

Viewing election issues through a **LENS OF FAITH**

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“(W)e bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God’s truth.”

— *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,
“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” #7*



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FORMING ONE'S CONSCIENCE FOR VOTING

Let's talk about voting. Jesus isn't running for public office this year. Neither is His mother. That means we can stop looking for the perfect candidate. From the perspective of the Catholic faith, the perfect candidate isn't out there.

It also means I'm not going to tell you how to vote — not because IRS tax codes prohibit it but because faith doesn't require it. I only intend to write about what faith requires — to look at issues that weigh on every Catholic conscience, issues by which we can measure every candidate.

In addressing those issues, I don't intend to substitute for anyone's conscience. Rather, I intend to help in the formation of everyone's conscience.

Abortion remains the number one issue that weighs on the Catholic conscience in every election. Why? Because abortion is the destruction of innocent life on a massive scale. In the U.S. alone, it involves the deaths of almost 1 million children every year, resulting in the deaths of more than 50 million children since 1973. When the powerful can eliminate the vulnerable, and society is told to look the other way, something is drastically wrong. And that pattern sets a template that will express itself in other ways.

Abortion is a direct contradiction to the faith. If we don't object to it, we have little grounds to object to anything else, and little grounds to claim that our concern with other issues is motivated by our Catholic faith. Candidates who support abortion are telling us that they will make decisions by criteria that are in fundamental contradiction to the faith. In the face of that, it strains credulity to believe any promises they make about caring for the poor and vulnerable in a way that is acceptable to the faith.

There are other issues, too. Like what? Racism.

That one word conjures a set of events and attitudes, actions and non-actions that capture our attention. Looking across the country, in our own city, or into our own hearts, there's widespread evidence of a problem and we can't ignore it. To turn our backs on the anguish and frustration of our brothers and sisters is to turn our backs on Jesus, who said, "Whatever you did not do for the least of these you did not do for me." In other words: Racism touches the heart of our Catholic faith.

What will we do about systemic racism? Faith doesn't give us one solution. But candidates who spend more time talking about tax policies than they do about healing racial divisions are telling us that they can't see or won't address a major issue that's tearing apart the human family. How can we trust them to represent us, to see and prioritize and address the most important human problems on our behalf?

There's more to be said about these and other issues, and I'll say more later. But I've said enough to uncover a dilemma that has haunted Catholics in every election of the past 20 to 30 years. It's time to confront that dilemma head on: We've created a party system in which it seems that half of the Catholic issues are championed by Democrats and half of the Catholic issues are championed by Republicans.

That isn't satisfactory. Catholics represent almost a quarter of the American population. Can't a voting bloc of 25 percent of the nation create a political landscape that regularly features candidates who represent Catholic values?

So, what can we do — each one of us, every day — to help change that system, to help something better emerge? We spend a lot of time and energy asking, "How did we get here?" But that's time and energy wasted if it's only spent on recrimination. We need to spend our time and energy asking: "How do we make something better?"

And, because we can't wait until something better emerges, we need to ask, "How should we vote in the meantime?"

How can we think about the election, talk about the election, and form our consciences in preparation for the election — not first as Democrats or Republicans, but first and last as Catholics? I'll address that in the coming weeks.

NOT ALL ISSUES CARRY SAME WEIGHT

Many issues confront us in this election. Abortion and euthanasia. Immigration and national security. The list goes on. The issues don't carry the same weight. In one sense that means different issues appeal to different people. But, in addition to a subjective scale of preferences, is there an objective scale of values that can help us weigh the issues? How do we consider all the issues, while giving each issue its proper weight?

The U.S. Catholic bishops provide guidance in a document issued every four years in preparation for the election: "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."

INTRINSICALLY EVIL ACTS

Some actions are what the Church calls "intrinsically evil acts." Please understand that term. It doesn't mean the people who do them are intrinsically evil. It means that these acts are never morally good. We should never approve or perform or support these actions.

Among these actions are abortion, euthanasia, embryo-destructive research, acts of racism and same-sex marriage.

"There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called 'intrinsically evil' actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned" ("Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," #22).

In terms of giving each issue proper weight, intrinsically evil actions have extra weight because they represent direct assaults on human dignity.

OTHER SERIOUS CONCERNS

Other issues, even if they don't involve intrinsically evil acts, are so important that faith requires us to give them serious

consideration. Among these are the economy, immigration, foreign policy, the approach to terrorism, the environment, systemic racism, health care and religious liberty.

"Although choices about how best to respond to these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters for principled debate and decision, this does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues" ("Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," #29).

Faith doesn't give us one way to address these. What's the proper balance between generosity and national security in an immigration policy? What's the best way to secure basic health care for everyone? What kind of educational reform or job creation plan will make the best contribution toward healing racial inequality? There's room, within the faith, for different answers to those questions, but there's no room for not asking them. In terms of weighing things, these issues shouldn't be ignored.

NUMBER AND KIND

The distinction between intrinsically evil acts and other serious issues is the first step in developing an objective scale of values for the issues. But it's only the first step. What kind of moral calculus will help us give each issue its proper weight?

Consider a simple example. The Church is opposed to abortion and the Church is opposed (when society can protect itself by other means) to the death penalty. But these issues don't carry the same weight for the Catholic conscience. Why not?

First, they differ in number. Abortion results in the killing of almost 1 million children every year — more than 50 million since

"As citizens, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help transform the party to which we belong; we should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths or approve intrinsically evil acts. We are called to bring together our principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a civilization of truth and love."

"Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," #14

1973, the year when the Supreme Court declared that abortion was a constitutional right. The death penalty resulted in the killing of 28 people in 2015, has never resulted in the deaths of more than 100 in a year (the high was 98 in 1999) and the total is 1,437 since 1976, the year when the Supreme Court found the death penalty to be constitutional.

Let me be absolutely clear: 1,437 deaths from the death penalty is 1,437 too many. But the number of deaths from abortion and the number of deaths from the death penalty are objectively different. That objective difference factors into the weight we give to each.

Second, these issues differ in kind. Abortion is the directly willed killing of the innocent; the death penalty is the willed killing of those found guilty in a court of law.

Once again, let me be absolutely clear: It's a violation of human dignity whether the person is innocent or guilty. But the death of the innocent and the death of the guilty are objectively different in their moral quality. That objective difference factors into the weight we give to each.

Abortion weighs more heavily than does the death penalty on the Catholic conscience. The difference isn't merely a subjective matter of preference. It's an objective difference in number and kind.

WEIGHING ALL THE ISSUES

Comparing the weight of abortion with the weight of the death penalty is a fairly straightforward case for the Catholic conscience. Placing all the relevant issues in the scales, and assigning each its proper weight, is an enormously complex task. But that's what it means to consider the issues and measure the candidates as a Catholic.

If we're going to form our consciences and vote as Catholics, we need to develop a new and deeper moral calculus. Classifying issues as intrinsically evil, or by number and kind, isn't the last step in that process, but it's a step in the right direction. It helps us replace a subjective scale of preferences with an objective scale of values. It helps us replace party identification with Catholic identity. It helps us engage in the deeper conversation we need to have with each other: How do we consider all the issues while giving each its proper weight?

THE DILEMMA OF CHOOSING BETWEEN IMPERFECT CANDIDATES

Sometimes, when we consider all of the election issues and give each its proper weight, we're left with a dilemma. What if one candidate is unacceptable on a set of issues that are non-negotiable for a Catholic voter, while the other candidate is unacceptable on a set of issues that a Catholic voter can't ignore? What should we do then?

First, we should pray. We should pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our discernment. We should pray that the candidates (and their parties) will be open to the grace of conversion — even if only one step at a time. We should pray that God will raise up better candidates. (I often say that we should pray for holy priests, because we get the priests we pray for. Perhaps we need to start praying for political candidates as well.)

Some people think that's pie in the sky — that prayer makes no difference. I would encourage us to look to the life of St. John Paul II. He was a great example of how prayer moves culture and shapes history. We would do well to heed his example.

Second, it's possible to give voice to your conscience by not voting for either candidate. That's a drastic step, to be sure, because you effectively silence yourself. But it can't be dismissed as a possibility. Sometimes the world presents the devil's bargain: a choice between supporting one grave evil or another. Sometimes we have to choose none of the above.

Third, it's also possible — after weighing the issues and giving each its proper weight — to vote for the candidate that you believe will do the least harm. Sometimes that's the best we can do.

"Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party and too few candidates fully share the Church's comprehensive commitment to the life and dignity of every human being from conception to natural death. Yet this is not a time for retreat or discouragement; rather, it is a time for renewed engagement."

"Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," #16

No matter which option we choose, however, there will be consequences, and we have to be prepared to face the consequences of our action or inaction. Perhaps that's our greatest contribution. Faith tells us that our suffering is redemptive when it's joined to the cross of Christ. And we have the Eucharist, which gives us the strength to unite ourselves to the suffering of Christ. That's why, when things look darkest, Catholics are at their best — this is a time for us to shine.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

When judging the candidates in light of the issues, we should keep in mind these special factors.

1) Look not only at what a candidate says about a particular issue, but also what they have done in regard to that issue. It's easy for a candidate to pledge words on a given issue. Voting records and actions give you a better picture of what they're likely to do.

2) Look not only at a candidate's position on an issue, but also at whether they have any ability to influence that particular issue. Some candidates aren't going to be in a position to influence a particular issue. Some issues aren't ripe for change. At the same time, however, a candidate's views on issues that are beyond their influence still sheds light on how they will make decisions on issues that are within their influence.

"The struggles that we face as a nation and as a global community cannot be addressed solely by choosing the 'best candidate' for political office. No, in addition to forming our consciences, we must fast and pray, asking our loving and gracious God to give us the ability to effectively proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ through our daily witness to our faith and its teachings. Let us all take to heart the urgency of our vocation to live in the service to others through the grace of Christ and ask humbly in prayer for an outpouring of the grace of the Holy Spirit on the United States of America."

"Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," Introductory Note

3) Recent history shows that decisions on issues that are critical to the Catholic conscience are often being made by appointed judges, not elected legislators. At least since the Supreme Court's *Roe v Wade* decision, we have lived in an age in which the courts have taken key issues out of legislators' hands. Recent Supreme Court decisions on marriage (2013, 2014 and 2015), abortion (2016) and immigration (2016) indicate that we're still living in that age. On many key issues the courts have had — and are likely to have — the last word.

Does that mean candidates don't matter? Not at all. It means that, in addition to judging the candidates by the issues, we have to consider what kind of judges a particular candidate and the candidate's party will nominate and appoint. Even when we aren't directly voting on judges, we can't ignore the question of who is appointing the judges.

"Two temptations in public life can distort the Church's defense of human life and dignity: The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity ... The second is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity."

"Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," #27-29



MORE INFORMATION

- Read the USCCB's document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship": www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/
- Find more resources on forming one's conscience from the Archdiocese of St. Louis: www.archstl.org/vote

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON FORMING CONSCIENCE

I haven't resolved every issue regarding the upcoming election, nor do I intend to. My intention is to help us form our consciences and frame our conversations as we prepare to vote.

In addition to the immediate issue of this election, however, I'd like to raise our eyes to a broader horizon for a moment.

When we do so, I return to one of my main questions: Can't a voting bloc of 25 percent of the nation create a political landscape that regularly features candidates who represent all of our Catholic values?

We aren't there yet. But what steps will move us in that direction? Let me suggest three things.

1) If we spend more time listening to political ads than we do listening to God, then that's part of the problem.

If we do that, we not only consume but also perpetuate a culture that puts politics before prayer. That's backward. We need to create a different kind of culture. That's a long term project, to be sure, but it starts right now, with individual people and

individual acts. Whether it's reading the Bible, praying the Rosary, sitting before the Blessed Sacrament, praying quietly as you drive or something else, make listening to God a priority. Be the change you wish to see.

2) If we don't listen to each other with genuine interest when we disagree, then that's part of the problem.

Political ads often feature the worst things a candidate has done or said, with the implicit judgment: "What a jerk!" or

"What a liar!" That doesn't foster faith-filled (or even reasonable) conversation. We need to create a different kind of culture.

Let's establish a family atmosphere, even if only among ourselves. Let's ask each other: "How do you plan to vote?" And:

"Man cannot be separated from God, nor politics from morality."

St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Proclaiming St. Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, 2000



"Why do you like that candidate?" And: "How do you weigh that issue?" Then let's listen to each other with genuine interest, not just waiting for the next chance to score points in a debate. Being genuinely interested in each other, listening to and loving each other even amidst our differences — if we don't do that within our own Catholic family, what hope is there for the broader culture? We need to be the change we wish to see.

3) There's a temptation to disengage because the situation is such a mess. But let's name that for what it is: a temptation to despair. We're called to be a people of hope, and hope expresses itself in continued engagement.

So, let's remember that the day after the election, Jesus will still be Lord. People will still need to hear the Good News of his saving love. Each of us will be called to take up our cross and follow Him, serving others and suffering for our convictions. That's how our faith has shaped culture in the past; that's how our faith will shape the culture in the future. In that sense, our mandate won't have changed, no matter who wins or loses.

Faith tells us that we bring a change by being the change we wish to see. Let's start with this election.