
From a Priest: A Political Statement About Ukraine

by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, Dean of the Cathedral

Good people around the world are in agony about the violent invasion of Ukraine. Politicians of various parties are in agony. Spiritual people of various religions and traditions are in agony. The situation is horrible, and good people everywhere question what we can do.

What can we do?

It may seem that the voice of one meager American, maybe one of us who is a member of a steady and faithful Episcopal Church in Atlanta, is meaningless. What in the world are we to do, in the face of such violent despotism and absolutism as displayed by the leader of Russia?

Here are the meager answers I have given to good people over the past several weeks. Mine are political answers from a church person, one who generally tries to live above the simplistic partisan politics usually around the United States these days.

First: Pray. Of course, the usual response to this advice is that "Pray" is too simplistic. It seems like avoidance and naivete. But, I do not mean that kind of prayer. Good prayer is always active. Good prayer leads to engagement and action with issues, not avoidance of the issues and the pain. Good prayer opens us to the active gathering of new information, even from new sources. Good prayer gives us compassion and empathy with those who are suffering. Pray for those suffering in Ukraine. Even pray for the changing of minds, for repentance, of leaders in Russia. Good prayer leads to good decisions and good actions.

Second: Find individual ways to support the people of Ukraine, especially those seeking refuge. Many people in Atlanta have already been finding housing for Afghan refugees. And many of us have been welcoming immigrants for years. There is opportunity to be open to many other refugees now.

Third (now the terrain gets more controversial): Be careful which religious institutions you listen to, and support. All religions are not the same. There are some religions who too easily support tyranny and violence. It is a tragedy, for instance, how some members of the Russian Orthodox Church have too easily become unwitting accomplices in the aggression of Russia's political leaders right now. There is a reason the Ukrainian Orthodox Church began its separation from the Russian Orthodox Church years ago. I understand that major religious systems usually serve within sovereign nations, and that we all have to keep the peace in some politically awkward situations. However, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1940s Germany, sometimes we are forced to make hard decisions.

Fourth (now the terrain is more controversial still): Pay attention to the character of the politicians you support. Obviously, most of us did not vote in recent Russian elections. But we do vote, all the time, in our own local and state and national elections. The people we elect make a difference. They will be the ones who decide state and federal policy, maybe about sanctions and taxes. They will be the ones who make the heart-wrenching decisions about aid, and about military deployment and action. They will be the ones responsible for nurturing creative political alliances and relationships.

For all my life, when I have been asked how I vote in American elections, I have said that I vote for character over the issues. I certainly have political positions that I support, and they have been described by others as conservative sometimes, and liberal sometimes. So it goes. But I urge all of us to consider character in the men and women we vote for. Most of us will not be the persons directly deciding critical political policy these days, but we can decide what kind of character we want behind those decisions.

What can we do, directly, to address the agonizing violence in the Ukraine? We can pay attention to what we

do have control over; we can pay attention to our local elections. We can find, and support, persons of good will and good faith and good character. We can find, and support, people of established virtue, people with records of virtue and wisdom and peace. We can support the people of peace, wherever they are.

Yes, my remarks in this time are political. (Some would want them to be even more political.) But we are all political, in whatever we say or don't say. Each of us, especially in the constitutional democratic republic of the United States, plays a political role. There is such a thing as good politics; good politics is the ability to develop relationships and alliances of good will, good character, good peace. As a Christian in this country, and during this time of turmoil and agony, I urge us to elect persons of good character, good faith, and good virtue.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip