

Sunday, October 30, 2016  
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

## Constitutions and Elections

All political elections, local, national, and international, need a bit of sanity. That is certainly true in the United States this year because of the antics of the candidates, the advertisements, the distortions, foreign internet malfeasance, and Wikileaks. Europe is experiencing similar political upheaval with the rise of radical right-wing, nationalist, anti-immigrant parties in Holland, Germany, France, Italy, and Great Britain. Brexit, the British vote to exit the European Community, an obvious example, proved to be very divisive, pitting young against old, rural against urban, island against continent. The economic and political fallout may prove disastrous. The Philippines just elected a crude and barbarous president who, in his war on drugs, has already killed over 3000 street people. He has used profanity in public against our own president and, despite the hegemonic threat of China, is pursuing closer military and economic ties with it and Russia.

Elections, then, may be an ideal time to re-familiarize ourselves with some of the basic principles of democracy. Here in the United States, we could focus on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The latter may be even more important than the former because it balances individual benefits with the wider common good. If, for instance, the Bill of Rights had informed our national consciousness, slavery would have been abandoned without a civil war and women and persons of color would have been allowed to vote without later concessions from the Constitution. Voting is both a duty and a right of all citizens. It should be facilitated, not obstructed. In Sweden, for example, every eighteen-year old citizen is automatically enrolled to vote. Likewise, the Declaration of Independence, a document admired for over 250 years, introduced the compelling idea “that all men are created equal,” a goal yet to be realized in most parts of the world, even here in the United States. If all Americans truly honored it, however, no prejudice of any kind, racial, religious or gender, would exist in our country today. Our national greatness lies in the uniqueness of these documents and their continual ability to inspire us.

Another document, applicable to every country throughout the world, is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights passed by the United Nations in 1948. It is a handbook meant to advise and guide government leaders in making policies, a primer of basic human values, e.g., decency, integrity, goodwill, justice, freedom and respect. Thus, it also is a useful resource for voters, providing wisdom and clarity, to help choose the best candidates based on personal character rather than on specific issues. For ultimately it is values which determine decisions.