misery? How do we set priorities, what criteria are we going to use? How do we change our society so there is less suffering, less injustice?

In Los Angeles, we have tried to unite all our work for life, justice and peace under a single banner. We call it “OneLife LA.”

For us “OneLife” means promoting and protecting the sanctity and dignity of every human person, who is loved by God with a personal love.

And by God’s grace, we are doing some beautiful things in Los Angeles.

*The “pulverization” of the human person*

In our work in Los Angeles, we have come to see the great challenge of our times. And that is the disappearance of the human person.

We are living in a society where God no longer matters and the human person is on the verge of being forgotten too. The sense of our great dignity as children of God, the sense of God’s loving design for creation and the divine meaning of our lives — all of this is fading from the hearts and minds of this generation.

We realize that this process has been gradual and that it has been going on for a long time.
Fifty years ago, when he was still a cardinal, St. John Paul II described our challenge this way. He said: “The evil of our time consists … in a pulverization of the fundamental uniqueness of the human person. To this disintegration … we must oppose … a kind of ‘recapitulation’ of the mystery of the person.”

Pope Francis has been saying the same thing in our times. He has said: “We are experiencing a moment of the annihilation of man as the image of God.”

And everywhere in our society, we can see what they are talking about. We can see it in the way people in our economy are more and more treated as objects that can be replaced or tools to be used to further the ambitions of others.

And we can see it, too, sadly in the human wreckage around us, the lives lost in addictions and wrong choices that lead to despair and degradation. We see it in the random cruelty and violence that we have come to accept as the daily state of affairs in our society.

Friends, in this moment — as a Church, as Christians — we need to be united in the urgent mission of proclaiming and defending the mystery of the human person in our times.

This is the central task for Catholic social teaching today. Even more, it is a challenge for our whole project of the new evangelization.

*Time for saints*

Now more than ever, we need to raise up a new generation of disciples, a new generation of saints.

This is a call to you and to me — to everyone in the Church. We need to be thinking in new ways about our identity and mission as Christians, as followers of Christ.

The Church exists to evangelize. Period. There is no other reason for the Church. We are not called to be social workers or advocates. We are called to be apostles and saints.

Our mission is to share the good news that Jesus has revealed to us — about who God is and how much he loves us; about who we are, and the way he has shown us to live.

In our work of evangelization, we need to be careful that our message does not get tangled up in politics or today’s fashionable ideas about happiness or “well-being.”

We are not here to provide solutions to problems in society. What we proclaim is true liberation — the pathway that leads to eternal life.

We can change the world by changing people’s hearts — by making God’s love present and leading men and women to find him and to discover their true dignity as his children.
And you and I, we are called to carry out our Christian mission in the world — person to person, heart to heart.

The great French apostle, Venerable Madeleine Delbrel, used to say: “Mission means doing the very work of Christ wherever we happen to be. We will not be the Church, and salvation will not reach the ends of the earth, unless we help save the people in the very situations in which we live.”

These are words for us, my friends.

We have a mission in life and that mission is to live as children of God and to try to become like Jesus — to see as he sees, to feel and think as he does; to be holy as he is holy. And God is calling all of us to seek holiness, to be saints, each in our own way, in the circumstances of our ordinary life. In our homes, at work, in school and in our communities.

We become missionaries by being good neighbors. When we seek holiness, it opens our hearts to building God’s kingdom of love and justice and peace. When we seek holiness, it leads us deeper and deeper into the lives of our brothers and sisters — their joys and hopes, their miseries and misfortune.

No single-issue saints

The love that Jesus Christ is calling us to is concrete and personal. It is expressed through human contact, through works of mercy and sharing our lives with others.

We have a vocation to love. The great American apostle, Dorothy Day once said: “Our lives must be a pure act of love, repeated many times over.”

This is a beautiful truth, this is how we are called to live. We are called to love as we have been loved and through our love, to reveal to others what great love God has for every person.

The salvation that we proclaim to our neighbors is a salvation of the whole person, body and soul.

That is why there is no “polarization” in the communion of saints; and there are no “single-issue” saints.

The saints teach us to see with the eyes of Christ. They teach us to see that every human life is sacred and special, no matter what stage of development or condition of life. And the saints teach us that whenever human life is threatened, whenever the image of God is obscured and violated, we are called to rise up and defend it.

When we think about St. Mother Teresa, we usually think about her charity to the poor and the dying and her defense of the unborn. But Mother Teresa did not stop there. She also raised a
prophetic voice against war and the arms race, against the death penalty, and the greed and inequality she saw in the global economy.

Blessed Oscar Romero was martyred for his defense of human rights and social justice. But when you read his homilies, it is striking how often he speaks out against abortion, artificial contraception, and divorce.

In fact, I was reading one his homilies the other day, and I want to share this thought with you. Blessed Romero said: “Matrimonial fidelity and the morality of preserving the life that begins in the womb of a woman are ancient themes, not new ones. And the Church must defend them even if it means losing applause and being attacked by the public.”

Friends, in our defense of the human person, we need to remember what Blessed Romero and all the saints know. If we want to promote the sanctity and dignity of the human person in our times, then we also must protect the sanctity and permanence of married love and promote the beauty of family life.

We also need to have a special care to defend the most vulnerable.

In the logic of God’s love, the weakest and most vulnerable in society must always be our priority in the Church. That is why abortion will always be the fundamental social injustice and priority in the Church — because it means the direct killing of the most defenseless members in the human family.

But like the saints, we cannot stop there. We need to fight for the human person. We need to defend the sanctity and dignity of the person everywhere and to work for his salvation.

One Life, One Love

My friends, let me offer a few final thoughts.

We are living in a time of confusion in our society, when the reality of God is fading away, and the reality of the human person is disappearing, too.

We are becoming strangers to our own selves. We no longer know who we are or what is inside us. And many of our brothers and sisters are falling by the wayside, discarded and lost.

But God does not leave us orphaned or alone. Jesus Christ still brings freedom for every human heart and his Church is still the hope for a fallen world.

That means you and that means me.

In this moment, God is sending us out to be his witnesses. We are called to testify that this world still speaks of God, that creation is his handiwork, and that he is still carrying out his intentions in history, his beautiful plan of love.
Life is one and God’s love is one. One life, one love. We are surrounded by God’s goodness and he loves us with a love that is greater than any power on earth.

And we are made for so much more, we are made to be made divine! The God of all Creation wants to share his blessed life with us! The Son of God became a Son of Man — so that you and I might become sons and daughters of God. This is our dignity and destiny. This is what God dreams for our lives.

We need to look in the mirror every day and really believe that this is true. And we need to share this truth with the people of our times.

Thank you for listening. And I look forward to our conversation.

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ii (July 27, 2016).
iii *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*.
iv *The Reckless Way of Love*, 64
v *Complete Homilies*, vol 4, 159–160.