

The Chattanooga Civics Website and Podcast

An Interview with

Very Rev. David Carter, JCL, JV, Pastor and Rector of the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul
and

Nathan Bird, Founder of the Chattanooga Civics Website and Podcast

March 17, 2021

Full Transcript of Interview

*On March 17, 2021, Fr. Carter interviewed **Nathan Bird**, a Basilica parishioner who is engaged in understanding local politics, and the founder of the **Chattanooga Civics** website and podcast. The full interview can be found on the Basilica's website along with Fr. Carter's Pastor's Notes for March 28 and April 4, 2021, accessible at stspeterandpaulbasilica.com/pastors-notes.*

Fr. David Carter

Here we are with **Nathan Bird**, the founder of the Chattanooga Civics website and podcast. And 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.

Nathan Bird

Yes. Thanks for having me.

Fr. David Carter

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. And 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. Local politics very much skews towards the older generations. So, I figured podcasts would be a good way to get more people in my age range involved. And there is also just a very low barrier to entry. It is a really good way to sit down, you're doing the dishes. 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. David Carter

Awesome. It is a great explanation of what you are doing. Let's talk about your inspiration for this, because like you said, not everybody is interested in local politics. And that is a curious thing. The turnout for national elections is huge. But then the turnout for the person that probably has more impact over your life than the President – your local council member, or the mayor of the city – Nobody comes out to elect those people. First of all, there's a problem with a lack of emphasis on that. What inspired you to be interested in local politics? And 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. Like I said, when we moved here, we knew we wanted to put down roots. I had already read a lot about subsidiarity and really kind of internalized it and knew it was an important aspect of our faith.

Fr. David Carter

Can you define subsidiarity?

Nathan Bird

Yes. 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 that we hear a lot about. 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. David Carter

Yes, it sounds like a very Catholic principle of "both/and" in that it incorporates the both/and approach. And it's also a very balanced approach, *virtus in medio stat*, in the Aristotelian mean. Virtue stands in the middle between two extremes. You mentioned subsidiarity as a standard principle for the Catholic social teaching, but there's also the principle of participation in public life. Has that played a part in your project?

Nathan Bird

Not explicitly, at least I have never thought of it in those terms. You are right, that is an explicit teaching of faith. I have just always grown up interested in different levels of politics. And so, for me, that always came naturally. I did not really have to think about it through the lens of what does the Church teach on participation, because that is just something that I was already interested in. But it does fit in with that. And as we are talking to other parishioners and other Catholics about why they should be interested, that will definitely play a role. Even if this is not something like me, where I am this big nerd trying to figure out what is happening in local politics, if that doesn't come naturally to you, understand that the Church does encourage us to be actively participating in our civic life.

Fr. David Carter

Excellent, excellent. What are some of the upcoming things that people who hear this interview might be interested in, on the local level of politics?

Nathan Bird

The most immediate thing is there is a runoff for the Mayor seat, as well as the Council seats in District Two and District Five. And that is going to be on April 13. And early voting is going to be starting in a week, I believe. So that is the most immediate thing. And I have interviews with most of those candidates on my podcast and on my website.

Fr. David Carter

And we're doing this interview on St. Patrick's Day, 3/17. So, when he says a week from now, this interview, it probably will be the following weekend after a week from now.

Nathan Bird

So early voting will probably have already started. The runoff is between Tim Kelly and Kim White who are running for mayor. And then in District Two, it is between Jenny Hill and Thomas Lee. And then in District Five, it is between Dennis Clarke and Isaiah Hester. And I was not able to interview Isaiah Hester. I just could not fit him into the schedule. But I have interviews with all those other candidates available on the website for people to get involved and say, the Mayor does a lot. Your city council person does a lot. It is important to go vote for these positions because they have a very direct impact on how our city operates day to day. Like you said, much more on a day-to-day level, they have a lot more impact than the President or your Congressman. So, I really encourage people to get active and educate themselves on this runoff and go vote on April 13.

Fr. David Carter

Where can people go to educate themselves about the important issues for our community?

Nathan Bird

There are several different resources. I have tried to aggregate as many as possible on my own website, which is ChattanoogaCivics.com.

Fr. David Carter

Well, let's look at your website, then, while you mention that. ChattanoogaCivics.com is the is the website, right? And you have on there a lot of resources, including a podcast, your podcast that we were talking about.

Nathan Bird

Yes. The homepage will take you to most of the major podcast apps as well as my social media page. If you want to email me, if you are feeling very generous and want to donate to support the project, it is really a labor of love on my part, but I do accept donations. That is just my introductory paragraph as to why I started the project. And then at the top, you can see the tabs for the mayor's race and city council race.

Fr. David Carter

So, you link directly to their websites.

Nathan Bird

I link to their websites, and then that is my interview that I have done with them - is what you'll find on that page.

Fr. David Carter

Awesome. And then obviously this is a runoff situation. But you had done the interviews with all these other candidates.

Nathan Bird

Yes, I did as many as I could.

Fr. David Carter

Okay. And then the city council race - we also have the same thing. Find your District. I think that is a great resource, because most people don't know what district they live in. I am just going to click on it while we're doing this interview. How about that? So here we are. We are downtown. I think we are in this District Eight.

Nathan Bird

I believe the Basilica is on the far western edge of District Eight, that piece that juts out into District Seven.

Fr. David Carter

Yes, this part right here. That's really cool to see that, and to see who is in the city. I noticed this little pocket, Red Bank, is not in there. I know that I have heard people say that: Oh, I live in Red Bank. I can't vote in those elections. Or East Ridge. There are incorporated cities that are not part of the city of Chattanooga.

Nathan Bird

Yes. And actually, if you see that little island in District Nine, as well, there's a tiny little community called Ridgeside that incorporated back in the early 1900s and has remained independent this entire time.

Fr. David Carter

That's fascinating.

Nathan Bird

It is fascinating. It is really interesting looking at how the city has kind of grown. The Other Resources tab is up at the top right. That is where I link to registration to vote. There is a great website where somebody online basically broke down all the financial disclosures of all the mayoral candidates and put them in a very easy-to-read format. He did a great job. I still do not know who this guy is. He is on Reddit. And I just know him by his username. But he put together this great website about finances. The Camp House does a great podcast. They have interviewed a lot of candidates. There are some other resources - voter guides; Times Free-Press and WRCB did candidate interviews. There are a lot of resources that I have tried to compile. If you want to look beyond what I am providing, I really want to try and provide a well-balanced, well-rounded look at these candidates and these issues. I do not want to be the only voice talking about these things.

Fr. David Carter

It sounds like you have put together a great resource to help people go through the door and explore these issues that affect us. And faithful people who are faith-based should be interested in this, because we were called to participate in the life of society. And we are supposed to respect that principle of subsidiarity, as you mentioned, that says that things that happen on the local level are very important for us to be attentive to, so that we are not just focused on huge issues from people far away, or just get insulated in our own island unto ourselves, but that we're truly part of a community. Well, Nathan, thank you so much for taking the time to tell us about this awesome project that you got going. We will pray for its success and hope to spread the word so that everybody can be informed about the things going on in Chattanooga.

Nathan Bird

Thank you for having me. It's been great.

Fr. David Carter

All right. God bless.

The video of the interview is available on the Basilica's website.

Visit **Nathan Bird's** Chattanooga Civics website at chattanoogacivics.com

See article: [Chattanooga Civics Podcast Aims to Prepare Voters For 2021 City Elections – by Katie Bird, Chattanooga Pulse 1/29/21](#)