



# OUR DIVIDED SOCIETY

## Part II: Solutions

BY CHRIS KELLERMAN, S.J.

In the previous *JustSouth Quarterly*, we looked at some of the reasons for our current polarized political climate. In this article we'll look at some potential solutions. In our world of unceasing caustic remarks, sensationalism, and demonization, is there anything that can be done?

University of Maryland political scientist Lilliana Mason, in her book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, presents four ideas for healing the divide: increasing cross-party contact, establishing and modeling better social norms, using affirming statements in political conversations, and employing superordinate goals.<sup>1</sup> We should keep in mind that these tools are not meant to make our country more politically moderate or to persuade others to abandon radical positions. They are meant only to help heal our acrid, demonizing political environment. Healing this divide, however, will take hard work and commitment.

### **Increasing Cross-Party Contact**

Mason notes that various scholars since 1954 have pointed to personal contact as being an effective way of reducing

outgroup prejudice. A group of psychologists in 2011, for example, published a report finding that intergroup contact, and intergroup friendships in particular, helped reduce prejudice through empathy and reduced anxiety.<sup>2</sup> This could help heal the rifts between Democrats and Republicans, as well.

More recent studies have confirmed these findings. In her work *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Berkeley sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild spent five years getting to know rural Louisianans with profound political differences from her. She wrote that she was trying to understand the "empathy walls" that exist in our society: those walls that are obstacles "to deep understanding of another person" and "that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances."<sup>3</sup> By the end of her time in Louisiana, Hochschild had developed friendships and relationships of shared empathy with these conservative Southerners. Her book portrayed what most of us probably know to be true: that getting to know one another personally helps.

In its October 2019 report *Divided by Design*, E Pluribus Unum reported that a majority of its respondents found festivals and sporting events to be particularly helpful for bringing people together across economic and racial lines.<sup>4</sup> Catholics already have a great tool to help bring about these kinds of events: our parishes, dioceses, and schools. Even if our parishes have become somewhat segregated politically—into the “traditional” parishes versus the “social justice” ones—we can still encourage attendance at diocesan-wide events, or even invite other parishes or Catholic schools near ours to co-host events with us in order to bring different groups of people together.

## Social Norms

Party leaders could stop some of the name-calling, demonization, and win-at-all-costs mentality by modeling different behavior. Mason asks:

What if the leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties decided to take on a tolerant rhetoric toward the opposing team? What if party prototypes started discussing real differences rather than demonizing their opponents? What if party opinion leaders (of both parties) started talking about politics by commending compromise and acknowledging the humanity and validity of the opposing team?<sup>5</sup>

She notes on the same page, however, that “party leaders are incentivized to maintain conflict and incivility” by the votes and media attention such sensationalism and demonization attract. As voters, we can demand otherwise and stop paying attention when the name-calling begins.

Catholic leaders could model this behavior as well. Unfortunately, far too many priests and bishops have participated in this acrid environment via social media. All Catholics could help by rejecting this behavior and demanding civility and Christian love from our leaders, as well as trying our best to model civil and loving behavior in our own lives.

## Affirming the Opponent

Mason references numerous studies that show that low self-esteem and insecurity about one’s social status can cause people to dig their heels more deeply into their “teams” in order to feel more secure. Reminding others of their worth can help to ease this problem. For example, in a conversation with another person who does not share my views on a particular social issue, I can ask them about their own life experiences that have led them to their position. I can point out the parts of their story that resonate with my own, and I can affirm that their opinions matter and that their pain is real. This does not necessarily

mean compromising my values. It simply helps develop a safe atmosphere that facilitates a productive conversation.

Our faith gives us a strong foundation upon which to practice these affirmations. Even our political opponents whose positions we find to be completely unjust and harmful are still God’s children. We are called to love one another, including our enemies (Mt 5:43-48; Jn 13:34-35). Affirming my opponent’s value as a child of God and recognizing that sin and grace are working in both of our lives can be a powerful way to enter into a conversation with empathy, respect, and mutual love.

## Superordinate Goals

Working together on a superordinate goal—one based on shared values that transcend one’s team—has also been an effective way of bringing people together and humanizing one’s opponents. Such a method can be abused, however, when group unity is invoked in order to suppress dissent or ignore injustices. Finding an effective way for Democrats and Republicans to come together to work on some shared project could be an effective tool for reducing outgroup prejudice.

It is no secret that Catholics are not one of the “sorted identities” that have all ended up in one party. We are as split as the rest of the country. But we have a very significant shared identity: our faith. We could start small, such as different parishes coming together to work on a joint service project. But if politically liberal Catholics and politically conservative Catholics could rely instead on their shared Catholic identity to build bridges with one another, we could model for our country how to reduce polarization in society.

Healing our divide will not be easy. If we want our country to change, then, rather than bemoaning its problems, we must begin practicing these values in our own lives. Only then will we create a space in which people feel comfortable coming together to build a more just world—a goal shared by all of us.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, ch. 8.
- 2 Pettigrew, T.F, Tropp, L.R., Wagner, U., and Christ., O. (2011). “Recent advances in intergroup contact theory,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35, 271–280.
- 3 Hochschild, A.R. (2016). *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York, NY: The New Press, 5.
- 4 E Pluribus Unum. (2019, October). “Divided by Design: Findings from the American South.”
- 5 Mason, 133.