

Landry: Amid political mudslinging, an invitation to examine our consciences

I have a love/hate relationship with politics.

On the one hand, I recognize that it is a gift to live in a country like Canada, where many of us take our right to vote and to publicly complain about our elected officials – a privilege not available in significant parts of the world – for granted.

On the other hand, I find that election years can bring out some of the worst of our political process. It seems like all too often, election campaigns focus less on actual policies and more about the character (either real or assumed) of the individuals who let their names stand for public office.

While attack campaigns are nothing new, the age of the Internet and social media seems to bring a whole new shine on the ugliness of these tactics. What we've seen happen in some campaigns is a "deep dive" into the public history of one's opponent. This dive scours the things they have said, written, or posted online or otherwise, seeking something controversial (or downright offensive) that could be used against them.

In some cases, what's found comes from decades ago and can be as short as a single spoken or written line. It's a good reminder that today, very little is private, as these inquiries can include any social media post, comment, or meme can become ammunition for one's opposition.

During the last provincial election, a colleague of mine commented that he was grateful social media didn't exist when he was in high school or university: he couldn't imagine what a scouring of his past comments would reveal. I think his sentiments would be echoed by many among us but mercifully, most of us are not held to the same standard as our political representatives.

We are held to a higher standard. Jesus couldn't be clearer on that point. There are two passages in the Gospels which, every time I come across them, make me shudder. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that "...everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36), and in Luke's Gospel, He says "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs" (Luke 12:2-3).

While our would-be political leaders are held accountable for what they've said, what Jesus is calling us to is the virtue of integrity in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Merriam-Webster defines integrity as a "firm adherence to a code of moral value" and "the quality or state of being complete

or undivided.”

This challenge is expressed beautifully when, during a deacon’s ordination, the Bishop presents him with a book of the Gospels and invites him to practise integrity in his ministry by saying “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practise what you teach.”

While our moral code has been spelled out quite clearly for us (see the third section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church), our firm adherence to it is a much greater challenge – particularly in a way that could be defined as “complete and undivided.”

The constant mudslinging in recent political campaigns can be frustrating and disheartening. As followers of Christ, though, we might find in all of this venom an invitation to examine our consciences. There are certainly moments where, for example, our actions on a Saturday night don’t properly reflect the words we pray Sunday morning. To be honest, there are moments where our actions in the parish parking lot immediately following Mass stand in stark contrast to the sign of peace we offered 20 minutes earlier.

I think that all of us can find it easy to be patient and show compassion to our friends and at the same time much more difficult to do the same for those whom we might feel “don’t deserve it.”

To make a long story short, if someone did a “deep dive” into our thoughts, words, and actions, in the same way as a political campaign examines the life of an opponent – many of us would be found to be lacking in our Christian witness.

It’s here where our Lord’s call to integrity should begin to ring in our hearts, and this last week of Lent is a wonderful opportunity to continue turning back to the Lord and knowing His forgiveness.

Ask yourself what are the careless words I have spoken in the dark? Where are the places I might compromise my moral integrity out of fear or selfishness? Where are the places in my heart that God is calling me to apologize and make amends so that I might offer a more integrated, whole, and holy witness of what it means to be a Christian?

Albertans will go to the election polls on April 16.

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