

Faithful citizens, faithful voting

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In the next few weeks, citizens of our country will participate in the important civic duty of choosing those who will lead and represent us. As is common during an election year, but particularly over the past few months, Catholics ask, "How should I vote, for whom?" Though every election cycle brings its own set of challenges and opportunities, our current political climate seems to bring unique, difficult questions to be discerned by voters who are committed not only to the well-being of our social and political life and to living out the Gospel in all aspects of life (cf. Mk 16:15).

It is not my intention to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Neither is it my intention to endorse any particular candidate or political party. As my brother bishops and I have expressed in our statement "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" (FCFC), "our intention (as bishops) is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience."

As human beings made in the image and likeness of God, we possess the gift of an intellect to discern right from wrong in accordance with objective moral principles. This is the precious gift of conscience.

Continuing to form our consciences and discern voting as a faithful citizen and a faithful Catholic, it may help to remember first how one should not vote.

As Catholics, we should not vote for a person or political party simply because of habit. To be true witnesses of Jesus today we cannot be content with supporting candidates or political parties simply because we have always voted that way or our families or friends voted for them. Much less should we vote for candidates or political parties because a popular actor or sports figure endorses them, or simply because they profess to be a Catholic or a Christian.

The current political climate starkly reminds us that, for good or for ill, candidates and political parties can and do change, sometimes dramatically. When considering how a Catholic should vote, it is important to remember that we belong first and foremost to Jesus before we belong to any particular political party or candidate.

When we are committed to Jesus, and his Gospel, we cannot merely "go with the flow." Rather, we must be willing to put in the hard work of seeking out accurate information on particular candidates and political parties—not just at the national

level but also at the local and state levels. Faithful citizenship requires that we research reliable information and not just accept media spin or commentary by the media personalities regarding a certain candidate or political party.

We should be keenly aware of sound bites or manipulations designed either to support or vilify a candidate. We should challenge ourselves to look beyond ugly and oftentimes irrelevant negativity from candidates, their political parties, supporters or detractors. We should engage in a true consideration and discernment of what a particular candidate or political party stands for, their views and intentions particularly regarding objective moral principles affecting the dignity of every human person, especially the most vulnerable.

In seeking to thoughtfully discern candidates and their positions, it would be helpful to challenge ourselves to not only consider their shortcomings but also to see the good and unique gifts that the candidate may possess. In doing this, we allow candidates to define and communicate their vision, positions and concrete plans and allow them to be accurately understood.

With so much negativity in current political discourse, perhaps we as faithful Catholic voters can become models of integrity and civility, to seek out what is positive about a candidate we engage in respectful discourse and where there are disagreements we do not become enmeshed in misrepresenting, insulting or demonizing the other.

After true discernment of a candidate's or political party's positions, our exercise of faithful citizenship requires that we carefully check these against the objective moral principles known through a well-formed Catholic conscience.

Though it may be difficult, we must then have the courage to consider not voting for a candidate or a political party—even one that we may happen to like—if that person or party stands for principles, positions or public policies that run contrary to these objective moral principles, especially those that violate basic principles of life and human dignity or strikes against the common good.

The current political conversations in our nation tend to have us believe that the candidate or political party to vote for is the one that will bring about the most advantage to us and our own personal prosperity. A well-formed Catholic conscience understands that true political leaders worthy of our support are those that protect and foster the common good. Common good does not mean economic prosperity for the most number of people nor does it mean a collectivism that puts the community over the dignity of the individual human person.

Rather, our Catholic tradition teaches that the “common good” is the sum total of social conditions which allow people—all of us—either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily (CCC, No.1906). The common good is not served if any one person's good is violated so that others may prosper. On the

contrary, the common good can be fostered only if “human rights are protected and basic responsibilities are met. Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access those things required for human decency...the right to exercise religious freedom publicly and privately by individuals and institutions along with freedom of conscience need to be constantly defended (FCFC 49).”

Related to this, a well-formed Catholic conscience understands that there are some acts that are always morally wrong and thus cannot morally be enshrined in law. These are commonly referred to as “intrinsic evils” and are objectively morally wrong regardless of situation, emotions or political correctness. These always violate the dignity of the human person and thus seriously strike against the common good of a society. Whether privately as individuals or socially through laws or public policies, participating in these or supporting those who would proliferate such objectively immoral acts is contrary to fundamental moral principles and is contrary to a well-formed Catholic conscience.

As my brother bishops and I have taught: “There are some things that 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. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia...It is a mistake with grave moral consequences to treat the destruction of innocent human life merely as a matter of individual choice. A legal system that violates the basic right to life on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed (FCFC 21).”

It is important to understand that not all issues objectively carry with them the same moral weight. Some issues, such as the destruction of innocent human life through abortion, active euthanasia of the elderly or infirmed, human cloning or so-called same sex “marriage,” are intrinsic evils that always violate human dignity. Other issues, such as the death penalty, just war and immigration, do allow for a legitimate diversity of opinion regarding their application.

When evaluating a political candidate or political party on important issues, a well-formed Catholic conscience must carefully discern first whether it is an issue that allows for a legitimate diversity of opinion or whether it is one that concerns an unchangeable, objective moral norm. To help understand which are objective moral wrongs and which allow for legitimate diversity, I strongly recommend that every Catholic consult the "Catechism of the Catholic Church", the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith's "Doctrinal Note Regarding Participation of Catholics in Political Life" and the United States bishops' document "Forming Conscience for Faithful Citizenship" for a clearer understanding of these. These can all be found online.

Unfortunately, oftentimes it can be that no candidate completely enshrines conformity with the moral principles that our formed consciences know to be objective moral norms. It may be the case that one candidate may support the objective moral law on certain issues but not on others, while other candidates may support or deny certain other ones.

In such situations, a well-formed Catholic conscience must first weigh—as much as possible—which issues concerning intrinsic moral principles are in question and which are more key or foundational to the current moral health of our society. However, it is important to remember that this must be concerning key issues of objective moral evils, such as abortion or human cloning, and not just issues of prudential applications, such as just war or immigration.

Then a careful discernment should be made as to which candidate would be most likely to support laws and policies that would limit the proliferation of intrinsically, morally objectionable wrongs. In such situations, Catholic moral teaching allows us to act in a way that would limit as much as possible violations of objective moral norms, even if this means voting for a candidate that is of the so-called “lesser evil.”

It must also be noted that though one may be allowed to vote for a so-called “lesser evil” candidate to limit the spread of intrinsically morally problematic legislation, if it is soberly discerned in conscience that no candidate is suitable in this regard, a faithful well-formed Catholic conscience may choose not to vote for any of the candidates presented and work towards fostering conditions in the society whereby candidates who are more in conformity with objective moral norms can be put forward.

It is important to keep in mind that though voting is a vital part of our civic and political participation in social life, it does not exhaust it. I underscore what my brother bishops and I have said regarding faithful citizenship, namely that “the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election (FCFC 7).”

Of course this does not mean that we take our duty to vote lightly. Rather, it means that even after voting for our civic leaders and representatives, we must work to hold them accountable to the bedrock and unchangeable principles of morality made known to us by God, to service of the common good and to create a more just society. It also means working or demanding that political parties present suitable candidates that will uphold the objective moral law.

Though an important part of it, voting is a right and a privilege that does not abdicate our responsibility to continue to build a society under God that advances the common good and safeguards the dignity of every human person. Civic responsibility, as part of our Christian responsibility, also means personally doing our part to serve the common good in our communities and in our society and not

just sit back to praise or complain about the leaders who are in office as if the common good is only served by those who hold political office. On the contrary, we as members of the Body of Christ, as a requirement of our faith, have an obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society (cf. FCFC 9).

Finally, being citizens but also being people of faith, as we continue to discern the most prudential courses of action in our voting and social participation, it is important for us to remember that we are never alone. As Jesus promised us, he will be with us until the end of the age as we fulfill our call to bring his Gospel to all nations (cf. Mt 28:19-20), including our own. As such, we should always go to him in prayer and worship, asking for his grace upon our nation, our leaders and ourselves, that we may always be faithful citizens and faithful witnesses to his love and mercy for all.