



Forward Together?

A discussion on what the presidential campaign is revealing about the state of the American soul

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Simmonds: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. Before we let Monsignor Albacete introduce our guests, we would like to explain very briefly what motivated us to organize tonight's discussion.

Obviously, nowadays there is no lack of debate about the presidential elections. As should be expected, much of this debate focuses on the most current developments regarding the candidates, their policy proposals, shifts in the electorate, political alliances etc. All these are very interesting topics, of course, and are abundantly covered by the media. We felt, however, that it might be interesting to take a step back and try to ask some more general questions that are less frequently discussed, perhaps because they are harder to bring into focus and because they require more systematic reflection than is allowed by the regular news cycle.

Given that politics is an important form of cultural expression, we would like to ask: What does the 2008 campaign say, if anything, about our culture? What do the candidates reveal, if anything, about our collective self-awareness and the way it is changing? Another way to ask essentially the same question is: What are the ideals that move people in America in 2008? Historically, great political movements have cultural and philosophical roots that go much deeper than politics in a strict sense. For instance, no matter what one thinks of Marxism, it is undeniable that it was not just a political doctrine; it reflected the whole idea of what it means to be human, and of what history is about. Similarly, in the US in the 20th century often politics drew its inspiration from external sources such as, say, the social gospel, the union movement, scientific positivism, Catholic social doctrine, and so on and so forth. Hence, again, the question: What are the belief systems and ideals that are shaping American politics today? We suspect that they are more subtle, and less self-aware than they used to be. Of course, everybody has been talking of the growing ideological polarization between the left and the right, but it seems to us that this is not necessarily a healthy sign about the status of our collective ideals. On the contrary, rhetorical propaganda

and ideological Puritanism are often signs of cultural weakness. Tonight, we are fortunate to be able to ask these questions to an exceptional panel of expert observers of the American scene. But I will leave the introductions to Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete.

Albacete: On my right, and rightly so, a great man, Marvin Olasky. He is editor in chief of *World*, the fifth most read news weekly in the United States; he is the Provost of The King's College, New York City, and a professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a leading conservative columnist (his articles have appeared in *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Investor's Business Daily*) and he is the author of 20 books including *Compassionate Conservatism* and *The American Leadership Tradition*. We will hear first from Dr. Olasky.

Olasky: Well, thank you, Msgr., and thank you all for coming on this night. This has already been an extraordinary election campaign and there are still eight months to go. We've already seen the political obituaries of some candidates written. Senator McCain counted out in the third quarter of last year. Twice reports of Hillary Clinton's immanent political demise—once right before New Hampshire, and once early last week before the Texas and Ohio primaries, and she's still going. The campaign so far reminds me of a Texas story about an old man who was in his upstairs bedroom and nearly dead. With his last bit of energy and his last bit of hope he smelled a heavenly smell, his favorite smell in the world—the smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen. He managed, with his last remaining strength to get out of his bed, to creep down the stairs, to peer around the corner into the kitchen, and there indeed, a heavenly sight—platter upon platter of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. And he reached out his aged, withered hand; he could almost taste that chocolate chip cookie taste in his mouth. And then, down on his hands came a spatula. It was his wife saying, “Stay out of those cookies! They're for the funeral!” And that's the way it's been so far in this campaign. A lot of candidates coming back.

But now we have a period of relative quietude—the Mississippi primary yesterday, and the next big one is April 22nd, in Pennsylvania. So hurry up and wait after two frantic months, from the Iowa caucus, January 3rd, through the primaries on March 4th. Now we have this waiting period, and it's a good time to look at these questions: What is this campaign revealing about American culture?—the beliefs and ideas that move Americans in 2008.

Now, I haven't listened to all the debates; there have been a lot of them. I've listened to a few of them, and astoundingly enough, at least in the ones I've heard, no one has been quoting Alexis de Tocqueville. De Tocqueville is the favorite quotee of politicians and pundits and lots of others, but he's been strangely absent for the campaign this year. He wrote his famous book in the 1830s—*Democracy in America*; it's a book that's regularly cited and quoted, and since we haven't been hearing a lot of him, I can't resist looking at de Tocqueville and trying to, to a certain extent, look at this campaign through his lens.

De Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, wrote that Americans tend to be restless and religious. In the 21st Century that is still the case. There's also a sense in de Tocqueville, despite the mantras we may chant at times, that Americans like conclusions that are, at least to some extent, based in reality, and even though journalists then and now sometimes fall into propaganda, I think there's been a great improvement in media of the past 10-20 years. There's a lot more diversity than there was, and that means that some

reporters, even if they want to be ideologues, tend to be shamed into rambunctious reporting. So those are my four “R’s” –restless, religious, reality-based and rambunctious. I’ll run through them.

Restless. Here’s de Tocqueville writing that “in the United States a man will carefully construct a home in which to spend his old age, and he will sell it before the roof is on. He will settle in one place only to go off elsewhere. If his private business gives him some time for leisure, he will immediately plunge into the whirlwind of politics.” Now that’s the 1830s. It’s interesting if you think of the run of presidents and presidential candidates. A lot of them have been rooted—we think of George Washington from Virginia and John Adams from Massachusetts, and even in 2004 the race was between a New Englander, John Carey, and George W. Bush, a very proud Texan. He talks like one; he emphasizes still his years in Midland, Texas Public School, rather than his Ivy League education, his higher education.

It’s interesting this year, though, if you look at the three major candidates left standing, that they don’t seem rooted in that way. There’s restlessness that starts at the top. John McCain is from everywhere and nowhere. He was born in the Canal Zone and he moved frequently with his military family, and then in his own career he moved around a lot. McCain, when elected to Congress to represent Arizona, spent more time in Hanoi than in Arizona. Obama and Clinton have Illinois in common, but as you know, Clinton headed east as soon as she could, except for a marriage-related sojourn in Arkansas. Hawaii, California, the state of Harvard, all have claimed Obama, along with Illinois.

So these candidates are interesting and different than some of the recent candidates we’ve had, but the restlessness is far more than geographic, especially in Obama states where transcendence of roots is really a campaign centerpiece. He says, “The choice in this election is not between regions or religions or genders, it’s not about rich versus poor, young versus old, it’s not about black versus white, it’s about the past versus the future.” This strikes a very powerful chord in America in a lot of us. Many among the young want to be adults before they’re ready to be. Many among the old want to be young, and most of us don’t know much about history. Obama transcends the racial divisions. Hillary Clinton breaks the glass ceiling for women, and McCain’s restlessness frustrates traditional conservatives.

All three biographies tap into this restlessness, and let’s bring in a Christian reference here too: the apostle Paul writes about how in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female.” So that taps into this religious base. It taps into our historic base of “E Pluribus Unum”—from many to one. So this restlessness has a positive side to it and I think this is one of the things that’s motivating this campaign, but it goes deeper. All the candidates are talking about change, Obama perhaps most of all. He used the word 33 times in his speech last month after he won the Wisconsin primary. All three candidates have turned that 6-letter word into an applause line. And that’s strange in a way. Not that change isn’t needed in a lot of areas, but America is the most affluent major society in history, and so we have the question—Is change a plus? In some ways yes, in some ways no, but one possible change in the next decade could be a US city destroyed by a terrorist nuclear weapon.

It’s strange that we tend to think that change automatically is a plus. But despite the affluence and even in what may be a recession that still remains, still lots of people, including the Beatles, have noted that “money can’t buy you love.” So the change mantra does tap into this sense of alienation. It’s a recognition that we are wanderers; it’s not a recognition that’s new to folks who read the Bible and understand the

Bible. That's what the Bible talks about. We're sojourners; we're wanderers. But in a sense, when you politicize that, it suggests that in politics if only we'd choose the right change agent, can only do what people in the Christian tradition believe that only God can do. So this is an interesting thing that's going on, this insistence on change, this restlessness.

And this brings me to the religious question. All the candidates this year have spoken of their religious beliefs. Here's how de Tocqueville described Americans in the 1830s. He said, "It is often hard to note from listening to them whether the main intention of religion is to obtain everlasting joy in the next world or prosperity in this." Or votes in this, I suppose you might add. It's interesting that journalists wrote and spoke a lot about Mike Huckabee's beliefs. I did a LexisNexis search that showed "Huckabee" and "religious right" in the three months before the Texas and Ohio primaries, "Huckabee" and "religious right" appeared 893 times during those months.

As Huckabee is a religious conservative, Obama is a religious liberal, but he was not typically characterized in that way. His name and "religious left" appeared together only 28 times during that same period, so 28 versus 893. And Huckabee received press criticism. There was an ad in Iowa, you may recall, just before the Iowa caucus, that called him a "Christian leader," and there was a lot of fuss about that. But just before the South Carolina primary there was a brochure that praised Obama as "a committed Christian who is called to Christ."

These two candidates have been both very obviously and in some ways ostentatiously religious. Clinton and McCain also have been, in a slightly more subdued way. Obama in particular has benefited from the messianic hopes and to a certain extent indulged them by saying that he and his supporters can become "a hymn that will heal this nation, repair this world, and make this time different than all the rest." It is an audacious claim; it is the audaciousness of hope, but there's been some sarcasm about him from some conservative circles, but I don't think he should be ridiculed because some of his fans swoon in the aisles. He's delivering the social gospel in a very skilled way, in a way that's more prominent. It's been a century, I think, since anyone has given it so skillfully.

Obama needs to be commended for that; he's giving a real choice and a real emphasis on change, and in fact, that profession of faith invigorates a lot of people and spares very few because in a way it's horizontal rather than vertical. It's an emphasis on finding community rather than communion with God, and this is where Obama comes from. He's a community organizer. This is a consistent message in terms of his past and experience. He writes that two decades ago, we saw "a part of me that remained removed, detached, that I was an observer in their midst, and in time I came to realize that something was missing as well, that without a vessel for my beliefs, without a commitment to a particular community of faith, at some level I would always remain apart and alone." So this is also commendable. He says that joining a church came as "a choice, not an epiphany." And choices do not bother secular Americans; epiphanies sometimes do. Theophanies especially do. But joining a church to fight a sense of aloneness or restlessness or loneliness makes it unobjectionable. And also an affiliation does serve as an anecdote to some of the fever swamp right wing charges that Obama is secretly Muslim and all that. And he says, "I've been to the same Christian church for almost 20 years." And so he has a real consistency there which makes his professions very credible.

It will be interesting, this will come out in the campaign, these things about his pastor for 20 years and associations with Farrakhan, that's going to come out. But that's not Obama; that's the pastor. You can ask questions, legitimate questions. He likes that pastor; he's been there for 20 years; he could've changed churches, and things like that. But once people settle in a church, there's a lack of enthusiasm about leaving. So these charges will come up. You'll see them. But Obama, I think, will be able to respond very well to them. And his religious language, his Christian affiliations, give him the opportunity to really dip into the language and make connections that have resonated with many Americans in many campaigns, one of the most notable being William Jennings Bryan who had a religious left campaign in 1896 and 1908. Despite the latter stuff about the battle of creation/evolution, Bryan was very definitely a candidate of the religious left, very proud of it and very skilled in it, and Obama I think is likely to be the most successful in that way since Bryan. I should point out that Bryan lost three times in a row, but that's because of a third American tendency, a certain reality base.

Now let me get into this. This is de Tocqueville in the 1830s. He wrote about the American tendency to use "crisp, clear, unadorned language in business dealings." But then when you get into supposedly poetic public speaking, "to engage in bombast and relentless pomposity." But de Tocqueville said there's quite this tendency in candidates sometimes that realism and just the facts will eventually win out. And this will be something interesting for the campaign, especially if Obama does become the Democratic candidate. His brilliant oratory so far has allowed him to escape specifics, but Hillary Clinton has been insinuating that Obama is unprepared and unrealistic, and that apparently helped her a lot in the Texas and Ohio primaries; she did very well with the folks that made up their minds just before voting. But she can only go so far in that approach because she essentially shares the same ideologies as Obama. McCain, coming from a different ideology and world view, is going to be punching very hard on this and his proxies are going to be punching very hard on this. What's the realism in all of this? What's the beef?

And I think this will come out very clearly in the debate we've already seen. It will become more intense in the general election—Iraq and American activities in Iraq. It's one thing to argue about who opposed the war in 2003, but the real question is what to do in 2008. It's interesting, there was an article by Angelina Jolie in *The Washington Post* late last month with a surprising headline, "A Reason to Stay in Iraq." And her look at reality there was worth a thousand bombastic speeches. Angelina Jolie argued that the US should not squander what the troops there have achieved, an opportunity to make humanitarian progress that she said would be lost if American forces pull out precipitously. This is something that Obama is going to have to deal with because we don't really expect to hear that coming from Angelina Jolie. In fact, I saw a poll in *CosmoGirl.com*. The readers voted Angelina Jolie number three on their list of desired presidential candidates. She was behind Oprah. She was behind John Stewart, but she was ahead of Bono, and I've been looking at speculation about McCain's list of possible running mates and she doesn't seem to be on it for some reason, but it certainly would make the ticket very, very saleable.

McCain should run with what she wrote, namely "A Reason to Stay in Iraq" and will we squander what has been gained over there in the past year after all the squandering and mess of the past four years and why were we even there in the first place? The question in 2008 is: What do we do now? So that's one

thing I think we're going to hear, and it will be a very interesting debate. As interesting as the campaign has been so far, I think it's going to get sensationally exciting.

And then there'll be another thing that comes up, and this is a hard subject to talk about, but McCain is going to try, or some other Republican is going to have to try to pop Obama's halo of humaneness. And one way they might do this is to look at Jill Stanek, a whistle-blowing nurse in Illinois who resigned from her position as a nurse when she saw babies who were born alive being left to die when they were born alive after failed abortions, very late-term babies. And there was an Illinois senate committee that looked into all this, and Jill Stanek writes that "Obama's clinical discourse, his lack of mercy, shocked me." *The Chicago Sun Times* ran a cartoon of Obama holding a sign with "live birth abortion" on the sign, and God reaching down from Heaven to a baby born in front of the state senator, and Obama yelling at God, "You keep out of this!" This is going to be a tough subject to get into. We'll see what happens on this question. It's one that's going to be there in the campaign. And the question is—will Obama be able to keep his aura, his messianic aura, his aura of humaneness, if that's thrown at him?

Obama and Clinton have both received favorable press coverage over the past two months. There was a study in the Center for Media and Public Affairs. Obama's coverage is overwhelmingly positive. 83% of the stories ended up being positive; 53% of the Clinton stories were positive. That's both much better than George W. Bush and so forth, but will that change?

There's the fourth "R"—Rambunctious. Right before the Texas and Ohio primaries you started to see a change among the journalists. Here's our last de Tocqueville quote: "It is an axiom of political science in the United States that the only means of neutralizing the effect of newspapers is to multiply their numbers." And that's what's happened. A generation ago, the number of news outlets in America was the lowest ever in proportion to the population, our lowest ever at least going back to colonial days. There was a liberal virtual monopoly in city after city where there was one newspaper that usually, at least on the front page, sometimes the editorial page might be different than the front page, which is the real editorial page of the newspaper, there have been a whole lot of studies showing a tilt to the left. And reporters could do this and there was very little risk of public chastisement, at least from the right, because the organs weren't there. Occasionally there might be some things that had very minor circulation, but there wasn't a big circulation of some of these things. *National Review* was coming on, was pretty much alone there. There were some other publications. There was a little bit of that, but on the Internet, on the Talk Radio page, that's changed, and now reporters who go overboard either on the left or sometimes to the right, immediately come into very sizable criticism from other people on blogs, on webzines, on talk radio, on all sorts of things, and sometimes on Fox News, and so forth.

The turnabout of Chris Matthews of MSNBC has been fascinating. Early in February he reacted to one Obama victory by saying, "I felt this thrill going up my leg. Obama seems to have the answers. This is the New Testament." This was a little bit over the top. "A thrill going up my leg," what exactly does that mean? And he encountered a lot of ridicule for that on blogs, on talk radio, all over the place. I don't know what got to him, but he really changed a lot. Right before the Texas primary he very aggressively was questioning Kirk Watson, a former mayor of Austin, who is now a state senator and Obama supporter. Let me just quote you some of this interview:

Matthews: What has he accomplished, sir? You say you support him. Sir, you have to give me his accomplishments. You support him for president, you are on national television, name his legislative accomplishments.

Watson: Well, I'm not going to be able to name his specific items of legislative accomplishments.

Now, Clinton supporters and McCain supporters might have had the same problem, except for McCain-Feingold which conservatives don't particularly like. But Chris Matthews pressed on:

Matthews: Can you name any? Can you name anything he's accomplished as a congressman?

And Kirk Watson, appearing as dumb as Sherlock Holmes's friend Watson:

Watson: No, I'm not going to be able to do that tonight.

Matthews: Well, that is a problem, isn't it?

Well, indeed it was. And the press adulation that Obama received until just a few weeks ago, there is some backlash emerging. A candidate benefits when reporters give him messianic status. But when they start to report that others are treating him as the messiah they aren't as charmed.

I did another LexisNexis search. During 2007 there were an average of 11 articles per month with "Obama" and "messiah" in them. During January 2008 there were 48. The first half of February, just the first half, it was up to 56. The second half, 153. This became a common theme among journalists, starting to hit back against Obama, that we've gone overboard on him. I can give you some examples. *Times* Joe Klein, "There's something just a wee bit creepy about the mass messianism." *Los Angeles Times* Joel Stein, "The Cult of Obama" was his headline. Paul Krugman here in *The New York Times*, "The Obama campaign seems dangerously close to becoming a cult of personality." Jake Tapper, ABC, "The helter-skelter cultish quality of Obama worshippers." And of course *Saturday Night Live* made fun of the journalist who kissed up to Obama, and that may have had some effect on the primaries. And then the unkindest cut of all from Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*, on the eve of the Texas and Ohio primaries, he said, "If you believe the media, Barrack Obama was born in a manger." So there's the rambunctiousness.

So restless and religious, reality-based, perhaps, certainly rambunctious. I think we have an exciting eight months ahead of us.

Albacete: Thank you. Thank you very much.

To my left, Hendrik Hertzberg. He is a senior editor and staff writer at *The New Yorker*, where he frequently writes the opening comment in "The Talk of the Town" He originally joined *The New Yorker* in 1969, after serving as an officer in the U.S. Navy. He left after the 1976 Presidential election to serve as President Jimmy Carter's chief speechwriter from 1979 until 1981. From 1981 until 1992 he was associated with *The New Republic* and served two terms as its editor. During his second stint as editor, between 1988 and 1992, *The New Republic* won three National Magazine Awards, including back-to-back awards for General Excellence. In 1992, he returned to *The New Yorker*. He is the author of *Politics:*

Observations & Arguments (2004). In 2006, his Comment essays won a National Magazine Award for Columns and Commentary. In 1994 or 98, he met me. He told everyone.

Hertzberg: Well, I feel a little bit out of place speaking under these auspices and in this company. My religious credentials, I have to admit, are a bit thin. One of them is sitting to my left—Msgr. Albacete; he’s quite right, we did meet ten years ago. We actually met more than ten years ago, but ten years ago the crucial coming together of Albacete and Hertzberg was at the wedding of Hertzberg which he performed and I’m extremely, extremely grateful to him for that, so I may not love God, but I do love Msgr. Albacete.

Albacete: Close enough.

Hertzberg: And my other credential is sitting to my right, oddly enough. In the last two or three years I’ve given a talk each year at The World Journalism Institute which is conducted under the auspices of The King’s College of which Marvin is the provost, over at the Empire State Building. I’m slightly baffled about why they invite me, and even more baffled about why they invite me back, but I’ve always enjoyed that talk. I’m sort of the official village atheist of The World Journalism Institute which trains young Christian journalists, as they call themselves, to enter the mainstream media. And those kids are wonderful. They are so nice, they’re polite, they’re open-minded, and they’re very welcoming even to an infidel such as myself.

Well, we’re supposed to talk about this election and the soul of the country which is a pretty humongous subject, so I’m going to try to be brief because I want to get into the discussion. I’ll make three points. The first one is that we’ve just had an experiment, a seven-year experiment in “compassionate conservatism” under a president who is the most overtly religious since my old boss, Jimmy Carter. And my antennae for detecting Christian belief are admittedly weak, but I really don’t see, compared to the Christian values that my mother, who was a Christian, Congregationalist turned Quaker, a strong social gospel proponent, the values that she gave me to understand were Christian. I haven’t seen much evidence of that in the past seven years. The Bush administration’s tax policies consist of taking from the poor and giving to the rich, or giving to the rich and saddling the bill on the poor and the future. This administration has shown a breath-taking contempt for the natural environment. Its environmental agencies have served as extensions of business lobbies. It has maintained pretty consistently a policy of denial about climate change. After 9/11, President Bush had an opportunity to bring the country together on a kind of national unity government. He had the support of virtually the entire population regardless of ideology or party, and he used the energy of 9/11 instead to divide the country, to question the patriotism of Democrats and liberals, and that unity, that feeling that was the only positive legacy of 9/11 was very quickly squandered. And finally, his has been a policy of war, a war in Iraq that was completely gratuitous, that was based on ideological fantasy, and promoted “vile intelligence fixed around the policy,” as the famous British memo put it. And perhaps most disgraceful of all, and most un-Christian of all, if I may say so, has been the Bush administration’s embrace of torture which reached a kind of climax last week when Bush vetoed legislation that would have directed the CIA to abide by the same rules in questioning prisoners that the military abide by. And I would argue that this policy is not only morally wrong, but also foolish and damaging to our national interests in the extreme, but it’s perhaps natural that the military does not wish to use torture since members of the military are in the position where they have

to worry about falling into the hands of our enemies, whereas the bureaucrats and policy intellectuals who, thanks to the United States, is virtually the only country in the Democratic world to try and torture as a national policy, they are in no danger. The creators of this policy are in no danger of being physically harmed by it.

Now as for the coming election, on the Republican side, something's happened that usually happens only among Democrats; it happened when Jimmy Carter was elected, and that is the sort of ideologically motivated forces in the party form a circular firing squad, finish each other off, and the one who remains standing is the odd-man-out who becomes the-odd-man in. There's no question but that McCain is by far the strongest candidate the Republicans could offer, and that's because, in terms of the aura around him and to some extent even the policies he has at least in the past espoused, he is the most distant from the Republican base and the current Republican president. He has, until recently when he slipped a bit, taken a principled stand against torture, one that was not particularly popular in his party. He took a principled stand against the use of the tax code to line the pockets of the rich at the expense of everyone else. He's abandoned that of late, but at least he did at one time. And he has a sense of honor, so I do think he's by far the strongest candidate they could've offered. His temperament is such that I would be a little worried about him in the White House. I think, for the country's sake, we might have been slightly better off with Romney because he seems to be a pure technocrat with no values to get in the way, but simply a practical man who probably wouldn't do damage because of any ideological ecstasies.

On the Democratic side, there is where we see some real hope for the soul of the country. The fact that the two remaining candidates are a woman and an African-American is absolutely extraordinary; it's absolutely amazing; it means that we're very likely to see a president in a year's time who is either black or female, and that is something that I never, ever expected to see in my lifetime. Furthermore, the two, despite all the rancor and ill-feeling that's present on the Democratic side this year at the moment, there's actually a lot of unity in terms of the basic policies and values that these candidates espouse. And it isn't just their identities, in the case of Obama especially. It's the promise of transcending identity. I think that these candidates, and Obama especially, (I won't deny that he's the one that I'm rooting for) are rooted, not necessarily in geography, but how many of us really are? When de Tocqueville wrote, geography was a crucial part of political identity, and identity in general. Most people didn't get 50 miles from where they were born during their lifetime. Geography is very far down the list now of things that are important to us, though our political system is still based almost entirely on geography. One of the reasons, in my opinion, that the system seems sluggish and unresponsive. But Obama offers a chance to transcend, not just race, but many of the identity differences that plague us. Race is a kind of stand in for the rest of them, and to a lesser extent, Senator Clinton holds out a similar prospect. So that's my take on what effect this campaign might have on the American soul.

I'll just finish by starting the more contentious part of the proceedings today by twitting Marvin on one or two points. One of his "Rs" was religious. I would just point out that generationally there is a change. Younger people are less religious either than they used to be or than their elders now. And the fastest growing religious category in the country is not evangelicals, but rather unbelievers or what is wrongly called unbelievers because I can tell you that, for instance, I have beliefs and I have values and I'll put them up against Governor Robinson's any day of the week. I might not put them up against Lorenzo's.

But most of his colleagues in the industry I would put them up against. I would also say that it's quite natural that the personal views of journalists tilt to the left. Just as it's natural that the personal views of corporate executives tilt to the right, what attracts people to journalism is curiosity, a desire to see how other people live and how they see the world, a sympathy for the underdog—and I see that in the young Christian students that I talk to at the World Journalism Institute. I'd like to think that their interest in working in mainstream media is a first step toward a broadening of themselves that has only just begun.

I could quarrel a little bit with Marvin's riff on Chris Matthews. Lorenzo remembers that Chris was one of the people at my wedding. I twitted him for giving a hard time to that poor state legislator, but it was really Chris's job, he's the journalist, to check out what Obama's legislative accomplishments were. There are plenty of them, but he was doing something different. He really wasn't going after Obama there. He was going after that poor state senator and showing his impatience with the sort of spokespersons that are offered up as sacrificial lambs to his program.

So I hope we can get into some fun topics here, and I thank you all very much for your attention.

Q&A

Albacete: I have been asked to make a 10-minute presentation on tonight's subject. I cannot pretend to have the expertise of our speakers, their knowledge and experience in U.S. politics, so I thought I would say something about the question itself, about how I understand the significance of a political campaign and what it reveals.

Politics forces us to witness to what we hold most dear. This challenge cannot be avoided. Not being interested in politics, ignoring the campaign and the election is already an answer to the question about what we care the most.

I tried to look at politics through the lens of my Christian faith. But I must make clear that it is not that faith provides me with political proposals. I judge the value of these entirely with my reasoning capacity like everyone else, (or as everyone else should by being reasonable and not ideological). Faith is a form of knowledge that in fact broadens reason. This has been, as you know, the banner so far of the present pontificate of Benedict XVI, the broadening of reason. And I think it deals directly with the questions that have been raised here today.

The way faith broadens reason was to be summarized by the Pope in a very powerful way in a speech at the University of La Sapienza in Rome, a speech he was not able to give because of opposition to inviting him within the university. But the text was released. The Pope in that speech refers to the arguments of Jürgen Habermas (and this guy is more atheist than Rick) that "the legitimacy of a constitutional charter should be derived from two sources: the egalitarian political participation of all citizens [Democratically open to all citizens] and from the reasonable form in which political conflicts get resolved." I think most of us would be satisfied with that observation of Habermas. In regard to this "reasonable form," Habermas notes that "it cannot only be a struggle for arithmetic majorities, but it must be characterized by a 'process of argumentation that is sensitive to the truth.'"

“This,” says the Pope, “is good stuff.” Well, he didn’t say it just like that; he went over the Greek origins of the word “stuff” and in German, and so forth. But in the end it was good stuff. “However,” he said, “it is difficult to transform this,” to apply this observation of Habermas, to put it into political practice. The representatives of this “process of argumentation” are predominantly the political parties, and these will undoubtedly have as their aim the obtaining of majorities, and so they will always be concerned with the interests that they promised to satisfy. (You can’t expect anything else. We don’t have the party of saints.) Such interests are often particular and do not truly serve the whole. So this “sensitivity to truth” says the Pope, is again and again defeated by the “sensitivity to interests.”

The Pope says he finds it significant that Habermas, as a non-believer, speaks about “sensitivity to truth” as a necessary element of the process of political argumentation, introducing thus the concept of truth to politics.

This brings up the question: What is truth? How is it recognized? What is reasonable? How does reason show itself to be a true reason? These are the questions of the Pope. These questions cannot be answered by politics, but in a viably human political system there exist voices besides those of parties and interest groups, and these must be heard without contesting the importance of parties and interest groups.

Here the Pope refers to the role of the university as “guardian to the sensitivity to truth.” The role of faith, its broadening of reason in making political judgments, is clarified as the source—not to present itself as an exigency to those for whom this faith still remains inaccessible—of a purification of reason, helping reason to be more itself, an encouragement to remain faithful to that sensitivity to truth in politics, and thus a force against the pressures of power and interest.

If politics forces us to witness what we hold most dear, faith allows us a grasp of its reasonableness, and for those who do not share this faith, it encourages them not to give up on reason’s ability to pursue the truth about the desires of the human heart, especially its orientation to transcendence, and thus to pursue a politics that is open to these desires that transcend the particular interests.

Many will have recognized the term “that which we hold most dear” as a citation from Vladimir Soloviev’s work, *The Short Tale of the Antichrist*, where a totalitarian dictator happily recognized as the Emperor by most people because he has been able to satisfy the desires of the people—both material and spiritual. He had brought progress, peace, unity among people—indeed he had made real the agenda of all political parties ever. He is described as a “convinced spiritualist,” an admirable philanthropist, a committed, active pacifist, a vegetarian, a determined defender of light, an admirer of the ethical teachings of Christ, a believer in God and goodness. Now he wants to bring unity to Christianity. Most Christians pledged loyalty to him. He summons three Christian leaders (a Catholic, a Protestant and an Orthodox) to find out how he can complete his work. The Emperor asks them what he can do for them to make them happy. “What can I give you, not as my subjects, but as a fellow Christian? Tell me what is closest to your heart so I can direct my efforts in this direction?” The Emperor decried the division among these Christians and insisted that he wanted to bring about their unity to serve the common good. The Emperor tries again and again to find something he can do to help them recover their unity. Finally, at the end of this scene, he says to them, “What can I do for you, strange men? Tell me yourselves, Christians abandoned by the majority of your brothers and leaders, and condemned by popular sentiment, tell me,

what do you hold most dear?” At this moment one of them, the Orthodox responds “with sweetness”: “Great Emperor, that which we hold dearest in Christianity is Christ himself. He Himself and everything that comes from Him, since we know that in Him resides bodily the fullness of divinity.”

The question Christians face when they say this is the question raised by Pope Benedict in Aparecida, Brazil: “Could this priority for Christ not in fact be a flight towards emotionalism, towards religious individualism, an abandonment of the urgent reality of the great economic, social and political problems facing the world, and a flight from reality towards an ethereal, spiritual world?”

“This leads to another question,” says the Pope, “What is reality? Are only these needs real?” Can reason—our path to reality—deal only with material needs? It is here that faith makes its contribution to all our quests to satisfy our human needs, namely by expanding (broadening) the field of research, so to speak, in the quest for human happiness, and keeping always an open horizon that does not exclude any element of the human experience, of the human search for happiness. Indeed, reason by itself will be moved in this direction. However, it is often tempted to stop along the way, perhaps out of frustration. Reason’s horizon is infinity; it is what we call God, and as the Pope says, “To detach the quest of reason from the foundational and decisive reality we call God is to falsify the notion of reality and in consequence, [it] can only end up in blind alleys or with recipes for destruction.”

Faith in Christ for us makes its contribution to this search. The reality of Christ, human and divine, sustains our hope in the success of reason’s quest and does not allow any reason to give up its quest, in this case, for a reasonable politics.

This is how the Pope ended his speech. This is how I will end it:

“Today the danger of the Western world is that man, precisely in the consideration of the grandeur of his knowledge and power, might give up before the question of truth. And that means at the same time that reason, in the end, bows to the pressure of interests and the charms of utility, constrained to recognize it as the ultimate criterion...[Reason] then must have the courage for the truth and in this way becomes greater, not less.”

So what do we expect today from our political leaders as we look at the political horizon? We expect the freedom, the recognition and the freedom to live these consequences of our faith, and we propose the insights about reason that come from our love for Christ. In the Pope’s words, “We do not attempt to impose this faith on others in an authoritarian way or conclusions coming from it, since it can only be bestowed in freedom.” All we seek is to “keep the sensitivity to truth alive, to continually invite reason to seek out the truth and the good...”

Thank you.