

Politics and Religion?

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Many of us know that in polite company and conversation politics and religion are two topics to avoid. Yet, during this time of year, we can hardly avoid them.

As we enter this time of year the political campaigns are moving into high gear. We see more and more political ads in all types of media. The issues and positions often seem to be conflicting and confusing. As Catholics, we struggle in trying to decide which candidates and issues best embrace the values we hold dear. I would like to offer a few reflections regarding our responsibility as Catholics in the electoral process, the importance of conscience formation and a couple moral principles that assist in forming our conscience.

One of the complexities of politics and the electoral process is that politics entails the art of compromise. And so that is why we often see candidates “say one thing and do another.” “Promises” made in the campaign, very often made in well crafted rhetoric, are often difficult to implement once officials take office as there is a myriad of other elected officials and constituents that are now part of the process. Politics often entails a give and take approach to issues. Sometimes this process can cause cynicism. Lots of eligible voters stay away from the polls because they believe that “you can’t trust politicians.”

As citizens of this country, we Catholics have a responsibility to make our voice heard and to exercise our voice for the common good. Each of us probably has our own thresholds for the values we want to be upheld for the common good. No single candidate embodies all the values that our Catholic faith upholds. Yet it is important that we exercise our voice and vote for the one we believe best fulfills those values.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* encourages participation in the electoral and political process. “It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person....As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life” (nos. 1913-1915).

Stephen Carter, Professor of Law at Yale University, in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief* (1994), offers thoughts on the role of religion in public life. He suggests that a primary role of religion in our nation is to provide an alternative vision to the one offered by society (37). By participating in the electoral process, the Catholic voice and vision enters into the public square as an alternative vision.

From another perspective, we live in a pluralistic society. In this type of society, there are many different views of what constitutes the “good” is for individuals and society. Therefore it is important that Catholics exercise their voice through the electoral process, so that the moral tradition of the Catholic Church, with its thousands of years of experience of reflecting on the good, is part of this discussion.

Catholics have a relatively short history of what we now call the social justice tradition. *Rerum Novarum* published by Leo XII in 1891 is considered to be the foundation of the modern teaching on social justice. In recent years more and more attention has been paid by many, including non-Catholics and non-Christians, to some of the principles that come from the social teachings of the various levels of the magisterium. I will focus on two primary principles, **Human Dignity** and **Solidarity** that may assist in forming our consciences. This is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but

rather a foundation upon which Catholic voters, are urged to reflect and pray about as they think about the coming elections.

Human dignity is at the forefront of both personal and social moral teaching. A critical aspect of human dignity is solidarity that we share with fellow human beings. In Pope Benedict's first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, he notes that "charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as 'social charity'" (no. 29).

In the next article in this series, I will offer reflections on the formation and binding power of conscience and the virtue of prudence. In the final article I will focus on the principles of Human Dignity and Solidarity.

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Conscience and the Elections

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In the last column we looked at reasons why it is important for Catholics to exercise their responsible citizenship by participating in the electoral process. This week, I want like offer reflections on how we use Church teaching in the formation of conscience to make the best decision on how to vote.

Often people think of conscience in the Jiminy Cricket image of the good and bad voices telling us what to do. However, conscience is more than that. Conscience is defined by the *Catechism* as "... a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that [s]he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right" (#1778). The *Catechism* (CCC) later tells us that our conscience has to be informed and this formation is a lifelong process (# 1783-4).

First, we must recognize the moral qualities of our action, in this case how we will cast our ballot. The moral aspects of the election this year (and other years as well) are obvious. Almost every campaign issue has a moral quality to it, e.g., human life and human dignity, justice, war and peace, care for the poor, etc.

The next step is forming our conscience. As Catholics we have a number of sources that we rely on to help us form our conscience, e.g., the Scriptures, the teaching of the magisterium, experts in the field, etc. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops, in their document *Responsible Citizenship*, has a very succinct summary of the moral principles that inform our conscience as to the moral qualities of this year's election. [The Indiana Catholic Conference web site also has a number of good resources.]

Our past personal and collective experiences are also a part of the formation of our conscience as well. We learn from the past, both from our mistakes and from our good actions.

Next we must make a decision. Most decisions that we make are not clearly "black and white"; more often they are in shades of gray. Often there are competing "goods" that are at stake. Yet, we cannot let this paralyze us; we have to make a decision based on informed conscience. "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself" CCC # 1790).

The virtue that assists us in making decisions is prudence. St Thomas Aquinas notes that in order to make good moral judgments one must have first have the knowledge of the general moral principles that guide actions and secondly, the particular circumstances in which a decision is required.(*ST IIaIIae* q.47 a.3) In other words, prudence is the virtue of being able to apply general principles to specific actions.

The *Catechism* also teaches us about prudence, wherein it states, that prudence helps "to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it" (CCC #1806).

No single candidate will uphold the positions that are espoused in our social justice tradition. Many candidates' position on abortion is not in line with what the Church believes and teaches about the dignity of human life. Some candidates do not uphold positions advocated by the Church in other moral issues. Does this mean that we cannot vote for anyone? No, as noted above we cannot remain morally paralyzed.. We

are guided by the moral teaching of the Church and make a decision guided by prudence. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops note in their document *Responsible Citizenship*:

Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods. A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate's opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.

There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil (nos. 34-5).

Finally, we should not forget to pray about these decisions as well. God's grace is always available to guide our lives and decisions.

In the next column, we will examine several moral principles that may serve as a guide for forming our conscience.

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Principles to Guide Decisions

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Thus far we have examined why Catholics ought to participate in the national elections this November. We then focused on conscience and formation of conscience to help us discern the moral qualities of the issues under consideration this year. This article will examine two overarching principles that can be used to form our conscience and make a decision.

For many, the “Catholic” position has been perceived as being a single issue. However, the US Bishops instruct the faithful to exercise their role as responsible citizens and to examine all life issues woven into the “seamless garment,” as the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin taught. “The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood; neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues (*Responsible Citizenship*, #40). This thought reinforces the ideas of John Paul II, from his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* as he calls upon Catholic to foster a “culture of life.”

There are many threads that are woven in this “seamless garment” of the life issues that face us as a nation. The rest of this article will address two major principles of the Church teaching that might help Catholics to form our conscience as we participate in this year’s election.

Human Life & Dignity

The Magisterium has consistently taught that all human life is sacred and ought to be protected from conception to natural death. The Church’s position, teaching and persuasive efforts on the issue of abortion are well-known.

Human life is sacred because humans are created in the *imago Dei* (the image of God) as we read in Genesis. We also find in Genesis that the human person was not meant to be in isolation, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gn 2:18). Although this passage forms the basis for the sacrament of marriage, it also points to a basic fact of human life, the necessity of social relationships—community—for human beings. Humans cannot survive without being in relationship with one another (and in many ways in relationship with the world around us).

This social fabric of the seamless garment of life issues also challenges us to become involved in this electoral process as citizens of this nation as part of the common good.

Solidarity

The above suggests that in many ways, as Catholics, we are called to be our “brother’s or sister’s keeper.” The “self-made” individual is a myth, we all have benefited from the care and concern of others to get where we are today. This interdependent web of relationships is necessary for us to realize our full humanity. The Scriptures also tell us of the special concern that Jesus had for the poor and the outcast.

Solidarity challenges to examine the way in which party platforms and government policies serve to enhance the common good, which in many ways enhances the individual. In almost every social encyclical, the Popes advocate this solidarity among people as a constitutive aspect of human dignity. We are not human in isolation from one another.

Under these two major principles falls a host of issues being addressed by candidates, media, and people of many different beliefs systems. The Bishops note in *Responsible Citizenship* that:

Human dignity is respected and the common good is 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 to those things required for human decency—food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life. (#49).

Conclusion

The issues are certainly complex and reasonable people may differ in some of the applications of these principles. The issues discussed here are reflective of the central theme in our moral tradition, the inherent worth of the individual human person and the dignity of all human as created in the “image of God.” We have also seen that one of the ways we are in the image of God is by our relationship and solidarity with others.

These two principles above have been presented in an attempt to apply some of the magisterial teaching of the Church that emphasizes the principles that flow from human dignity and solidarity. It is important, for the sake of common good and our solidarity with others that many voices enter into dialogue with respect to the direction our country, state or local government will move. As the Bishops note in *Responsible Citizenship*, “[o]ur nation’s tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions and concerns into public life.”

It is up to each individual to form his or her conscience and through the virtue of prudence to make a decision on how to cast their ballot in November.

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