Columns
Religious Life



A sign directs people to vote in the New York Presidential Primary election in New York City April 2. (OSV News/Reuters/Adam Gray)



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The headline "Space X's Assault on a Fragile Habitat" caught my attention. According to an investigative report by The New York Times, Elon Musk's space operations near Brownsville, Texas, which he promised would have a small, eco-friendly footprint, has dramatically changed the fragile landscape, threatening the habitat that the U.S. government is charged with protecting. Progress in space vs. the health of a fragile habitat. Two competing values causing division that were unknown choices decades ago.

Although the substance of this article is well worth discussing, that is not what caught my attention. Reading it in the midst of the swirling debate about the nominees for U.S. president, I found myself thinking how many of the future questions facing any of our elected leaders are yet to be imagined. Each issue will be complex and reflect vying worldviews. What kind of person is best to lead in this kind of future?

Unlike in earlier decades, the internet and social media outlets are the harbingers of what is coming. They provide instantaneous, unfiltered information about what is happening everywhere by anyone who adds their voice. Each of us then interprets that stream of data through the lenses of our experience based on multiple factors including where we live, with whom we identify and what economic bracket we fall into. We are living at a time when the capacity to hold multiple views and work together to imagine a new way forward is critical. Yet, there seems to be a growing paralysis that keeps us at odds with each other and solidifies our separate camps.

For some, this paralysis is key to their vision of the future. This is perhaps best expressed in a New York Times column David Brooks wrote about an interview with Steve Bannon, a former adviser to Donald Trump and a key architect of the radical populist right movement spreading throughout the world. Bannon supports policies advocated by Project 2025, which include radical cuts in government spending and the deconstruction of the administrative state as well as the destruction of the "deep state."

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During the interview, Brooks comments that he finds most people with whom you can have a conversation reasonable. Bannon's response was: "I think you are dead wrong." He goes on to say that his followers are not reasonable. "We're unreasonable," he continues. "... And we're never going to be reasonable until we get what we achieve. We're not looking to compromise. We're looking to win." He sees his work to be like a war in which you "take the moral high ground, (and) totally and completely destroy your opponent."

Approaching our future this way without reason or conversation is very frightening to me. The complexity of today's issues only foreshadows what we can expect with the yet-to-be imagined issues of tomorrow. To stake out a position that categorically eliminates a good percentage of the population and impose it without any discussion is undemocratic and wrong. The future will ask of us more than compromise. The future's growing diversity and complexity will invite us to find a way forward together, respecting each other and imagining new possibilities that do not destroy the other.

When I ask the question: What kind of person is best to lead in this kind of future? I believe our focus needs to be equally on *how* they intend to make their hopes a reality as on *what* they are advocating. How they approach governing and decision-making tells us a lot about the kind of person they are and offers hints as to how they will approach future dilemmas.

Perhaps, that is a conversation that we can begin to have with family and friends with whom we may not share policy positions. For those of us coming from the Christian perspective, the fruit of the Spirit as found in Galatians 5:22-23 might be a place to begin. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Such qualities are often missing in our political discourse, but they name attributes that help describe a leadership style that is needed in a time of great complexity and uncertainty. These are qualities that when cultivated strengthen your capacity to withhold quick judgment of people and positions; to be open to different opinions while sharing your own; to be less defensive and therefore to withhold negative or disrespectful comments about people who disagree with you; and to offer hope in chaotic times.

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A look at the candidates from this perspective might open up the space for sharing, engaging in questions like: How are these attributes embodied in this candidate? How might this candidate approach a complex issue, respecting all sides? How would this candidate, after deciding, work with those who disagreed with him/her? How would this candidate approach an unexpected development, a new issue or crisis that emerges in the next four years? What might be the questions the candidate would ask to come to a decision? Who would the candidate invite to be part of the search for a new policy?

Before we begin these conversations about the candidates running at every level of public office, we need to take time to get in touch with what we feel about these qualities. To see how they are operative in our life. Contemplative practice opens us to becoming aware of our own biases and defenses and invites us "to see" in new ways. The future is calling for "a new way of seeing"; our present choices of who will govern will shape how we are going "to see" what is emerging.

After I wrote this reflection the alleged attempted assassination of Trump occurred. That tragedy only confirms the importance of rejecting the approach Bannon espouses, which is to view the work of winning as being like a war in which you "take the moral high ground, (and) totally and completely destroy your opponent."