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Post-election, we are still divided, in need of healing

Heidi Schlumpf | Nov. 23, 2012

Election night was, for me, a true multimedia event. My television was tuned to the local PBS station, with Gwen Ifill, David Brooks and Mark Shields providing analysis as the returns came in. But most of the breaking news came from my other screen: my laptop.

Jumping between news websites, my Facebook and Twitter feeds, and a couple private chats, I stayed on top of which states were being projected for Mitt Romney and which were going for Barack Obama. In fact, I was typing the news that Ohio had been called for Obama when PBS announced that he had indeed been re-elected president of the United States.

I'll admit it: I cried. But I was tempted to cheer, which wouldn't have been a surprising response, given how the democratic election of the leader of our country pretty much resembles the Super Bowl, the World Series and the World Cup, all rolled into one.

By the next morning, the American people, who had previously been divided into Democrats ("blue") and Republicans ("red"), could now be labeled "winners" and "losers" based on the presidential and other, local election results. Demographic groups, too, were categorized as winners or losers. Women, Latinos and other people of color, and gays and lesbians were popping champagne. White men? Not so much.

The Catholic church was also declared a loser. Although a number of vocal bishops had insisted that opposition to abortion, gay marriage and/or comprehensive contraceptive insurance coverage were the defining issues of this election, a majority of U.S. Catholics did not follow the hierarchy's thinly veiled campaigning for the Republican ticket and platform.

It's no fun to be the loser. I should know; I'm a Cubs fan. But it's been interesting to observe the reactions of those who did not prevail on Nov. 6. In his concession speech, Romney appeared sad and a little shocked, but he called for an end to "partisan bickering and political posturing" and urged his supporters to pray for the president and the country. Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York also promised prayers, but got in a plug for his priorities in a congratulatory letter to Obama. A number of conservatives have been uncharacteristically quiet.

But not everyone has been so graceful in defeat, and the blame game has begun. I heard a conservative talk radio host blame Romney's loss on his refusal to appear on -- surprise, surprise -- conservative talk radio. Others say the Republican Party needs to move more to the center. Shockingly, one Catholic conservative, Austin Ruse, president of the Catholic Family & Human Rights Institute, posted his solution on his Facebook wall, writing, "Women should not be able to vote until they are married." I can only hope he was kidding.

In a world in which social media allow anyone to broadcast their every thought and feeling, emotion-laden reactions are the norm, from Donald Trump's Twitter tantrum ("This election is a total sham and a travesty. We are not a democracy.") to the legion of references to end times among some evangelical Christians.

Some of the winners, too, have been less than magnanimous in victory. If you thought the snarky Tumblr memes would end after the election, you would be wrong, since apparently the temptation to gloat is too strong. A number of liberals have offered to buy a plane ticket for Rush Limbaugh, who famously promised to move to Costa Rica (where ironically there is universal health care) if Obamacare passed. Others seem just a little too happy to dance on conservatism's grave.

True, there is much talk about "reaching across the aisle" and the need to work together to avoid the "fiscal cliff." But when one side complains about partisanship, they're usually talking about the need for the other side to compromise. Too much of the lament about political polarization is itself merely more political posturing.

So where do we go from here, as Americans and as Catholic Christians? Do those who are grieving and those who are celebrating have anything in common? Or are we headed for the next civil war?

Author Parker J. Palmer, a Quaker, believes Americans today -- much like at the time of the Civil War -- are brokenhearted and in need of healing. The "politics of rage," like any expression of intense anger, is really a mask for heartbreak, he writes in *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

Healing that anger takes inner, spiritual work. As I learned during a retreat with Palmer this fall, he believes five "habits of the heart" are critical to sustaining a democracy, the most difficult of which seems to be the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways and an appreciation of the value of "otherness." Such habits are spiritual disciplines that require prayer and practice.

The Gospel reading on the Sunday before Election Day featured Jesus telling the scribes that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12). While we may interpret those commandments differently, it seems a fitting place to start the necessary healing after the election. With love, there are no winners and losers. Either we all win, or we all lose.

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