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Dear Brother Priests and Deacons,

As another contentious presidential electoral season is unfolding in the United States, I write to share some thoughts with you regarding our unique roles as ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and as guides for the lay faithful who, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, are called to be “the channels of Christian wisdom” in the national, state and local civic arenas. The Council Fathers continue, “In their patriotism and in their fidelity to their civic duties Catholics will feel themselves bound to promote the true common good; they will make the weight of their convictions so influential that as a result civil authority will be justly exercised and laws will accord with the moral precepts and the common good” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 14).

As preachers and teachers of the Faith, we are called primarily to help form consciences according to the word of God and Catholic doctrine while exercising a proper discipline that keeps us from entering into the political fray. We live in a particularly challenging time when the authority of the Church in matters both religious and civil has been eroded by past institutional failings as well as an ongoing ignorance regarding moral and social teachings. Our message is first and foremost that of the Lord. Like Saint Paul, “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). We form consciences not by acting as agents of politics but by acting as ministers of the Gospel, recognizing that Christ is not only the object but the content of our preaching. Without a true relationship with Jesus Christ, a work to which our ministry is fundamentally oriented, the authority of His teaching that is preserved and handed on by the magisterium of the Catholic Church does not take hold of hearts and minds, and therefore, does not form good consciences.

Ours is not the task of replacing the conscience when it comes to prudential judgments. Ours is to allow the proclamation of Christ, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to challenge the lay faithful to embrace the truth that faith is not only an influence in their decision-making: it is the fundamental and necessary perspective from which all aspects of human life and action derive their meaning and tend toward the greatest good. They can only do so when they have come to “know Him in whom they believe” (2 Tim 1:12).

Cardinal Robert Sarah, Prefect Emeritus of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, describes the necessary asceticism demanded of us when we are faced with the political climate of the coming months. In a retreat talk given to priests in February 2020, his counsel is clear and unencumbered, helpful for priests and deacons alike:

Another offshoot of our priestly asceticism, which implies self-discipline and even constant self-censorship, must be exercised in our public statements, both in homilies and catechesis and also through the social media platforms and blogs that number many priests as their users. Each of us naturally has personal opinions, for example in the political sphere. There is a strong temptation to use the church pulpit or any pulpit given to us as priests (whether material or digital) to spread our own ideas rather than the doctrine of the Church. This is frequently seen and is a serious matter.