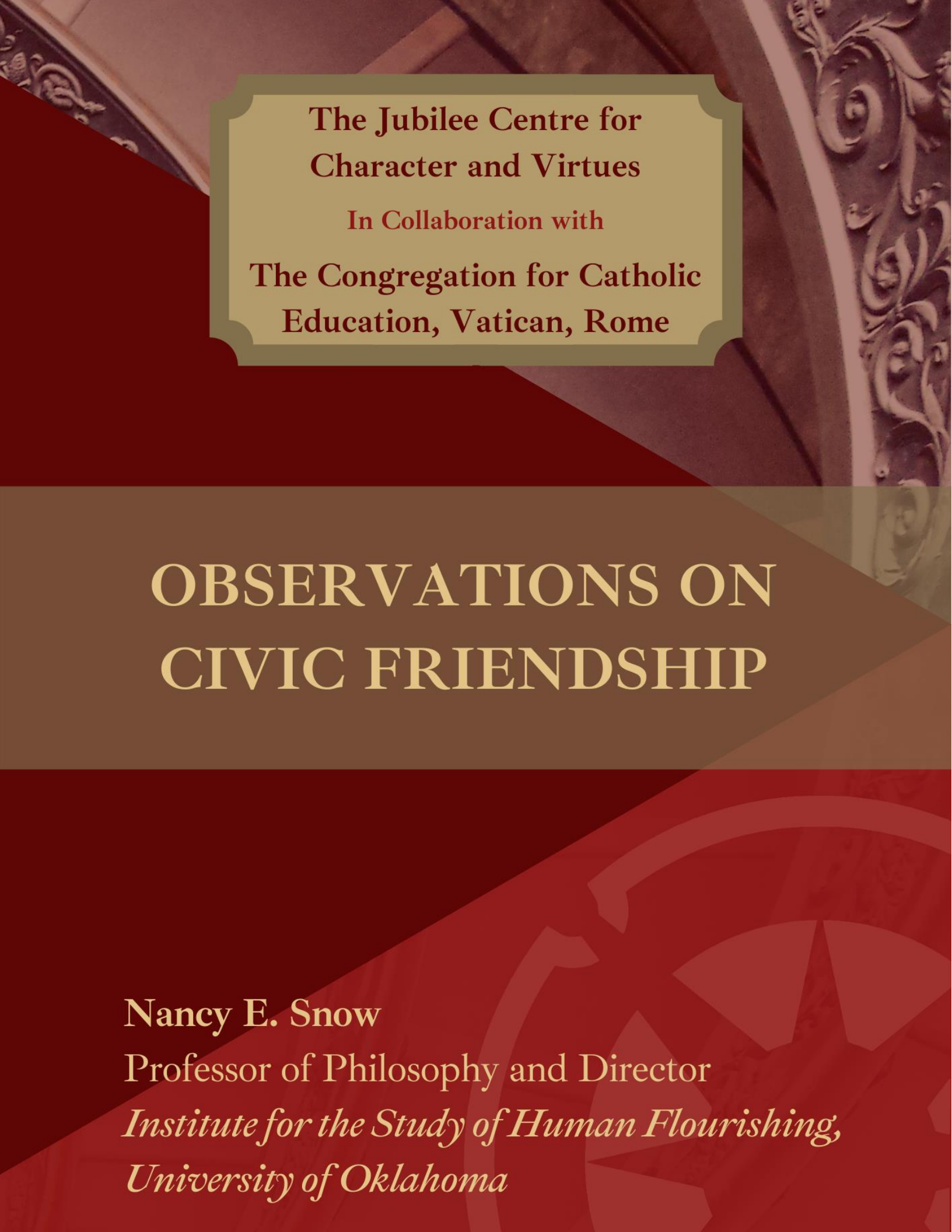

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

In Collaboration with

The Congregation for Catholic Education, Vatican, Rome

OBSERVATIONS ON CIVIC FRIENDSHIP

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Introduction and Initial Conceptualization

What kinds of societies do we want to live in? This question forces itself upon us with special urgency as we survey the many ways in which societies across the globe are polarized. Groups within societies disagree, sometimes in acrimonious ways, about questions concerning politics, religion, education, the role of government, the duties of citizens, who has rights and to what, and numerous others. In many respects and in many nations, the fabric of societies has been damaged by deep and ongoing disagreements, sometimes about the fundamental terms on which citizens should interact with one another.

Many terms in our current discourse are used to address these issues. We hear of the need for greater tolerance, civility, respect, empathy, and so on. Rarely, if ever, do we hear pleas for civic friendship. What is civic friendship, and why should we pay attention to it?

Though a small but vibrant literature exists on civic friendship, academic work has been focused largely on the values just mentioned, as well as others, such as the need for open-mindedness and forgiveness, in helping us to navigate civic life. Civic friendship has recently been emerging as a value in its own right, however, and in this paper, I hope to make headway toward clarifying the concept.

Let us begin with an observation and two caveats. The observation is this. Civic friendship seems to be a kind of relationship that can exist among members of a polity or even larger groups. Internal factors - qualities of individuals -- and external factors -- features of polities or societies -- can contribute to the conditions needed for civic friendship to take root and grow. The first caveat is that here I confine the discussion to the internal factors that contribute

to civic friendship. The second caveat is that discussions of civic friendship in academic literature typically start with the claim that Aristotle adopts a conception of civic friendship. After this, discussions become more complex. Some scholars doubt that Aristotle has a conception of civic friendship; others think he does but disagree about the nature of the relationship; still others admit that Aristotle has a conception but find it inadequate for present day liberal societies and look to other figures, such as Kant and even Marx, for inspiration.

I plan to skirt these debates (Andrew will delve into them) and start with the following Aristotelian-inspired notion of civic friendship:

> Civic or political friendship (*politikê philia*) is a bond of reciprocal good will between fellow citizens … expressed through norms of civic behavior, such as mutual recognition of moral equality, mutual concern, and mutual defense and support. Theories of civic friendship are, at their heart, normative arguments about the proper nature of political unity – that is to say, arguments about how fellow citizens in general should regard and relate to one another in the public sphere (Scorza 2013, 773).

This insight is consistent with the following:

> … individuals acquire through these [civic] friendships an aspect of civic virtue that could be called civic friendliness or a disposition to exhibit goodwill toward all the diverse members of the society (Curren and Elenbaas, https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/insight-series/RC_LE_CivicFriendship.pdf, 2-3).

Using these quotations as starting points, I plan to address three questions: (1) Can an Aristotelian conception of civic friendship be useful for modern liberal societies? (spoiler alert – the answer is 'yes'); (2) If so, what are the purposes and virtues associated with modern-day

civic friendships?; and (3) What kinds of factors can motivate citizens to undertake civic friendships, and thus, to cultivate the virtues needed for them?

Question 1: The Aristotelian Problem

The concern that I call the 'Aristotelian Problem' is, in essence, this. Even if Aristotle has a conception of civic friendship, it would not be appropriate for liberal societies today (see Snow https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/insight-series/Snow%20-%20Citizens%20Relationships%20Political%20Civility%20and%20the%20Civic%20Virtue.pdf, 2-3). This is because the Aristotelian *polis*, or city-state, was united by a shared conception of the good. We can describe this conception as 'thick' in the sense that the political and individual good – the good of the *polis* as well as of individuals -- was richly articulated in terms of shared conceptions of ways of life, of what counted as a good life, of what counted as virtues worth having, as activities worth pursuing, etc. The good of individuals was not possible unless they lived in a *polis*, and the good of the *polis* depended upon the commitment of individuals to the shared conception of a good life and the virtues (and external goods, such as wealth, good friends and family, and noble birth) that constituted it. In liberal democracies, individuals still have thickly articulated conceptions of a good life, of the virtues that partly constitute it, of what makes a life worth living, and so on. But there is a multiplicity of such 'thick' conceptions of the individual good in most societies, and liberal democracies are committed to a stance of value neutrality with respect to them. Consider, for example, religious pluralism as it exists in liberal democracies. Religions are a source of deeply held and richly articulated conceptions of a good life, some of which are at odds with each other. Liberal governments are committed to value neutrality with respect to religious conceptions and any other 'thick' conceptions of individual good that arise (provided that practitioners do not cause harm to others). Neutrality with respect

to individual conceptions of the good is one of a suite of 'thin' liberal values which includes liberty, equality, mutual respect, and toleration of differing lifestyles. To put the point starkly, the kind of civic friendship that would have been appropriate for the *polis* would violate the stance of neutrality that liberal democracies are committed to taking with respect to 'thick' individual conceptions of the good. But if so, civic friendship, in a robust Aristotelian sense, would not be appropriate for citizens in liberal democracies today.

One response to this is to argue that the 'thin' values of liberal democracy can form the basis for the 'reciprocal good will' that Scorza mentions or the disposition of civic friendliness that Curren and Elenbaas note. The problem, of course, is that this yields a 'thin' conception of civic friendship. If such civic friendships do indeed exist in liberal societies today, it is under siege, since the social fabric of many liberal democracies is being worn ever thinner by the polarization, deep disagreements, and increasing acrimony of civic life today. This approach, however, relies on an error. Citizens in a liberal democracy need not base their good will toward each other only on the 'thin' values of liberal democracy. In other words, though liberal democratic governments are committed to a stance of neutrality, toleration, etc., toward differing conceptions of the good, individual citizens are free to respond differently toward others whose values differ deeply from theirs. In fact, many citizens in liberal democracies clearly do not adopt a stance of neutrality toward conceptions of the good with which they disagree but are openly hostile toward both the conceptions and those who endorse them.

Even a stance of neutrality would be an improvement over the present situation. That said, do we really want to settle for societies in which we simply tolerate others' values and commitments, or treat others with differing conceptions of the good only with civility and nothing more? Toleration and civility seem to be rather 'thin' qualities, and are compatible with

disliking or disapproving of another and his or her activities. For example, I might tolerate my students' haircuts and nose rings while intensely disliking them, and can be civil toward a colleague I dislike and mistrust for the sake of maintaining a tolerable workplace environment. But surely these are not ideal or optimal ways of relating to others. An alternative would be to extend good will, if only on a provisional basis, to my students and my colleague, in a more robust way. Perhaps I could be open-minded toward my students' choices of hairstyle and facial decorations, remembering my own days of experimentation with my looks. Maybe I could try to understand my colleague by taking his perspective and provisionally trust him until he actually breaks my trust, then deal with the situation in an open and respectful way or bring in a neutral third-party mediator to resolve the dispute. In other words, a more charitable approach is possible and in many cases, desirable. Robust civic friendships incorporate this kind of charitable approach toward others whose conceptions of the good differ from our own, and do not require that liberal democracies renege on their commitment to neutrality with regard to the plurality of 'thick' conceptions of the good that citizens hold. I explore this kind of robust civic friendship, which is inspired by Aristotle's approach to the role of virtues in civic life, in the next section.

Question 2: The Purposes and Virtues of Modern-Day Civic Friendships

In the preceding section, I noted an obstacle to thinking that robust Aristotelian-inspired civic friendships are appropriate for liberal democracies and explained why it is mistaken. I also observed that such friendships, perhaps, rely on charitable outlooks toward others. A more systematic way of describing civic friendships, however, should take as its starting point a key question: What are civic friendships for? That is, what purpose or purposes do they serve?

In the ancient Greek *polis*, the purpose of civic friendships was to solidify the shared conception of the good and common bonds among citizens that helped society to function. The point of civic friendships today, too, is to help societies to function, though they do not do this in liberal democracies by upholding commonly held "thick" conceptions of the good. Civic friendships help to promote the functioning of liberal democracies in other ways. They help society – in particular – the political aspects of society – to function smoothly by creating and sustaining a shared environment of mutual respect, good will, trust, and cooperation among citizens. In other words, civic friendships create and sustain a functioning "social fabric." This fabric is constituted by a plethora of ways in which citizens interact and interconnect in social and civic life. In many liberal democracies today, the social fabric has been damaged by polarization and deep and often acrimonious disagreement. In these contexts, civic friendships as they currently exist, if they do, have failed to sustain the social fabric. Citizens have become mutually mistrustful enemies. The purpose of civic friendships in such non-ideal contexts is to repair the damaged social fabric. That is, moral and civic repair becomes essential, for a ruptured social fabric cannot sustain the smooth functioning of political society.

As Andrew also points out in his paper, any number of different virtues can help to facilitate civic friendships or be incorporated into them, and seem to be at least necessary for them, if not also sufficient. These virtues fall into at least two categories: intellectual and moral. Earlier I mentioned open-mindedness, perspective-taking, and charity. Other candidates include intellectual humility, forgiveness, sympathy (feeling sorrow for another), compassion (suffering with another) and the more robust form of perspective-taking of 'empathy,' which can be not only cognitive, but also emotional, and is 'feeling as the other feels.' One can see how many of these virtues can help to resolve some of the civic tensions surrounding contemporary issues. If

a person is open-minded enough to listen to the science on COVID-19 vaccines and masking, he or she could be persuaded that anti-vaxxing and anti-masking are wrong because they can cause harm to fellow citizens. If a Hindu is empathetic enough to relate to a Muslim's desire to live and worship in peace, religious conflicts could become more tractable. And forgiving or charitable attitudes toward those taking the other side of an issue can, perhaps, induce those others to take initial steps toward rethinking their beliefs and broadening their perspectives by defusing atmospheres of tension and hostility that often pervade interactions among those who disagree.

I use the examples of anti-vaxxing and anti-masking and religious conflict because there is an important difference between them that affects whether and how civic friendships can come about. In the religious case, people need not give up their deeply held beliefs to achieve empathy or the other virtues, or to develop civic friendships. They can simply acknowledge that others who disagree have a legitimate right to their views and ways of life, provided they are not harm-causing. The anti-vaxxing/anti-masking case, however, is different, precisely because the beliefs of one party are false and her activities are dangerous to society. If someone holding those beliefs or others that are false and dangerous (such as white supremacist or neo-Nazi beliefs) refuses to give them up or is not open to questioning them and revising them, it is doubtful that we can or should have civic friendships with them. This is a sobering thought, but it does harken back to the purposes of civic friendships: the social fabric cannot be sustained, nor can damages to it be repaired, by the dogmatic perpetuation of false and/or harmful beliefs and the pursuit of socially harmful activities. This leads to our third question: What kinds of factors can motivate citizens to undertake civic friendships, and thus, to cultivate the virtues needed for them?

Question 3: Motivational Issues

Some philosophers try to reduce motivations to two basic, rough-grained categories: attraction and repulsion. When we are attracted to something, we have a positive motivation that guides us toward it in some sense; when we are repelled, we have a negative motivation that pushes us away from it in some sense. Both positive and negative factors can motivate people to undertake civic friendships and to cultivate the virtues that are integral to them. Positively, of course, we are attracted by the idea of civic friendship itself and the social and political benefits it can bring: amicable, rich, trusting, and hopefully, enduring relationships amongst citizens; the kind of reciprocal cooperation needed for the smooth functioning of society; societies characterized by citizens of virtue and good will; and a strong and healthy social fabric that is resistant to damage and disruption. Negatively, we are repelled by the breaches of civic friendship in our societies: the political polarization, name-calling, acrimonious disagreements, and rude and disrespectful behavior that have so often become parts of our daily lives. At the extreme end of this is violence: damage to property, physical and emotional harm to persons, and even death. Many people are appalled by these trends and seek to reverse them. Perhaps cultivating virtues like civility, as Andrew suggests, are first steps in this direction. But the motivation to avoid these kinds of harms will not bring us full bore into civic friendships. It could well be that some people will seek only to minimize overtly negative interactions, and not make the extra effort to cultivate robust civic friendships that incorporate empathy, charity, open-mindedness, forgiveness, and other alternatives.

Elsewhere I have commented on the perils of this 'minimalist' approach (see Snow https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/insight-series/Snow%20-%20Citizens%20Relationships%20Political%20Civility%20and%20the%20Civic%20Virtue.pdf, 3-4). Allowing citizens to retain deeply negative attitudes toward others, covered only by a thin

veneer of civility, is insufficient to ensure the smooth functioning of civil society, and thus, does not well serve the purposes of civic friendship. This is so for at least three reasons, as I noted in my earlier work. First, negative attitudes can often erupt into overt displays of hostility. Second, unscrupulous politicians can manipulate negative attitudes to pursue agendas of hatred and disenfranchisement against some members of society. Finally, we often know when others dislike us. That is, even when we are not confronted with overtly hostile behavior, we can often pick up on social cues that indicate when we are disliked, and this does not contribute to friendliness or social harmony.

One might point out that such negative attitudes are incompatible with the requirement of mutual good will that is at the heart of civic friendship. I agree. To achieve mutual good will and to ensure that we receive the benefits of civic friendship, we must be motivated not only to avoid negativity in thought and deed, but also to seek positive, robust, and enduring relationships with one another. We must do this not only because we want to avoid the negative, but, more importantly, because we have higher aspirations for ourselves and our societies. We should aspire to a "more perfect union," in the words of the Preamble to the United States Constitution. Why should we do this? Out of concern for the common good of our nation. What is the *common* good of a nation? It is the good of every individual in it. Let me illustrate and close with a final thought, taken from the March 4, 1861 Inaugural Address of President Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln concluded his address, given on the eve of the Civil War, with the following passage:

> I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of

> memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature (https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/blog/the-better-angels-of-our-nature-president-lincoln%27s-first-inaugural-address; Accessed August 31, 2021).

A gloss on Lincoln's speech is instructive:

> Lincoln's appeal, however, avoided the cause of the onrushing war—slavery. Failing to take this divisive issue head-on only added to its polarizing effect. Many Americans in the North found Lincoln's speech too conciliatory. Southerners thought it threatened war. And the nation had little time to stop and think. Immediately after his inauguration, Lincoln had to decide whether to resupply Fort Sumter, the U.S. military post in Charleston harbor, the heart of secession. In April, the "bonds of affection" broke (https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/blog/the-better-angels-of-our-nature-president-lincoln%27s-first-inaugural-address; Accessed August 31, 2021).

The *common* good, I believe, is contingent on the good of every individual in society. If some individuals are damaged or wounded, or if serious disagreements cleave citizens from one another, these need to be frankly admitted and addressed. Friends who suffer discord commit to working through these issues together, with an ideal of reconciliation in mind. True civic friendships should not overlook the issues that divide us but should seek to work through them so that some form of genuine reconciliation can be achieved. Lacking that, civic friendships will be no more than artifice and window-dressing. This is a tall order, but one that is both necessary and urgent in this day and age.

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