



# What Way are You Going?

by Fr. Christopher Panagoplos, TOR

## Taking Sides. Really?

Abraham Lincoln had it right. We should not claim God's blessing and endorsement for national policies and practices. We should not proclaim that God is on our side. Rather, said Lincoln, we should pray whether we are on God's side. Martin Luther King Jr reminded us of God's purposes for peace, for justice, for the building of the "beloved community," where everyone is welcomed, everyone is included, and no one felt left out of the conversation. By the working of the Holy Spirit in human hearts, unity is forged in diversity.



"God is on our side" ideology is bad theology. It foments self-righteousness, triumphalism. Rightly so, "if we are on God's side," we breathe a spirit of humility and reflection, accountability, perhaps even penitence—values missing in public life. When we are on God's side, we are challenged to **listen** to God present in the poor, the vulnerable, those left behind; to **discern** basic issues with the help of our Rule and Constitutions; and then go **forth**, resolute in loving relationship with people and all creation

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As we **Go Forth**, allow me to add the words "**gently and pastorally.**"

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is neither R/D, right/left, liberal/conservative. CST is Christocentric. God does not take sides. People seeking leadership positions in government are not divinely appointed! They are chosen for many reasons by many people deeply rooted in faith. We Franciscans are not single-issue voters, but some of us are! Truth-telling is a religious issue—one party defends truth while the other refutes it. Respecting the image of God in every person, in the migrants and refugees, is a religious issue—one party is for offering shelter and security while the other sends them back. Failing to protect the lives of the innocent and defenseless is a religious issue and is a sin against justice.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org) insisted in their pastoral Faithful Citizenship, "that Catholics who bring their moral convictions into public life do not threaten democracy or pluralism but enrich them and the nation. The separation of church and state does not require division between belief and public action, between moral principles and political choices, but protects the right of believers and religious groups to practice their faith and act on their values in public life."

With political leaders obligated to the money of wealthy individuals and corporations, and with the media elites joining the ranks of the rich and famous, who will sound the call to justice? Politics runs on ideological polarities, even to the extreme, and that leaves many people feeling left out. From the political Right we find differences between aggressive nationalists and cautious Isolationists, corporate defenders and principled fiscal conservatives. From the Left, liberalism is everywhere, differences from pragmatic centrists to green lefties, and finding themselves on the defensive. Libertarians are a mixture: liberal on cultural and moral issues, conservative on fiscal and economic policy.

What say you? What about your voice? your “prophetic” voice, speaking moral truth? Our ancestors are Hebrew prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah. They look into the signs of their times, diagnosing the present, and pointing the way to a just solution. **“Prophetic creativity” is using imagination to open up political options** which are failing to solve our most pressing social problems. Prophetic creativity is **active faith-based language that goes beyond old divisions and seeks the common good—the link between personal ethics and social justice.** So, let us strive to capture the imagination, commitment, and the trust of the majority of people in our country. Let personal and social responsibility be woven together in search of the common good. Franciscan Sister Thea Bowman would pray for us and for much needed grace.

I believe that we Franciscans have the capacity, by God’s grace, to envision a world other than the one that is in front of us. The world in front of us is propelled by money, power, greed, fear, and violence where God is eliminated as a serious player and a real character. **Faith encourages us** that God governs with justice and compassion. **Faith assures us** that God creates viable conditions for life to flourish. Fear cannot hold us captive in working for an alternative world. **Prophetic creativity imagines an alternative way to the dominant forces confronting us. It begins with faith, and imagination!** The presence of God has not been vacated. The presence of God lives—in us. Faith, great faith, is called for in these turbulent times.

You recall several times in the Gospels we find Jesus’ disciples to be of “little faith” because they were preoccupied with the world immediately in front of them: worrying about food and clothing; worrying about wind and storm; worrying about bread. Their “little faith” caused them to miss the point—about trust—in the grace of God to provide what is needed for life, and to engage us all on behalf of the “kin-dom” of God. Creative and imaginative thinking can broaden horizons for the greater good of all. We hear many people pre-occupied with the world immediately in front of them, many voices: clamoring about the state of

health care, the wrong leader being elected, jobs going overseas, people of other political persuasions, the rise of acceptable immorality, crime, global warming, poor people, rich people, black people, to name a few. We cannot assume that the world immediately in front of us is the only world the way it is presently arranged, with no possibility of newness.

What will keep us going through all the terror- and fear-talk? Trust! Trust in God, and His ways in us. **“Be not afraid, I go before you always,”** and in all ways. Let us pray

***Most high, glorious God of justice,  
open our eyes to see you  
in the faces of the poor;  
open our ears to hear You  
in the voices of the exploited;  
open our mouths to defend You in the public  
square as well as in deeds of mercy.  
Remind us that what we do to the least among  
us, we do to You. Amen.***



### **Quotations from Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA**

**“Remember who you are  
and whose you are.”**

**“Can you remember who you were before  
the world told you who you should be?”**

**“When you know whose you are and who  
you are, you will run the race of life  
differently.”**

**“I try to make sense of life. I try to keep  
myself open to people and to laughter and  
to love and to have faith.”**

<sup>1</sup> Francis of Assisi: The Saint, p. 109

<sup>2</sup> Rule of 1221