

REFLECTIONS

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Casting Your Ballot, A Moral Act

Next month, we will have the opportunity to vote for the people who will lead this nation. The outcome will significantly affect our lives – and those of our children and grandchildren -- for decades.

The challenges before the nation are serious and emotion laden. They range from abortion to immigration, from redefining marriage to adequate health care, from freedom of conscience to the national debt. All have profound moral implications. Thus, as Catholics, each of us has an obligation to cast our ballot with a faith-formed conscience, aware of the teachings of our Church and of the views of those who seek to represent us. We must evaluate the candidates' promises, policy positions, and party platforms in light of the moral and social teaching of the Church.

Notwithstanding diverse prudential judgments, each of us should guide our decision making on the issues with a fundamental respect for the dignity and life of every human being at every stage of life. This foundational principle is fundamental to our nature as having been created in the image and likeness of God and is the central tenet of Catholic moral and social teaching.

The righteousness of some decisions, such as waging war, depends on the situation. Other actions, as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops points out in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, “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.”

Preeminent among these non-negotiable tenets is the protection of human life, from conception until natural death. This holds for every condition of the person, whether healthy or sick, whole or handicapped, young or old, born or in the womb. The Church's position on human life -- as well as on euthanasia, human cloning, embryonic stem-cell research, terrorism, genocide, other direct assaults on innocent human life and on its wellspring in the union of a man and woman in marriage -- is immutable and not open to individual judgment. Actions to deny human life are so detrimental to humanity that there can be no allowance for diverse views.

Pope St. John Paul II, in his 1988 apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, stated: "The common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights -- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture -- is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition of all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination."

Issues that do not promote an intrinsic evil require prudent judgments about the best way to apply Church teachings to deal with compelling societal problems. Health care, education, poverty, housing, immigration, jobs, taxation and national security are important concerns and their consideration should not be dismissed. They are significant, challenge one's moral sense and require action, but approaches to addressing them are open to principled debate. Morality in these cases rests not on what is done, but on how it is done, on the motives, means and

circumstances involved. No matter how beneficial to society a candidate's positions on these issues may be, they cannot outweigh his or her support for an intrinsic evil such as abortion.

Supreme Knight Carl Anderson, in his address at the 2016 Supreme Convention in Toronto, reminded us that: "[T]he right to abortion is not just another political issue. It is in reality a legal regime that has resulted in more than 40 million deaths. -- a figure greater than the entire population of Canada. What political issue could possibly outweigh this human devastation? The answer, of course, is that there is none."

Closely allied with the right to life are the promotion and defense of the natural structure of the family and the protection of religious liberty. The Church is steadfast in defining the family as a lifelong union between a man and a woman based on marriage for the procreation and raising of children. And it firmly supports our right to live our lives and express our opinions, publically and privately, according to our faith.

On matters that involve an intrinsic evil, a Catholic cannot be true to the Faith and claim to be opposed personally to a political position, but support it for those who think otherwise. The person is either in self-delusion or deceitful as he or she tries to straddle contradictory positions. A Catholic who votes for such an individual, if there is a morally-acceptable alternative candidate, would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil.

While a candidate's stand on a single issue may not be sufficient to guarantee a voter's support, the Church makes clear that a single position that favors an intrinsic evil should disqualify that candidate from receiving one's vote, regardless of the candidate's views on issues requiring prudential judgement. In good conscience, one must give preference to candidates who do not oppose God-given moral principles.

There rarely is a candidate with whom one agrees on everything. What does one do when there is no totally acceptable alternative? Deciding not to vote is often not the best solution. When all candidates support an intrinsic evil, it is morally permissible to vote for the candidate who poses the least threat to human life and dignity and thus limit the harm. It is important, therefore, to vote with a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods.

Guidance for voting is available from the Maryland Catholic Conferences, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Priests for Life, among other sources. The information they provide can be helpful in developing one's conscience. But advice on issues that involve reasoned judgement is not binding as sincere Catholics can come to morally-acceptable opposing conclusions based upon the same principles.

In the coming election, every voice will matter, every vote count. As you prepare to exercise your right and duty as a Catholic citizen, strengthen your understanding of the Church's positions on moral issues, learn the views of the various candidates, give the matter prayerful reflection, and prudentially cast your ballot.

Vivat Jesus!

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