

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, May 17th 2018

“Paul was aware that some were Sadducees and some Pharisees, so he called out before the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees; I am on trial for home in the resurrection of the dead.”

Acts of the Apostles

Today’s reading from Acts showcases St. Paul in a role that had never occurred to me: astute religious politician. He stood before the divided Sanhedrin accused of an essentially political crime. By shrewdly appealing to the members of one faction, he got the two groups arguing with each other instead of him and lived to take his battle to the bigger stage in Rome.

Would Christianity have developed as anything more than an obscure Jewish faction if Paul had been less astute? Could anyone else have persuaded Peter and the other apostles to excuse gentile converts to Christianity from observing Jewish laws that they objected to like circumcision?

It’s NO insult to acknowledge Paul’s political and communications skills. The important thing is to learn from him as we try to carry out St. Ignatius’s command to change the world for the good.

There’s nothing immoral about politics per se. Where would the U.S. be if Abraham Lincoln had not emancipated the slaves in a way that kept European countries from backing the Confederacy? Who but a brilliant politician with unequalled moral credentials like Nelson Mandela could have steered South Africa through its first years after apartheid?

While many politicians are indeed corrupt and venal, a few became saints like St. Thomas More. St. John Paul II who more than anyone brought about the fall of communism in Eastern Europe showed how sanctity and politics can go hand in hand.

I suspect God knocked St. Paul off his horse en route to Damascus because Paul was smart and driven as well as devout.

Ironically I read this passage immediately after finishing the new biography of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, “Eunice The Kennedy Who Changed the World” by Eileen McNamera. Eunice was driven by her deep Catholic faith to battle for decades to change society’s treatment of people with disabilities, especially developmental disabilities. To her dying day, she was lobbying Congress from a hospital bed on behalf of people whom she led from being warehoused in institutions to the mainstream. Her better-known brothers left no legacy as remarkable as her Special Olympics.

Today’s reading should teach us that not only is it okay to work politically, it’s virtually a moral mandate. St. Paul and St. Ignatius would surely have agreed with Edmund Burke, a British parliamentary leader, when he said that “The only thing needed for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

