

LISTEN TO YOUR CONSCIENCE, NOT THE BISHOP OR POPE, TEXAS NUN URGES VOTERS

By: Bekah McNeel - Oct. 27, 2020

As political groups across the country make their last appeals to Christian voters, often pointing to a narrow set of issues, Sister Jane Ann Slater, chancellor of the Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio, wants the people of faith to think more broadly — looking at the total of what a candidate or ballot proposition brings to the community.



Sister Jane Ann Slater. Image via screenshot from Our Lady of the Lake University video

“You look at the breadth of issues under the umbrella of common good and quality of life,” she said. A pandemic and time of deep division calls for communities, including people of faith, to act, Slater said: “It’s a providential moment.”

In San Antonio, one ballot proposition asks voters to consider rerouting an existing tax to those most in need by providing job training for the most in-demand middle-class jobs in the city, as well as the wraparound services needed to support the process.

The workforce development initiative, known as “Proposition B,” is as much about helping those hit hardest by COVID-19 as it is about the moral imperative to stabilize the quickly gentrifying city, argues Slater.

Getting the initiative on the ballot and campaigning for it has been a political process that some in the faith community are uncomfortable engaging, Slater acknowledged. But she sees government as a major influence in “the common good.”

Allied for the ‘common good’

For years Slater has been working with **C.O.P.S./Metro**, an alliance of community organizations that started with coalitions of local churches and grew over time to include labor unions and other activists to organize on immigration and living wage campaigns. The coalition powerfully campaigned for educational and economic opportunities for low-income San Antonians, winning victories throughout the 1990s and instituting programs that continue to bear fruit today, including **Project QUEST**, the program on which Proposition B is modeled.

A belief in a “fabric of life” has compelled people of faith, like Slater, to stay involved, even when the groups they worked alongside had other interests that would be out of line with Church teachings. Recently the group has undertaken a new challenge in a traditionally working class city: helping families stay in their homes as rents rise quickly in San Antonio.

When the pandemic hit, the Archdiocese of San Antonio quickly worked with C.O.P.S./Metro to ensure the city directed millions of dollars in COVID-19 relief funds toward housing security, but Slater said charity isn’t enough for the long term. That’s where Proposition B comes in.

C.O.P.S./Metro worked with the local community college district and employers to assure that the kind of training the new program provides will make participants eligible for jobs that already exist with room for salary growth.

The road to November

Getting the initiative on the ballot was just the first hurdle. Like with many other initiatives across the country, poor wording or misinformation can lead to voter confusion.

When the coalition saw the first draft of Proposition B, C.O.P.S./Metro volunteer Sonia Rodriguez was alarmed. “We read it and we thought ‘I wouldn’t vote for this,’” she said, “It was gobbledygook.”

The wording made it look like a new tax would be levied, which is not the case. They knew voters would have no appetite for new taxes during an economic crisis and the misunderstanding would likely kill the proposition.

Rodriguez and other volunteers spent the entire day with county elections officials, city council members, and the city attorney getting the language changed to something more clear and accurate.

“Fairness comes with clarity,” Rodriguez said.

They’ve also been trying to get word out to voters that the program Proposition B aims to replace, a popular aquifer protection program, will be funded by another revenue stream. Protecting environmental resources, especially clean water, is not a trade off C.O.P.S./Metro is asking people to make.

Again, Slater said, the goal of conscientious voting should be doing the most good where it is most needed, not pitting components of the common good against one another.

Now, vote!

The final hurdle, Slater said, is turning people out to vote. The pandemic has not dampened voter turnout in the contentious presidential election. Lines wrapped around polling places in the extended early voting period. Still, Slater hopes that people will think beyond partisan politics, or single issues at the top and bottom of the ballot.

As people of faith, particularly Catholics, approach the ballot box, she reminds them to follow the leading of their own spirit, as encouraged by the Catholic Church for the past two centuries, and clearly **reiterated by Pope Francis** in 2016.

“You don’t listen to your bishop. You don’t listen to the pope. You don’t listen to the church as an institution,” Slater said, “You vote your conscience and no one can tell you you were wrong ... well, they can, but you don’t have to listen.”