

WITH GOOD REASON

VILLANOVA POLITICAL SCIENTIST **DANIEL MARK, PhD,**
COLLABORATES AT THE HIGHEST ECHELONS
TO PROMOTE RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

BY SUZANNE WENTZEL

When politics and religion come up in conversation, reactions vary: awkward silence, a change in subject, banal commentary, unrestrained ranting. None of them promise thoughtful dialogue. How, then, are people and nations to discuss topics crucial to human freedom and societal flourishing?

Cue Daniel Mark, PhD, assistant professor of Political Science and superb navigator of the crosscurrents of politics, law and religion. Dr. Mark advocates an effective, often overlooked approach: Weigh the best arguments on all sides of an issue, and ground civil discourse in reason.

At Villanova, Dr. Mark accompanies students on what he calls the “daunting journey” of exploring the deepest questions, seeking answers honestly, and having “the courage to change one’s opinions

and even one’s life.” He also plies his method at the global level as vice chairman of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan government body that monitors violations of this universal human right.

SAFEGUARDING THE FIRST FREEDOM

Appointed in 2014 and again in 2016 by successive speakers of the US House of Representatives, Dr. Mark joins fellow commissioners in advising the White House, Congress and the US Department of State on foreign policy toward countries that permit or incite religious persecution. For countries with the most severe violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act,

the commission recommends a specific designation: “country of particular concern,” or CPC.

Dr. Mark has traveled with small delegations to Vietnam and Nigeria, both of which the commission has recommended for designation as CPCs, as well as to Azerbaijan, Indonesia and Malaysia. Such visits allow the commissioners to meet with religious leaders, victims of persecution and those working on the ground. High on the agenda are meetings with senior government officials, who know that their countries are under scrutiny. These sometimes fraught, but always diplomatic, encounters also take place in the commission’s Washington, D.C., offices. Even when the parties vehemently disagree, Dr. Mark relies on argument based in reason to present the commission’s point of view.

“Our hope is that people will recognize and uphold religious freedom, but in places where the culture is less supportive of human rights, it helps to make the case that it is in a country’s best interest to address these problems.” Concerns about their international reputations can also spur governments to step up their efforts to get a more favorable designation.

Dr. Mark feels privileged to do his “tiny bit” for this critical cause and to support those who sacrifice so much to defend their beliefs. “People fight for their rights in different ways, but religious freedom is the one they are most willing to die for.”

His colleagues value the conviction and knowledge of the commission’s youngest member. “Dr. Mark is a passionate advocate for the rights of religious minorities and other persecuted people around the world,” says Commissioner Jackie Wolcott, whose distinguished career includes service as special envoy for Nuclear Nonproliferation and US ambassador to the United Nations Security Council. “He brings great academic precision to our work and, as vice chairman, is an exceptional and highly respected leader, both inside and outside the commission.”

Evidence of this high regard abounds. Since joining Villanova’s faculty in 2013, the Princeton-educated political scientist has published a plethora of scholarly chapters and articles. He was a visiting fellow at his alma mater last year and will be one next year at the University of Notre Dame. CNN, *U.S. News & World Report* and other media outlets have shared his insights with a worldwide audience. Listed on the cover of a recent issue of *Vital Speeches International* are the titles of addresses by the prime ministers of India and the

United Kingdom, the vice president of the Philippines, the premier of China—and Daniel Mark.

RECALCULATING

The esteem accorded Dr. Mark on the international stage is matched by the respect of learners in his classroom. In courses on political theory, law and morals, and other themes, students rise to the challenge of wrestling with issues inherently worthy and politically pressing. In addition, Dr. Mark, who received the title of Battalion Professor in 2015, inspires midshipmen in Villanova’s Naval ROTC with invigorating guest lectures.

One midshipman, Brent Sacks ’15 CLAS, had been hitting the snooze button on his political awakening, but Dr. Mark’s intellect, eloquence and fair treatment of issues roused his interest. Sacks took one of Dr. Mark’s courses, and the experience redefined the way he looked at government.

“When we expressed opinions in class, Dr. Mark would push back to test how well they were developed,” recalls Sacks, now an ensign in Virginia Beach. “He didn’t change our opinions. He changed how we arrived at them. That immersion in critical thinking transformed me.”

Dr. Mark sees Villanova as the ideal environment in which to engage students in intellectual struggles. The University’s commitment to its identity never wavers. “Villanova recognizes that the liberal arts are critical for educating young people to be responsible citizens in a free republic,” he says. At a time when civil discourse is “bitterly divisive and crass,” the need to develop and exercise the virtues of citizenship is urgent. ■



Vice Chairman Daniel Mark, PhD, flanked by the Rev. Thomas Reese, SJ, chair, and Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz, commissioner, leads a discussion at a meeting of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom at its headquarters in Washington, D.C.