



Statue of George Washington in United States Capitol Rotunda

A Dangerous Hour for the United States: We Must Unite Together in Prayer

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Jesus Christ:

I.

This week American Catholics have reached the point where our faith and politics meet in a unique and intense way. There has always been a crossroad between the Christian faith and grave moral issues like war, capital punishment, abortion, racial prejudice, poverty, and care for the earth. But the completely unthinkable events that have overshadowed the end of one presidency and challenged the beginning of another presidency compel us to examine the startling events of each day's news through the eyes of our Catholic faith. This is a dangerous hour for our country. We need to pray fervently for the end of violence and hostility and the renewal of civic harmony.

The month of January takes its name from the Roman god, Janus, who was said to sit on the top of the walls of the city of Rome with two heads. One head looked to the past and the other head looked to the future. And because of this unique vantage point, in January the citizens would look back on the past year and seeing their failures they would look to the coming year resolving to do better. They would make New Year's resolutions. The custom continues to this day, even though very few of us keep our resolutions to exercise more, eat less, work harder, be kinder to others, and live our Catholic faith more genuinely. *Anno domini* 2021 has already begun as a turbulent, troubled year. We can each

make this new journey around the sun better by making and keeping a New Year's resolution to think and pray about the intersection between our faith and politics. We can do this by listening to the voice of God whispering in the corridors of our souls urging us to think more and learn more about the causes of the political turmoil swirling around us. Could it be that, if we listen, God is calling us to be more responsible citizens by opening our minds to learn more about the many different and opposing factions that are causing such divisions in our country?

When we hear about the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, Boogaloo, Proud Boys, Christian extremist, Militias, Nationalists, Neo-Nazis, militant racists, anti-Semitic groups and domestic terrorists, do we reflect as committed Catholics on our responsibility to learn what these groups are about? When people on the evening news say they are part of Q-Anon and they believe the President is protecting America from a cabal of Satanists and pedophiles, do you study the matter to find out if this is indeed true?

Have you ever thought that you might become a better American Christian by studying the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and key supreme court decisions? Could God be summoning us to free ourselves from closed minded thinking, as conservatives, liberals, republicans, democrats, independents, and people who never vote at all?

Could God be asking all sides to think more critically about their certitudes? Should loyal supporters of the President, who believe he should not have been impeached because his words at the Stop the Steal rally were not to blame for the insurrection that stormed the Capitol, be open to examining their point of view more critically? Should harsh critics of the President, who believe firmly that he should have been impeached because his words at the rally did spark the insurrection, violence and death that day be open to examining their point of view more critically? Could God be calling us to be more informed and more responsible citizens by not watching only news channels that reinforce our biases and tune in to stations with which we disagree? Could He be calling us to listen to family members, co-workers, neighbors, and fellow Catholics who do not view the immensely complex social upheavals leading to and following the Nov. 3 presidential election in the same way we do? What if God is calling us to acknowledge that, no matter how strong our views are about the conflicting ideologies that make the country seem more like two or three nations under God, we do not know how to end the intense division and rancor that is turning neighbor against neighbor? Could God be forcing us to our knees, admitting that we do not have all of the right answers to the many disputed questions that flood our consciences? Could any of us have expected to see American citizens attacking the fortress Capitol brandishing confederate flags, American citizens causing the deaths of fellow citizens (including a police officer) in an effort to prevent the Congress from fulfilling its constitutional duty to count the votes of the Electoral College, shouting "traitors", "treason"? Had you imagined you would live to see the day that unruly crowds would roam the Capitol, vandalizing offices and demanding the death of the Vice-President? (One of the rioters said: "The legislators who sold out the American people were forced to cower in fear and scatter like rats!") Nothing like this has happened since the war of 1812. I tell you the country desperately needs our prayers!

II.

Maybe rather than judging and condemning others in the midst of the chaos that has threatened the fabric of our nation and brought this country to this very dangerous hour, God may be calling us to be like Samuel (1Samuel 3-10,19), in our first reading. God may be calling us to open our ears and hear the divine whispered call in our lives. Why not resolve to respond to God in this challenging New Year

in the way that Samuel did? “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!” “Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will!” (Psalm 40)

We might think that we are too busy to really listen to the quiet voice of God. Our “busyness” can be one of the main reasons why we Christians often do not hear God. No time for listening! No time for hearing! No time for SILENCE! We are too busy to take time to study the Word of God before or after Mass. Instead of listening to the Word, we are more likely to drown it out by talking all the time. “Listen to ME, dear God, here is what I want, what I need. Here is how I want my life to be, how I want my marriage to be. Here is my dream for my education, the kind of career I would like, the type of home I would love to have, the amount of money I need. Hear my prayer for those who do not share my views about our polarized political situation.”

When God might be speaking, we are asking painful questions. “Where were you when my brother died? When I developed life threatening cancer? When my daughter was paralyzed after a serious car accident? When I lost my job? Where were you when I felt all alone or so depressed that I considered suicide?” Our human nature makes it difficult to simply be quiet and listen! But praying is more about being in the presence of God than giving Him a list of the things we want and need. When we listen to what God has to say rather than to what we have to say, we realize that God is not God the way we would be God, if we were God.

But even when we fail to listen, God, by His grace, continues to speak. Indeed, in these difficult days God may be speaking to us in more ways than ever before. God is infinitely patient with our deafness. So even when we sin by not listening, God offers us the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, telling us to go in peace, our sins are forgiven.

We must remember that Samuel did not realize that God was speaking to him until the fourth time He called his name. He was finally listening! And he kept listening even though the message God had for him was unpleasant and even though what God was calling him to do was not easy. It would have been easier for Samuel to just roll over and go back to sleep. Humanly speaking, it might have seemed prudent for Samuel to change God’s message and avoid angering Eli. But through His Word God gave Samuel the strength not only to listen but also to act.

God continues to strengthen us as well. He gives us the wisdom to understand that, in this dangerous hour, His is only voice to which we must listen at all times. He gives us the gift of the Spirit, so that we not only hear His Word, but also believe it. And, as with Samuel, God’s grace can enable Catholics in America to be ambassadors of God’s truth, justice and love. It is precisely in the midst of the present turmoil that we must boldly obey and proclaim Jesus’s Law of Love: “Love God with your whole being and Love your neighbor as yourself.”

III.

This week American Catholics have reached the point where our faith and politics meet in a unique and intense way. We are facing a dangerous hour. The Capitol, our temple of democracy, has been stained with blood. The Senate chambers were filled with enraged protestors breaking through doors, sitting in the Vice-President’s chair, rummaging through the senators’ desks, demanding to know the whereabouts of the senators, clearly outnumbering the security forces. Some senators called their family members fearing their lives were in danger.

On Wednesday, our 46th President will be inaugurated surrounded by barbed wire fences, with only a small number of people in attendance, due to the coronavirus pandemic and extreme security measures. The new President's predecessor will be the first President not to attend his successor's inauguration since 1860. The 45th President will leave Washington still insisting that the election was stolen from him, with many bitterly angry Americans agreeing with him, in spite of the courts' rejections of all legal objections. Millions of Americans say they will never accept the new President as legitimate. While chatter in the dark corners of the internet about a new civil war, guerrilla warfare, and guides for making weapons may be hyperbole, they may serve to radicalize impressionable users. Meanwhile, nearly 25,000 troupes will be guarding the Capitol; more than the total number of soldiers currently in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The capitols of all 50 states are on high alert in fear of violent demonstrations and domestic terrorism. At the same time, nearly 400,000 Americans have died from Covid-19 and the vaccination process is moving very slowly. The incoming President's proposed \$1.9 trillion to address the pandemic and the nation's dire economic crisis may not be enough. The new President's agenda will be competing for the attention of Congress with the Senate trial of the outgoing President, impeached for the second time, a trial that may exacerbate and prolong the country's volatile divisions.

IV.

The world is looking at the United States in baffled amazement:

From our foes: President Hassan Rouhani of Iran declared, "the insurrection in the US and the Assault on the Capitol on January 6 was above all a demonstration of how fragile and vulnerable Western democracy really is." The Chinese foreign minister said: "The same American leaders who now condemned the mob violence causing death and destruction in Washington had hailed demonstrators who invaded the Hong Kong legislature as heroes. The contrast deserves profound reflection." Voices from Moscow observed, "Look how weak the United States is, a small group of thugs can overrun the Capitol and threaten to kill the Vice-President."

From our allies: Germany found haunting parallels between the scenes in the Capitol and its own history, with the hijacking of a weak democracy by Adolf Hitler. Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the images "made her angry and sad." She did not hesitate to place the blame at the feet of the President. President Emmanuel Macron of France underscored the gravity of this moment declaring that "The temple of American democracy has been attacked. The universal idea of 'one person, one vote' has been shaken to its foundations." The United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson lamented, "I am appalled by the frightening, disgraceful scenes of the desecration of the citadel of democracy in America."

Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations said, "We are seeing images that I never imagined we would see in America, in some other capitol, yes, but not here. Not in this great and noble country. No one in the world is likely to see, respect, fear or depend on the United States in the same way ever again. A strength that was of permanent value to the body politics may have been lost forever."

V.

Dear People of God: Some of you may think that the volatile issues shaking our country have no impact on us in a quiet small town in southern Illinois. You may think this is not a dangerous hour at

all. You may think that the deadly insurrection that took place in Washington on January 6 has been blown out of proportion by the media the same way you believe the media has overstated the calamity of the pandemic. I fear that you may be wrong. Over time, these confounding events may well have a lasting impact on us all. Therefore, we need to be like Samuel opening our ears to listen, our eyes to see, our minds to think, and our hearts to pray about the frightful events that are disturbing our domestic tranquility.

In today's Gospel, two of John the Baptist's disciples ask Jesus: "Where are you staying?" He replied, "Come and see." So, they went and saw where Jesus was staying. And they stayed with Him that day. God is calling all of us to spend the day with Jesus, praying for our country. Pray that Americans will heed the words of Abraham Lincoln, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." Pray that we will again be "touched by the better angels of our nature."

Can we make the time to stay with Jesus and listen to God by praying in communion with Jesus Christ in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament? Can I ask you to pray the rosary every day during the next month for peace in our country? I mean really pray with all sincerity and urgency! You say you are "too busy" to pray a daily Rosary? Then, pray one Our Father each day. Are you "too busy" even for that? Then, pray for one moment in silent longing: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!"

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born 92 years ago on Friday. He was only 39 years old when he was brutally and senselessly murdered April 4, 1968, 53 years ago. He has now been dead more years than he lived. Everyone knows that he was one of the world's greatest orators. He used his powerful voice to challenge the conscience of this country. But Reverend King always spoke from a listening, prayerful silence. From that silence, this is what he said:

"Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You only need to listen to the voice of God within. You only need to listen to the ideas of those with whom you profoundly disagree. You only need to listen to the lessons of history. Every one of you can be a great servant in your family, your Church, or your country. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

"You only need to realize that love is the only force that is powerful enough to turn an enemy into a friend!"

Praise be Jesus Christ!
Both now and forever. AMEN.



Amanda Gorman, Youth Poet Laureate

“The Hill We Climb” - Inauguration Poem, January 20, 2021

When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry. A sea we must wade.
We braved the belly of the beast.
We’ve learned that quiet isn’t always peace, and the norms and notions of what “just” is isn’t always justice.
And yet the dawn is ours before we knew it.
Somehow we do it.
Somehow we weathered and witnessed a nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.
We, the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.
And, yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn’t mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.
We are striving to forge our union with purpose.
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man.
And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.
We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true.
That even as we grieved, we grew.
That even as we hurt, we hoped.
That even as we tired, we tried.
That we’ll forever be tied together, victorious.
Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division.

Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid.

If we're to live up to our own time, then victory won't lie in the blade, but in all the bridges we've made.

That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb, if only we dare.

It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit.

It's the past we step into and how we repair it.

We've seen a force that would shatter our nation, rather than share it.

Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.

And this effort very nearly succeeded.

But while democracy can be periodically delayed, it can never be permanently defeated.

In this truth, in this faith we trust, for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us.

This is the era of just redemption.

We feared at its inception.

We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour.

But within it we found the power to author a new chapter, to offer hope and laughter to ourselves.

So, while once we asked, how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe, now we assert, how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?

We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be: a country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free.

We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation, become the future.

Our blunders become their burdens.

But one thing is certain.

If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy and change our children's birthright.

So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left.

Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest, we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.

We will rise from the golden hills of the West.

We will rise from the windswept Northeast where our forefathers first realized revolution.

We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the Midwestern states.

We will rise from the sun-baked South.

We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.

And every known nook of our nation and every corner called our country, our people diverse and beautiful, will emerge battered and beautiful.

When day comes, we step out of the shade of flame and unafraid.

The new dawn balloons as we free it.

For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it.