

Throughout the course of the year, the Church often celebrates the feast days of martyrs, such as the man honored Saturday, Ignatius of Antioch, thrown to the lions in the Roman Colosseum for his Christian faith. But as we all know, the persecution of Christians, in particular Catholics, is nothing that is faded from history, and our own country is no exception.

In the late 19th century, political cartoonist Thomas Nast regularly lambasted Irish Catholic immigrants as drunkards and barbarians unfit for citizenship; signs that read “No Irish Need Apply” were common in Boston and New York. Political leaders warned about the dangers of letting in Catholics to the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe for fear they were less than civilized. Many a politician would wonder aloud whether a Catholic could be loyal to their adopted home country.

Between 1840 and 1924, over 30 million European immigrants arrived in the United States, many of whom were Catholic. And with this came the rise of anti-Catholicism; the Know Nothing Party in the 1850s controlled a number of congressional seats and those “No Irish Need Apply Signs” were common through the 1890s. Sometimes there was violence too; On August 6, 1855, what is now called Bloody Monday, armed Know Nothing mobs

controlled the city of Louisville, Kentucky, and made a show of force to prevent Catholics from “rigging” the day’s election. What transpired were a series of beatings, lootings, acts of arson, and murders that resulted in the deaths of at least twenty-two people and the near destruction of the city’s cathedral.

But Catholics decided not to keep their mouths shut, and to stand up to this hate.

Take Bishop John Hughes, who was a proud Irish native, who built up a massive web of primary and secondary schools. The English who dominated Ireland influenced him as a young man when, at 15, law in Ireland prevented the priest from entering the cemetery at the funeral of his sister - he could only bless dirt, hand it to Hughes who sprinkled it on the grave. From early on, Hughes said he had “dreamed of a country in which no stigma of inferiority would be impressed on my brow, simply because I professed one creed or another.” This was to be America; but he’d have to fight to achieve the dream because while law said one thing, people often say something else who do not like the law. In the US, he’d meet Mother

Elizabeth Seton, and with her recommendation he went to seminary and was ordained.

In Philadelphia, he became one to speak out against bigotry. He saw the bigotry in the city, and in Ireland, he remembers the clergy being, in his estimation, passive. He started a letter writing campaign against what he called chauvinistic nationalism. Needless to say, he'd probably be a big follow on Twitter today. In 1829, for instance, outraged by an editorial in a Protestant religious newspaper about "traitorous popery," he fired off a letter to its editorial board of Protestant ministers, calling them "the clerical scum of the Country." During the 1834 cholera epidemic in Philadelphia, which nativists blamed on Irish immigrants, Hughes worked tirelessly among the sick and dying, while many Protestant ministers fled the city to escape infection. After the disease subsided, Hughes wrote to the U.S. Gazette, a popular periodical, and criticized the Protestant clergy. He pointed to the work of the Catholic Sisters of Charity, who had cared for cholera victims without regard for their own safety, and wondered where all the people who spoke about perversion in the convents had gone during the epidemic.

Not too long after this, he became bishop of New York, and got the nickname “Dagger John.” Martin Scorsese included him in “Gangs of New York” where he rallies a crowd of Irish toughs (the fighting Irish?) to protect the cathedral from a mob threatening to burn it down. Scorsese noted that he learned in the late 1950s, when he was in high school, that Hughes threatened in 1844 to the mayor that he would tell the Irish to “turn New York into a second Moscow” if one of his churches were touched (referring to Napoleon burning Moscow to the ground in 1812). The mayor got the point.

Hughes also worked to educate his flock in New York, working to get the Catholic School system, emphasizing education but also respect for teachers and fellow students, eventually setting up 100. All this was done despite his enemies being vocal; a mob ransacked his residence and the local militia was needed to protect the churches of the city. He also re-spiritualized the flock.

Of course he didn’t stomp out anti-Catholicism. In the 1880s, Blaine Amendments, named after the anti-Catholic senator James Blaine, barred any state funds for separatist schools, attacking the Catholics as we were

and still are the largest private school system. Ira Hersey, a senator from Maine, said: "We have thrown open wide our gates and through them have come other alien races, of alien blood, from Asia and southern Europe ... with their strange and pagan rites, their babble of tongues." (When he spoke of "pagan rites," Hersey almost assuredly meant both the Latin Mass and the Hebrew service.)

Come the early 20th century, the KKK was active against Catholic and Jewish immigrants. Though it was born in the 1860s in violent opposition to emancipation of slaves, in the early 20th century it was reinvented to identify Catholics, Jews, immigrants, "new women," bootleggers, criminals and of course black Americans, touting "100 percent Americanism." It would spread all kinds of propaganda about the Catholic Church. But like Dagger John, Catholic stood up. The KKK accused the Knights of Columbus as "the Pope's Knights of Mob and Murder, his Militia of Christ, his pilant tools who have bound themselves together in a secret, unholy compact to destroy our free American Public School system, our Constitution and it's guarantees." With 4 million Americans in the KKK in the mid 20s, the Knights fought back in letters, pamphlets, in magazine and meetings. The Knights 'first Spanish-speaking council in the United States,

Del Norte Council 2592 in El Paso, Texas, repelled a Klan attempt to take over the school board and mayor's office in 1922. K of C members followed Klansmen to their secret meetings and then wrote down their license plate numbers and made their names public.

K of C councils in other cities, such as Anaheim, Calif., had similar success in countering the Klan's infiltration of local government.

Sometimes, the Knights answered the Klan with their own show of force. In 1924, after hooded Klansmen abducted, severely beat and mutilated Father John Conoley in Gainesville, Fla., Knights armed with shotguns stood in the windows of the rectory, protecting another priest and the church itself from the Klan's threats to burn it. The Knights also stood up to the KKK's attempts to ban Columbus Day and prevent statues from being built. In Oregon, where the KKK was surprisingly strong, they succeeded in getting laws past to pull Catholic school kids out of the Catholic schools and force the public schools. Knights around the country rallied in defense of the Catholic schools and the Supreme Court overturned the Oregon law unanimously in 1925.

Finally by the mid-20th century, things eased a bit - in part because of the common war effort, but also through education. Bishop Fulton Sheen who

began “Life is Worth Living,” bringing in 30 million viewers a week, and getting on the cover of Time and an Emmy award, helped people understand Catholicism across the country. Thanks to him many converted to the Catholic faith, including Henry Ford II, the CEO of Ford and Louis Budenz, a communist writer.

But is anti-Catholicism gone today? Not so much. It takes on a different form. In recent months, radicals and other anti-Catholic extremists have set fire to a statue of the Virgin Mary in Boston; plowed a vehicle into and attempted to burn down a church in Ocala, Fla., with parishioners inside; vandalized Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York; spray-painted the Denver cathedral; tore down a California statue of Junípero Serra, the Golden State’s patron saint; and defaced and called for the removal of a statue of King Saint Louis IX in the city that bears his name, St. Louis. There’s also the attacks against our dogma of the sanctity of human life and marriage as between a man and a woman. For instance Brett Kavanaugh, the supreme court justice, was questioned if he’d be willing to leave the Knights of Columbus by one senator. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii, because of their “extreme positions.” He was also asked by Senator Kamala Harris “were you aware that the Knights of Columbus opposed a

woman's right to choose when you joined the organization," insinuating that being pro-life was relevant to being an effective judge. Amy Barrett, now up for nomination, was told by Senator Diane Feinstein in 2017 when named to the appellate court, "the dogma lives loudly within you. And that's of concern." This isn't limited to people trying to become a judge; you can see many examples of universities or businesses not really liking people talking on social media about certain aspects of their Catholicism. But again, people do fight back. Both justices gave good answers in response; and in Saint Louis when they tried to come for the statue of Saint Louis, the Archdiocese issued a statement talking about the good work of King Louis IX, and a large group of Catholics would gather there daily to pray the rosary, with one young priest even giving talks about the real history of King Louis IX. Might not be a bad idea to educate, or at least try to educate, those who just want to destroy a statue.

Anti-Catholicism isn't limited to a political party or time in history; it has existed and always will exist. And that is why for you and me as Catholics, we have to respond to it, by being political and active citizens. This means not fearing speaking about our faith, and taking a page from the great Catholics in our country who did not run from their faith, but embraced it.

And this means letting it inform how we vote, and how we live out our faith in the public sphere. As we hear in the Gospel, Jesus says render unto Caesar what is Caesars and unto God what is God's. It means we are active in this world, and we bring our faith into public life. So how is this done properly?

The first step is to make sure our consciences are formed. The Church is there to help us in that regard. Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom states Catholics "must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth." The question for us is who informs our conscience, or that of our kids? Raw emotion? Social media? The problem is many a Catholic can't articulate what our faith holds; its why so many millions of those who say they are Catholic don't even understand the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The catechism is a great tool. It will explain many a moral issue, often which crosses over into politics too, and often challenges us. As Archbishop Charles Chaput puts it, when this happens, "the test of a believer's honesty is his humility; that is, his willingness to put the matter to real prayer and the seriousness of his effort to accept the wisdom of the church and follow her guidance. If after this

effort he still cannot reconcile himself with the teaching of the church, he must do what he believes to be right, because ultimately every Catholic must follow his or her conscience.” It’s important to form it though not just based on popular opinion, or believing what we want to believe. There’s also many other great spiritual writings out there on the Vatican website, and books by Catholic apologists that explain why we believe what we do.

With that though, there is a difference on how faith applies to political issues. Not all political issues are equal; they may deal with subjects that are more serious or less serious, more urgent or less urgent. As an example, in the middle of the 19th century, legal slavery was an issue so serious and urgent that we can all agree today it required complete abolition. No voter of that time who chose a candidate based on whether or he believed human beings could be legally bought, sold and forced to labor would be considered “single issue” because slavery was a preeminent issue. For us as Catholics, abortion today is that issue. More than 60 million unborn children have been killed since 1973. As such, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops calls it our “preeminent priority” as faithful citizens.

Of course, abortion is hardly the only issue or even the only serious issue for Catholic voters to think about. Many people point out that there are even other “life issues” in the political world: health care, immigration, and criminal justice, for instance. All those issues and many others deserve careful consideration, and Catholics should scrutinize politicians positions to see which ones most closely follow Catholic teaching and practical reason.

But abortion is not merely one “life issue” on a menu of other, equally important ones, for two reasons.

First, because of the incomparable gravity and scope of abortion. It is the direct killing of innocent human beings—and not just any human beings but the most powerless and vulnerable human beings of all, the ones we should most try to protect. This legal murder is not something that happens just a handful of times each year but claims more than 2,000 victims a day; far more than capital punishment which is also wrong. Nothing in our American political status quo is more evil, more unjustifiable, and more irredeemable than the regime of legal abortion.

Second, because as with slavery there is only one final goal for dealing with this evil, which is ending it completely as soon as possible. With most other issues, the matter isn't so clear cut. We all should help the poor, help the stranger, promote public health and do other social goals - but people of all political persuasions are free to disagree about the best specific policies like tax rates, welfare programs, education reforms and so on, and even as we do we can make compromises on these issues. But abortion differs in that it requires total abolition; there's no compromise.

This is why our pro-life group handed out voters guides, and why it's so important to look at where candidates stand on this issue in particular. It's also why it's such a core component of our faith that we can't just say because any candidate is Catholic they are pro-life; in fact any Catholic who runs for office but says they support abortion is a hypocrite.

Other key issues include marriage. Again, we do not re-define marriage; that is something God does. There are also pushes to redefine gender though that are ongoing, at very early ages in some cases. And we also need to consider religious liberty. We take public safety seriously, but in many places, now 7 months after it began, worship is still hindered greatly.

No one is forced to go to Mass; but for states to force the shuttering of churches while allowing abortions, liquor stores and selling of marijuana as “essential” is a major issue, which is why multiple dioceses have had lawsuits against their state, and some bishops have led processions of the Eucharist to demand the opening of Churches. As put by Bishop Joseph Strickland a couple of days ago, Bishop of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas: “Catholics...make your decision. Do you believe what the Catechism teaches on life, marriage, sexual morality and the freedom of religion or not? If you do believe in what our faith teaches this must guide your vote at the state, local and national level. Vote according to the truth.” I couldn’t agree more, which is why it is so important to prayerfully think about the candidates on the issues, not just feelings alone. The media gives us glimpses of people, but most people we vote for we haven’t met in real life. So prayerfully look at the issues and make a decision.

Lastly, long after the election has come and gone, it does not mean we as Catholics stop acting. We have to open our eyes to the reality that so much of what we believe is counter cultural, both within our schools, our places of work and larger society. It’s why we need to pray for fortitude, the virtue God gives us, to be active, and to not pipe down. Whether trying to help

someone find the right way in life, or talking about these issues with others or even on social media trying to actually argue rather than shout, we cannot fear being hated for the sake of the Gospel if we truly believe the mission of the Church is salvation of souls.

It goes without saying when we both think about and talk about these issues it can make us feel uncomfortable. It's also clear to remember you have to follow your conscience; and it only becomes sinful if a person is voting for a candidate for the reason they are supportive of abortion. I know full well people here are voting differently. As such, you won't hear me saying if you voted for candidate X you better get to confession. But what you will hear me say not just at election time is there's so much to think about, and sadly we can become so focused on feelings and emotions - who do we like the most based on tone, and what can we say that will not result in us dealing with angry people. We can certainly pray together and talk about the non-hot button things. We're all for helping others, we're all for doing good things for the less fortunate and reminding others Jesus loves them. But faith requires a response; we pray and we render unto God, but as citizens of this earth we live out the virtue of hope by also rendering unto Caesar.

In his book "Render Unto Ceasar," which talks more in depth about Catholics and the political life, the Archbishop closes with the following: "If we really love this country, and if we really treasure our faith, living our Catholic beliefs without excuses or apologies and advancing them in the public square are the best expressions of patriotism we can give to the nation. American Catholics need to be more Catholic, not less; and not simply "more Catholic" but more authentically and unselfishly Catholic - in the way we live our personal lives and in our public words and actions. That includes our political choices. We are citizens of heaven first. But just as God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so the glory and the irony of the Christian life is this: The more truly we love God, the more truly we serve the world." That can only happen if we know our faith and articulate it so we know how to act and use our faith to be politically active to truly make this world a better place, and live out the words "thy kingdom come." May we do that with love and charity armed with fortitude, truly testifying to the truth through making this world a better place.