

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates Wisdom Handed On

I grew up in Minnesota in the 1950's and 1960's when politics was exciting and readily engaged the attention of us high school and college aged students.

There was the 1960 election which surfaced political competitors such as Senators Kennedy and Humphrey as well as Vice-President Nixon. The presidential primaries, the nail-biting conventions, the presidential debates captured a nation.

One of my classmates in high school was the son of Hubert Humphrey's campaign manager. Through this friend, I came to know Senator Humphrey and naturally as a neophyte followed Minnesota's favorite son and cheered the Senator on in his political forays.

Senator Humphrey had many admirable personal traits. He had an uncanny memory for names. Once introduced to him, rarely did he forget your name. He was also particularly loquacious. Perhaps too loquacious. His wife, Muriel, would often tell him, "Hubert, for your speeches to be immortal, they need not be eternal." It was a custom also to ask in Minnesota, "What comes after a Humphrey speech on a Saturday night?" The answer – "Sunday morning."

In late May, a group of family, friends and associates gathered in Minneapolis to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Hubert Humphrey's birth. Reading some of the commentary that was shared on that occasion, I was particularly struck by a quote of Senator Humphrey which, I submit, gives particular pause in our days. The Senator stated:

"That the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped."

The Senator thus capsulized the responsibility all of us have, exercised through the agency of government, to respect the life and dignity of the human person.

His apt words in citing the needs of children, "in the dawn of life," puts us in touch with the moment of individuation of each person – conception. Dawn is the earliest moment of each day which oftentimes lacks visual precision but gives way to clarity. So it is with the development of the human person.

Senator Humphrey personally gave credence to the value of the handicapped. He noted that his family was blessed with a grandchild who had downs syndrome. In Humphrey's estimation no other person in his family brought such great joy and unconditional love as

did this child. Such witness holds powerful insight in our age where some self-righteous have spawned the possibility of creeping eugenics, which could spell doom for some of us who do not meet standards of development which such proponents have established.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at its spring 2011 meeting in Seattle adopted a statement entitled: “To Live Each Day with Dignity” (ref: www.usccb.org/toliveeachday)” This document addresses the issue of euthanasia – thus pertaining in Humphrey’s words to “those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly.”

Basically, what the Bishops desired to communicate is that every person has eternal value and dignity. Seniors are not to be discarded and dismissed when they can no longer be totally independent and care for themselves.

In particular, the Bishops cite palliative care that has emerged which distills pain and enables the elderly and others gravely ill to be relatively comfortable. Palliative care joined with the love, sacrifice and attention of family and friends, enables the elderly to feel appreciated and wanted and, in turn, exercise their great capacity for love which they have developed over the years.

One may or may not agree with some of the partisan aspects of a politician such as Vice-President Humphrey. In retrospect, however, in their historically attributed role of statesmen, their vision and deeply rooted convictions transcend the transitional issues of the day. Surely they can be instructive in our days, particularly as we grapple with moral issues pertaining to the life and dignity of the human person.

In implementing the wisdom of our mothers and fathers and historical giants, we continue to advocate for the inalienable rights of our sisters and brothers. In an address, Vice-President Humphrey’s contemporary, President John Kennedy, pointed out the origin of these rights when he stated: “The rights of man (come) not because of the state but because of the hand of God.”