

On Our Civic Responsibility for the Common Good

The following is a summary of the pastoral letter written **by Archbishop Raymond L. Burke** to the faithful of St. Louis on October 1, 2004 prepared by the Respect Life Apostolate. Catholics will find it helpful as they form their consciences in preparation for this year's election. The full text of the pastoral letter is available online at www.archstl.org or by calling the Respect Life Apostolate at 314-792-7555.

Introduction

Every citizen has the responsibility to safeguard and promote the common good. The responsibility of each individual is weightier in a democracy like the United States, in which we elect the officials of our government. One way to exercise our civic responsibility for the common good is by exercising our right and fulfilling our duty to vote, in order to choose representatives who will best serve the common good in government.



I am 'my brother's keeper'

Scripture teaches us that we are our "brother's keeper;" Good Samaritans charged to exercise our civic responsibility to promote the common good. As followers of Christ, we can never excuse ourselves from responsibility when there is something to be done to save the life of a brother or sister in great need. I ask myself what answer I will give our Lord when He asks me about my many innocent and defenseless brothers and sisters in the womb whose lives have been and are being snuffed out. How will I answer our Lord when He asks me about my brothers and sisters who have grown weak under the burden of advanced years, grave illness or special needs, whose so-called "mercy killing" has been made legal in some places and is proposed to be made legal everywhere in our nation? Our civic responsibility for the common good is great, especially in a society which fails to afford legal protection to the weakest and most defenseless.

Bond of divine charity

Our civic responsibility to protect the common good is informed, first and foremost, by our life in Christ. We come to life in Christ through Baptism. From the moment of our Baptism, the Holy Spirit begins to dwell within our soul. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we truly live each day in Christ and strengthened by the Sacraments. As followers of Christ, it is our joyful obligation to make of ourselves, by God's grace, instruments of divine charity, of God's love for all men and women, without boundaries.

Citizens of Heaven and Earth

By our birth, we are citizens of earth. By our Baptism, we become citizens of heaven. We are called to live an integrated life in which our duty as citizens of earth, to protect and promote the common good, is enlightened by the grace of Christ, and our duty as citizens of heaven, to live for love of God and love of neighbor, is a part of our civic responsibility.

Conscience, our guide in divine charity

Conscience is the voice of God within us, assisting us to choose good and to avoid evil, in accord with God's law. It is our conscience which leads us to choose a particular action, which judges the goodness or evil of the action as we carry it out, and helps us to assess the goodness or evil of the action, once it has been done. It is our responsibility to inform our conscience with the truth, which is

God's law inscribed in our hearts, revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and taught with authority by the Church.

We are morally bound in conscience to choose leaders at all levels of government who will best serve the common good, "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 26a). "[T]he sum total of social

conditions" embraces a wide spectrum of concerns which the Catholic voter must have before his or her eyes, for example, safeguarding the right to life and the sanctity of marriage and the family; securing domestic and international peace; promoting education and public safety; assisting those suffering from poverty; providing sufficient and safe food, health care and adequate housing; eliminating racism and other forms of injustice; and fostering justice in the work place.

In considering the common good, there is a certain order of priority which must be followed. Conditions upon which other conditions depend must receive our first consideration. The first consideration must be given to the protection of human life itself, without which it makes no sense to consider other social conditions. Within the considerations for the protection of human life, the protection of the life of the innocent and defenseless, and of the weak and the burdened must have primacy of place. There can never be justification for directly and deliberately taking the life of those who indeed are "the least" (Mt 25:45). Such an act is always evil in itself, intrinsically evil. Society, rather, is called to treasure its members who are weakest, in the eyes of the world.

The chief offenses against human rights in our day include abortion, the destruction of human embryos, euthanasia, human cloning and the movement to recognize as a marriage a relationship between two persons of the same sex. These practices attack the foundation of the common good, which is the good of human life and the good of marriage and the family.

In order to defend the common good, we must first defend the right to life. Some Catholics have suggested that a candidate's position on the death penalty and war are as important as his or her position on procured abortion and same-sex "marriage." This, however, is not true. Procured abortion and homosexual acts are intrinsically evil, and, as such, can never be justified in any circumstance. Although war and capital punishment can rarely be justified, they are not intrinsically evil; neither practice includes the direct intention of killing innocent human beings. In some circumstances, self-defense and defense of the nation are not only rights, but responsibilities. Neither individuals nor governments can be denied the right of lawful defense in appropriate circumstances (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2265, 2309). While we must all work to eradicate the circumstances which could justify either practice, we must stop the killing of innocent unborn children and the practice of euthanasia, and safeguard marriage and the family now. One cannot

justify a vote for a candidate who promotes intrinsically evil acts which erode the very foundation of the common good, such as abortion and same-sex “marriage,” by appealing to that same candidate's opposition to war or capital punishment.

Voting and the common good

The Church teaches that we have an obligation, in justice, to vote, because the welfare of the community depends upon the persons elected and appointed to office. We are morally obliged to vote for a worthy candidate. Depending on the importance of the office which the candidate seeks, careful consideration must be given to the

The Church on intrinsic evils

“Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable” (*Evangelium vitae*, 58a).

“[T]he use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person” (*Evangelium vitae*, 63a).

“[E]uthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person” (*Evangelium vitae*, No. 65d).

“Human cloning, for any reason, is ‘in opposition to the dignity both of human procreation and of the conjugal union’ (*Donum vitae*, I, 6), inasmuch as it reduces procreation to a species of manufacture, and treats human life as a product of human artifice” (*On Our Civic Responsibility for the Common Good*, 27).

“Legal recognition of a same-sex relationship undermines the truth about marriage, revealed in the natural law and the Holy Scriptures, namely that it is an exclusive and lifelong union of one man and one woman, which of its very nature cooperates with God in the creation of new human life” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” July 31, 2003, 2-4).

principles and positions for which he or she stands. If all candidates uphold the moral law in its integrity, especially with regard to the intrinsically evil acts considered above, then it is a question of voting for the candidate on the basis of his or her character, ability to lead, record and practical plans for attaining goods proposed.

When all candidates for a particular office fail, in some regard, to support the moral law and thus foster the common good in its entirety, some Catholics simply decide not to vote at all. The decision not to vote at all, however, fails to take responsibility for any advancement of the common good, even if limited by some false positions taken by a candidate.

Voting as material and formal cooperation in another's sin

Candidates and their parties, at times, advocate social policies and programs which are themselves gravely immoral or they endorse laws which permit intrinsically evil actions which are gravely unjust. Certainly, it is never right to vote for a candidate in order to promote the immoral practices he or she endorses and supports. In such a case, the voter, who assists the candidate in fulfilling his or her agenda by getting into office, intends the same evil endorsed and promoted by the candidate. Assisting another to achieve evil in this

fashion is called formal cooperation, which is never morally permissible.

In certain circumstances, it is morally permissible for a Catholic to vote for a candidate who supports some immoral practices while opposing other immoral practices. Catholic moral teaching refers to actions of this sort as material cooperation, which is morally permissible when certain conditions are met. With respect to the question of voting, these conditions include:

- 1) there is no viable candidate who supports the moral law in its full integrity;
- 2) the voter opposes the immoral practices espoused by the candidate, and votes for the candidate only because of his or her promotion of morally good practices, [which are proportionate to the evil advanced by that candidate; and]
- 3) the voter avoids giving scandal by telling anyone, who may know for whom he or she has voted, that he or she did so to advance the morally good practices the candidate supports, while remaining opposed to the immoral practices the candidate endorses and promotes.

But, there is no element of the common good, no morally good practice, that a candidate may promote and to which a voter may be dedicated, which could justify voting for a candidate who also endorses and supports the deliberate killing of the innocent, abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, euthanasia, human cloning or the recognition of a same-sex relationship as legal marriage. These elements are so fundamental to the common good that they cannot be subordinated to any other cause, no matter how good.

Candidates who support imperfect legislation

A Catholic may vote for a candidate who, while he supports an evil action, also supports the limitation of the evil involved, if there is no better candidate. For example, a candidate may support procured abortion in a limited number of cases but be opposed to it otherwise. In such a case, the Catholic who recognizes the immorality of all procured abortions may rightly vote for this candidate over another, more unsuitable candidate [such as a candidate who supports abortion without any limits] in an effort to limit the circumstances in which procured abortions would be considered legal. Here the intention of the Catholic voter, unable to find a viable candidate who would stop the evil of procured abortion by making it illegal, is to reduce the number of abortions by limiting the circumstances in which it is legal. This is not a question of choosing the lesser evil, but of limiting all the evil one is able to limit at the time.

Thus, a Catholic who is clear in his or her opposition to the moral evil of procured abortion could vote for a candidate who supports the limitation of the legality of procured abortion, even though the candidate does not oppose all use of procured abortion, if the other candidate(s) do not support the limitation of the evil of procured abortion. Of course, the end in view for the Catholic must always be the total conformity of the civil law with the moral law, that is, ultimately the total elimination of the evil of procured abortion.

Conclusion

As Catholics, informed by the moral teaching of the Church, we bear an especially heavy burden of responsibility for the attacks on human life and the family in our society. We cannot remain silent. We have a most serious obligation to bring the moral law to bear upon our life in society, so that the good of all will be served.

We are our “brother's keeper.” Our vocation and mission in life, a true share in the vocation and mission of Christ our Savior, is to love our neighbor without boundaries.