

Voting Your Catholic Conscience

by Father Anthony J. Mastroeni S.T.D., J.D.

This small piece is not intended to be a research essay in social ethics or political philosophy, but simply a clear and concise guide to the average Catholic on how to form a sincere but *correct* conscience in voting this November.

The observations here are not to be construed as promoting or endorsing any one political party or candidate, but instead to identify and parse out the fundamental moral principles and issues that confront consciences in casting a vote.

Permit me to make ten points:

Voting is not an optional extra for citizens of a democratic republic. It is a right that derives from our rational human nature created by God providing us with the good of self-determination that we need, precisely as rational creatures, to determine how and who should govern us. In many instances

the right to vote was won at a very stiff price—years of struggle and even bloodshed. The *Catholic Catechism* teaches that “*Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory ... to exercise the right to vote*” (2240). Failure to exercise that right can be a serious dereliction of that moral responsibility which requires us to promote and secure the common good of our fellow citizens.

Not to vote in November, as some otherwise devout Catholics intend to do because neither candidate attracts them or is perfect enough, is to put oneself in a very morally precarious position causing a less worthy candidate to be elected. Usually there is no candidate who represents a perfect

score on all the issues operating in an election, and it is sobering to recall that the last Perfect Candidate stood on the portico of Pontius Pilate while a poll was taken, and Jesus lost.

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To “sit this one out” and refuse to vote in the November election when the moral stakes are so clear and so high, the future direction of the nation so evident, is like “riding out Katrina” in your house near a levee on

Lake Pontchartrain while refusing to take safe refuge in a school gym just because it doesn’t have all the amenities of a five-star hotel.

No doubt there are still those who will maintain that the Catholic Church has no business in politics, least of all interfering in a national election, that

our U.S. Constitution guarantees “a separation of church and state.”

While the first part of the First Amendment –i.e. its “Establishment” clause– forbids the government to establish any state church or official national religion, the second part –i.e. its “free exercise” clause– was not intended to protect the state from the church, but rather to protect the church from the state; to allow every religion to express its views freely and publicly. It was meant to *include* not *exclude* the voice of religion from the public square.

While the “business” of religion is the saving of souls, this in itself necessarily includes matters of morality. And since there are no morality-free-zones in the business of legislation or politics, religion has a right to make its voice heard.

The act of voting represents a judgment of conscience. And conscience is NOT the same as opinions or feelings. It is an act of the intellect judging the rightness or wrongness of an act or omission. Feelings come from another part of the human soul; they come and go and should be governed by the intellect and will. Also, conscience is not the same as an opinion because its judgment is based upon the intellect’s understanding of the natural moral law, inherent in human nature, or the divinely revealed moral law, such as the Ten Commandments. These are not opinions we invent, but rather they are discovered either by reason’s understanding of the human person, or they are revealed by God. Conscience then is the echo within the human person of objective, moral truth; and our opinions –if they are to be taken seriously by anyone other than ourselves– need to be in harmony with objective truth, and not the other way around. As Catholics we are fortunate to have the Church’s Magisterium to help guide and form our conscience. Among other truths, that Magisterium teaches us that, “*A well-formed Christian conscience does*

not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals” [CDF, *Doctrinal Notes on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Public Life*].

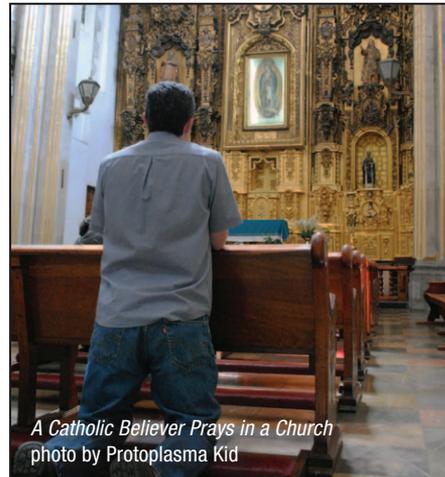
There are some political issues that represent “non-negotiable” moral principles that do not admit of exception or compromise, for they concern intrinsically evil acts or behavior. An individual political position is either in accord with these principles or it is not. And if not, then that position runs contrary to the moral law.

In the November election there are six non-negotiable moral issues: Abortion, Euthanasia or assisted suicide, Embryonic Stem Cell Research, Human Cloning, Homosexual Marriage, and Religious Liberty. These moral issues should disqualify any candidate who holds, promotes or protects them of any Catholic vote.

Other issues, like providing health care, how to cure the immigration crisis, how to correct foreign trade deficits, do not normally involve intrinsically evil acts which are always and everywhere wrongful. Instead, they admit of a variety of political solutions on which morally prudent persons can differ. Pope Saint John Paul II puts it this way:

“Above all, 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 for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination” (*Christifideles Laici*, 1988).



A Catholic Believer Prays in a Church
photo by Protoplasm Kid

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problematic that neither is clearly better than the other” [Catholic Standard, Philadelphia, PA, 8/12/16]. To be sure, this kind of advice is not particularly helpful because it is not evidently correct. A cursory look at the official political platforms of both parties will show a moral fault-line of differences existing between them.

Differences in the Republican and Democrat Platforms.

Republican Platform

“The Constitution’s guarantee that no one can ‘be deprived of life, liberty

Without governmental protection against intrinsically immoral actions, the common good is gravely imperiled and left to face an uncertain future for democracy. As an old Russian peasant was heard to remark in 1917, “*When the country forgets God, it builds its own gallows.*”

Recently, a leading U.S. Churchman stated in his weekly column, “*Both candidates are –what’s the right word?– so*

or property' deliberately echoes the Declaration of Independence's proclamation that 'all' are 'endowed by their Creator' with the inalienable right to life. Accordingly, we assert the sanctity of human life and affirm that the unborn child has a fundamental right to life which cannot be infringed. We support a human life amendment to the Constitution and legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment's protections apply to children before birth" [p. 13].

"We oppose the use of public funds to perform or promote abortion or to fund organizations, like Planned Parenthood, so long as they provide or refer for elective abortions or sell fetal body parts rather than provide healthcare" [p. 13].

"We support the appointment of judges who respect traditional family values and the sanctity of innocent human life" [p. 13].

"We condemn the Supreme Court's ruling in the *U.S. v. Windsor*, which wrongly removed the ability of Congress to define marriage policy in federal law. We also condemn the Supreme Court's lawless ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*... In *Oberfell*, five unelected lawyers robbed 320 million Americans of their legitimate constitutional authority to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman" [p. 11].

Democratic Platform

"We believe that every woman should have access to quality reproductive health care services, including safe and legal abortion—regardless of where she lives, how much money she makes, or how she is insured. We believe that reproductive health is core to women's, men's, and young people's health and wellbeing... We

will continue to oppose—and seek to overturn—federal and state laws and policies that impede a woman's access to abortion, including by repealing the Hyde Amendment" [p. 37].

"We will continue to stand up to Republican efforts to defund Planned Parenthood health centers, which provide critical health services to millions of people" [p. 37].

"We will appoint judges who... will protect a woman's right to safe abortion..." [p. 25].

"Democrats applaud last year's decision by the Supreme Court that recognized LGBT people—like every other American—have the right to marry the person they love. But there is still much work to be done" [p. 19].

Some things always and everywhere are morally wrong. There can never be justification for directly and deliberately

taking innocent human life: abortion, destruction of human embryos, human cloning, euthanasia [assisted suicide]; to promote homosexual "marriage," or to deny the right of religious liberty. Therefore, it is morally wrong to vote for a candidate who promotes these immoral practices. "[A] well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals" (CDF: *Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life*, 2002, n.4).

Therefore, anyone who knowingly votes for a candidate who promotes such evils is a formal cooperater in these evils and, consequently, commits grave or Mortal Sin.

Moreover, not to vote for a candi-

date for whom there is reasonable hope that such evils will be eradicated, or at least seriously limited, is also to be a formal cooperater in evil by omission; that is, not doing what we reasonably can do.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing—Edmund Burke.

A word to those who persist year after year, mindless of seismic shifts that have taken place in political parties, voting the very same way their ancestors did: *you do them no honor!* If these same ancestors, though now dead and perhaps in heaven, now knowing what they knew not then, could make their words take flight, they would say something similar to what Saint Paul told those Christians of Galatia, grown deaf and muted to the truth and stuck in pagan thinking, "*O you stupid Galatians! Have you gone mad?*" [Gal. 3:1].

Voting one's conscience is like taking an oath. We ask God to witness to the truth that we are affirming by our choice of such a candidate. In *Man for All Seasons* Saint Thomas More answers his daughter Meg and her fiancé Roper who are trying to convince More to simply say the words and swear the Oath of Supremacy, regardless of what it actually says, but personally meaning something else:

"What is an oath then, but words we say to God? Listen, Meg. When a man takes an oath, he's holding his own self in his own hands like water. And if he opens his fingers then, he needn't hope to find himself again." ❖



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