Catholic teaching views the vocation of politics as a vital element in building up the Kingdom of God on earth. Just as democracy is not merely a set of empty procedures, but instead the promotion of the dignity of the human person, respect for human rights, and commitment to the common good, so too the vocation of the political leader is a deeply moral one. It is rooted in the commitment to share fully in the destiny of the people while seeking solutions to society’s deepest problems. It seeks to put power into practice as service. As Pope Francis noted last September “politics, according to the social doctrine of the church, is one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good in humility and love.”

It is this inherent dignity of political leadership, and the countless sacrifices that public officials are called to make in their daily lives for the service of our nation, which compel us to thank and acknowledge tonight all who respond to these truest calls to public service in our society. And it
is out of a profound respect for the enormously complex questions of conscience and moral choice that political leaders face repeatedly in their vocation that we gather together and reflect upon the issue of what role party politics can and should play in the decisions of our political leaders at this moment in our history.

The moral end of politics is the achievement of the common good in society. The second Vatican council defined this central but complex concept of the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” In seeking the common good “every group must take into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of every other group, and still more of the human family as a whole.”

It was this emphasis on the unity inherent in the common good which led many of our nation’s founders to conclude that political parties, or factions as they preferred to call them, were totally anti-thetical to the pursuit of the common good. For them, the concept of faction was rooted in the effort to formulate public policy around the views and interests of one segment of the people of America over another. Parties were necessarily divisive – in their world views, their political structures, and
their objectives. In an age like our own, when partisan divides seem so often to hobble public policy rather than advance it, the echoes of these early American critics of partisanship in American politics raise the perennial question of whether parties truly serve the democratic process or impede it.

Yet in the most important crises in our nation’s history, political party structures have transformed and advanced the common good in profound ways. In 1860 the Republican Party of “free soil, free labor and free men” cobbled together the coalition that elected Abraham Lincoln and forced America to confront the continuation of slavery, that original sin of the American constitution. And in the wake of the great depression, the democratic coalition transformed the nature of the federal government in order to erect a social safety net that reached out to every corner of the land with jobs and food and electricity.

The moral achievements of party structures appear no less in the moments in our nation’s history when bipartisan action has led to revolutions that monumentally advanced the common good and basic human dignity. The progressive reforms that emerged from the republicanism of Theodore Roosevelt and the democratic politics of
Woodrow Wilson, and the bipartisan coalition that wrought the civil rights acts in the 1960’s testify to the reality that party structures can produce a level of moral cooperation that propels the common good of society even as it reflects party identity.

Catholic social teaching envisions a vital role for political parties in the advancement of politics and the common good. In the words of the Vatican’s compendium on social teaching, “political parties have the task of fostering widespread participation and making public responsibilities accessible to all. Political parties are called to interpret the aspirations of civil society, orienting them towards the common good, offering citizens the effective possibility of contributing to the formulation of political choices.”

Thus in Catholic teaching the genius of parties is that they serve two essential goals in a democratic society. First of all, they have a uniquely powerful capacity to stimulate participation by large numbers of citizens at all levels in political decision making. Secondly, they act as moral sifters in the formulation of public policy, lifting up the longings and insights of women and men and providing specific avenues for them to change public policy to more fully protect human dignity.
But if the capacity of parties to generate and sustain widespread political participation and produce reforms in public policy makes parties a beneficial element of American politics, the excesses of political partisanship make it essential that all public officials have a strictly conditioned fidelity to their party identity. Party structures accelerate the tendency to value victory over compromise, electoral advantage over substantive accomplishment, and power over principle. Party structures can at times deliberately call upon legislators to place partisan loyalties above the common good, in the hope of attaining partisan advantage. Even more frequently, party pressures can distort legislators’ very comprehension of the common good, because of the immensely powerful human instinct that we all have to convince ourselves that what is the best option for us is really the most moral option also.

For Catholic social teaching, the current structure of American political parties bisects the common good. The Republican Party better reflects the commitment to protect unborn life, reject euthanasia and promote religious liberty. The Democratic Party witnesses more effectively to Catholic teaching on the issues of poverty and inequality, immigration reform, restorative justice and the environment. On the critical question
of family life, each party reflects certain key elements of the core common
good, while on the issues of the radical need to address global poverty and
the fundamental question of the role of warfare in American foreign policy,
neither party embodies even an acceptable threshold commitment to
achieving the Catholic vision of justice and peace in the world. The
commitment to the protection of human life from conception to natural
death and the option for the poor have become particularly important
principles in the present moment, not only because of their centrality to
the defense of human dignity, but also because the rejection of the first
has become a virtual litmus test for Democratic leadership, while a
rejection of the second is increasingly becoming a litmus test for
Republican allegiance. For these reasons, voters guided by Catholic social
teaching are left with a deeply conflicted attachment to particular parties
today.

In many ways, all voters, legislators, members of the executive branch
and party leaders who dedicate their lives to seeking the common good are
inevitably left in a continuing state of conditioned commitment to their
party’s agenda. They are called to embrace fully those elements of party
life which contribute to the common good and to deepen the ability of
their party to elicit and enflesh broad participation by citizens in the political life of the nation. They are also called to act at times as insurgents within their own parties to bring their party’s positions and influence into closer conjunction with the deeply moral vision of advancing the dignity of the human person.

Recognizing these realities, I would suggest the following six principles as guideposts for fostering party structures which reflect a moral commitment to the common good.

1. Political parties in their core moral identity are called to nourish the broad and meaningful participation of citizens in the formulation of public policy choices and the selection of candidates. This breadth of participation is a goal which must take precedence over the expansion of political contributions, the recruitment of candidates, and at times, even electoral advantage itself.

2. The political culture of our nation should not only allow public officials to at times make policy choices of conscience which are at variance with their party’s position, but should also recognize such moments of
conscience as a mark of leadership and devotion to public service,
rather than a failure of loyalty to party.

3. There must be an examination of the structures in our current partisan
life and governance which contribute to the tendency to foster gridlock
over governmental accomplishments that will advance the common
good. Structures which powerfully favor partisan electoral advantage
over good governance should be substantively reformed.

4. There is great social peril in the fact that today our party structure is
sharply divided along lines of race and ethnicity. This is not a new
development in American politics, of course, but it strikes at the very
heart of the social compact which is essential for the preservation of the
common good in our nation. Both political parties have a deep
responsibility to minimize and assuage these racial and ethnic divisions,
and not to exacerbate them for electoral benefit.

5. Parties must find pathways to overcome and transform the pressures to
become dominated by money. The pursuit of the common good is both
a substantive endeavor and a highly symbolic one. The current role of money in our partisan and political life is a threat to both.

6. The history of political parties in the United States is a proud one which has dramatically advanced the common good, creatively brought forth new solutions to profound crises, and enlisted the broad base of the American public more intimately in the process of their own governance. Our parties need to bring this legacy to the millennial generation, and in integrating that generation’s stress on governmental accomplishment over ideological division, to renew this legacy once again.

I would close with the words of Pope Francis: let us not forget that “responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation....I ask God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots, and not simply the appearances of the evils in our world.”