

Pastor's Notes: The Chattanooga Civics Website and Podcast - Part 1 of 2

March 28, 2021

On March 17, I interviewed Nathan Bird, a Basilica parishioner who is engaged in understanding local politics, and the founder of the Chattanooga Civics website and podcast, at ChattanoogaCivics.com. The first part of our interview is presented here.



Fr. Carter: Here we are with Nathan Bird, the founder of the Chattanooga Civics website and podcast. Nathan is married and now with two children, a young family alive in the Lord and alive in the faith. We are grateful for having you on this interview. You are the founder of the Chattanooga Civics website and podcast. Can you tell us a little bit a little bit more about that?

Nathan Bird: Yes. When my wife and I moved back to Chattanooga, about three years ago, we were in Nashville for a time, and we knew we wanted to build a home here and really put down roots in Chattanooga. And part of that in my mind was really getting involved in local politics. When I first came back to town, my only real goal was to be informed enough to know how to vote. And to know what the city government does. I was really just looking for my own education. And in looking for those resources for my own education, I found that resources were very much lacking. The *Times-Free Press* does a good job of covering the news. They are a newspaper, and so they are always covering the latest problems, latest debates, but there is a lack of core fundamental civic education in terms of what does the city council do? What does the mayor do? What are the ongoing issues that we are talking about? Not just in a he said, she said, kind of city council debate, like the *Times-Free Press* coverage, but what are the core issues? And how do we understand them? And so I saw this lack of resources. And for a while, I just thought, oh, it would be cool if there was a podcast or blog. Maybe somebody else would do that someday, and just kind of forgot about it for a while. And then over the summer of 2020, we had discussions about the mask mandates. We had discussions about institutional racism and police brutality. And we were having all these national conversations about what seemed to be, the way we were talking about them, national issues. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized, the mask mandates: they are handled by the Hamilton County Health Department; policing, that's all handled by the police chief who is nominated by the mayor and approved by the City Council. These are all very local issues at their core. And so the events of this summer really kind of spurred me on to realize this is really important. I cannot just wait around for somebody else to do this project. I have been doing my own research, trying to educate myself. I am just going to share what I have learned with others.

I chose a podcast for a couple of reasons. Podcasts are really popular among my age group, and my age group is typically not very involved in local politics. So, I figured podcasts would be a good way to get more people in my age range involved. And there is also a very low barrier to entry. You don't have to be reading something like a blog. You just put your headphones in. You're doing the dishes, doing your chores, and you can listen. And it's really easy to set up a podcast, too. I mean it took me 30 minutes to get signed up. So that is why I chose the podcast format. I started the website a little bit later, just to kind of aggregate some of this information. And it's still very much a work in progress. It is still evolving. But the long-term plan is to do small explainer episodes about different issues in city government, interspersed with interviews with electoral candidates. So most recently, I just finished up doing about 20 interviews with City Council and mayoral candidates and a couple more follow-up interviews with mayoral candidates.

Fr. Carter: The turnout for the person that has more impact over your life than the President—your local council member or mayor—nobody comes out to elect them. What inspired you to be interested in local politics? Does your faith have anything to do with that?

Nathan Bird: Yes, this project was very directly born out of the desire to live out the Catholic teaching of subsidiarity. I had read a lot about subsidiarity and knew it was an important aspect of our faith.

Paragraph 1883 of the Catechism says: subsidiarity is a principle according to which a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community have a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good. And when I started reading about this, I found that in American Catholic discourse, subsidiarity usually gets confused with federalism or even libertarianism. And I feel like federalism puts way too much emphasis on the states and ignores the kind of lower levels. And then libertarianism puts far too much emphasis on the individual and ignores the ways that we can work together towards the common good. And part of that statement from the Catechism says, we should always be coordinating our activities with the rest of society with a view to the common good. So, subsidiarity really is a great expression of the "both/and" of Catholicism. It recognizes the importance of each level of society, big and small, and it puts them all in their proper place and encourages us all to engage in self-reflection about what our proper role in society is. It encourages the individual not to become too atomized. And it encourages the higher levels of government not to get too involved in lower levels than they need to be. It encourages us all to really reflect on what our role is in society.

Fr. Carter: Yes, it sounds like a very Catholic principle of "both/and". And it's also a very balanced approach, *virtus in medio stat*, in the Aristotelian mean. Virtue stands in the middle between two extremes.

In the second part of the interview, Mr. Bird talks about the **April 13 run-off election for Chattanooga Mayor and City Council** and the voter resources compiled on ChattanoogaCivics.com. **Early voting is open from March 24 to April 8, except Good Friday.** The full interview is now available on the Basilica website for you to view or read.