

Voting Catholic

By Graham Osborne

The Catechism confirms that it is “morally obligatory ... to exercise the right to vote” (CCC 2240). But with a key election in the United States on November 3, and a Canadian federal election also threatening, many feel overwhelmed by the flood of competing issues and candidate’s platforms. How does a Catholic sort through all this? The Church gives us some principles.

The Church is generally hesitant to endorse a particular political party or candidate, largely because few ever hold all the tenets of the Catholic faith perfectly, so an endorsement of such a person or party could be seen as unspoken support for some potentially un-Christian policies as well. Additionally, there is never a guarantee that a particular person or group will not veer from Church teaching in the future.

But what the Church does do is give us clear, moral guidelines to follow, and if one follows the principles for Catholic voting set out by the Church, it often becomes completely unnecessary for the Church to specify a particular candidate, as the guidelines often make the choice abundantly clear to all except those determined to intentionally turn away from the truths of the faith.

Order issues according to moral importance

There are many issues to consider in an election, but morally, they are not all of equal weight. The right to life is not the only issue, but it is absolutely the most foundational issue of all human rights. The economy, immigration, health care, racial issues and the environment are all important issues, but are absolutely inconsequential if a person does not first have life. The right to life is the most foundational of all human rights, and the one upon which all others are built.

This is, in part, why abortion is the primary issue to be considered in any election. American Bishop Donald Hying explains the rationale for this position succinctly in his summary of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ position on this matter, which applies equally well to our position here in Canada: “The United States bishops have declared abortion as the preeminent moral issue because no other fundamental moral evil has destroyed more human lives. There is no other evil extolled in either party’s platform or candidate’s policies that matches a party’s or candidate’s promotion of the intrinsic evil of the direct and deliberate taking of so many human lives -- now nearly a million each year in the United States alone.”

St. John Paul II lays things out for us: “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), no. 380).

In *Evangelium vitae* (1995), no. 101 he adds: "It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church **553 adds further clarity:** *Promoting human dignity implies above all affirming the inviolability of the right to life, from conception to natural death, the first among all rights **and the condition for all other rights** of the person (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Donum Vitae*)*

In his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, St. John Paul II gives us added clarity: "from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun that is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather, the life of a new human being with his own growth."

He then goes on to authoritatively declare that the Church's teaching on abortion "is unchanged and unchangeable. Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his successors... I declare that direct abortion... always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church's tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium. No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church".

Pope Francis echoes this in his February 2 address to Italian Pro-life leaders, stating that abortion, "undermines the foundations of the construction of justice, compromising the proper solution of *any other* human and social issue."

We may never directly vote for, or even publicly promote, candidates, laws or propositions whose goal is to maintain or increase access to abortion. This is called formal cooperation with evil, and is a serious sin.

Then-Cardinal Ratzinger, in his document, "*Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion: General Principles*", wrote the following: "A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia. When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favour of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons."

So what if you feel there are "proportionate reasons" to vote for a pro-abortion candidate? What if you think there is some issue that would unequivocally contribute more evil to the world than abortion? You would be obliged to prove this. It couldn't be just speculation on your part.

Again, Bishop Hying, summarizing the USCCB's position on abortion answers things clearly for us: "There is no other evil extolled in either party's platform or candidate's policies that matches a party's or candidate's promotion of the intrinsic evil of the direct and deliberate taking of so many human lives -- now nearly a million each year in the United States alone."

Lesser of two evils?

But still, what if things are not so clear cut? What if both candidates are flawed in some way? Often, the Catholic principle of double effect comes into consideration, more loosely/inaccurately known as, "the lesser of two evils."

Simply put, when faced with a choice between two evils, one must choose the lesser evil. And while, technically, a Catholic is never truly free to "choose evil", sometimes an action can potentially have both good and evil effects. Can we choose such things? Again, simply put, yes, as long as the action itself is not evil (Catholic teaching states that you can never do an evil to do a good), and the good is intended, but the associated evil is not.

We can see the practical application of this principle often, as one sifts through the various platforms of a potential candidate, and it can help us to order various voting considerations. For example, Colin Donovan, vice president for theology at EWTN writes: "What would be the object in voting for an imperfect candidate? It would be to limit the evil that a more extreme candidate would do."

We clearly see the idea of proportionality coming into play in this above situation as well: a fancy word simply meaning that, the resulting good of a particular action **must outweigh the associated evil**.

Form your conscience

But what if you disagree with the Church's assessment of things, or it's guidelines. A Catholic must "vote his conscience", right? Sort of. Here's a good rule of thumb I tell my children. If you truly form your conscience – you read copiously from solid Church documents, papal writings, etc – and you still find your conscience in conflict with what the Church teaches, go back and "form" it again.

Protected by the Holy Spirit's gift of infallibility in its doctrinal teachings on faith and morals, it is unlikely you are smarter than the Church. Sorry to break it to you.

The "Third Candidate"?

What if there is a third candidate who perhaps seemingly better aligns with Church teaching, but they have virtually no possibility of winning election? Should we not still choose such a candidate?

This is a valid consideration, but here's where things get a little murkier, especially if one is trying to send a message about what they feel should be more weightily considered in future elections – in a sense, placing a vote to try and make a point.

However, the “lesser of two evils” idea does potentially come into play here. As long as a candidate does not clearly endorse objectively evil actions or policies [like abortion, euthanasia, which are distinct from potentially prudential judgment issues like the economy, immigration or climate change], one must also consider the scale of evil that may be done or prevented if a particular candidate *does or does not get in*, and whether you directly [for example, by voting for Biden], or indirectly [voting for an unlikely third party] facilitated that result.

In the case of Trump vs Biden, it is an absolute certainty that abortion will both flourish and expand nationally and internationally under Biden. Voting for Biden would clearly be formal cooperation with evil. Very serious! Potentially mortally sinful. So that option is out. And if you knowingly vote for a candidate who has no realistic possibility of election, you potentially are not realistically resisting the known, certain grave evil that ***will occur*** if Biden is elected. That's a problem.

With the profound seriousness of the 2020 American election, especially in terms of the limiting, or even potentially ending of abortion in the United States, this is not the moment to try to send a weak message with a vote for a candidate who has no chance for election – and consequently, who will have ***no possibility of ending or further limiting abortion***.

Separation of Church and State?

Some even insist that we should not apply Christian principles to the election of political candidates at all, appealing to the flawed idea of “separation of Church and state”. St Pius X answers for us stating: “That the State must be separated from the Church is a thesis absolutely false, a most pernicious error ... a great injustice to God.

The history of this false dichotomy is long, but for a Christian, it is clear that unless Christian principles undergird the laws of society, they cannot be founded on truth and justice. The inevitable results are moral evils, like abortion and euthanasia, being enshrined in unjust laws. As a principle for guiding one's determining which candidate to vote for, it is utterly, morally bankrupt.

Innocent blood

2 Kings 24:3-4 is a stark warning to us. It relates the disturbing story behind God's judgement and consequent destruction of Judah at the hands of the

Babylonians in 587 BC. The crime? The killing of thousands of infants, burned alive as sacrifices to the pagan god, Molek: "This befell Judah ... because of the innocent blood he (King Manasseh) shed, with which he filled Jerusalem, the LORD would not forgive".

How long do we think we can carry on as nations when we break God's Commandments and fill the world with the blood of the innocent: 50 million abortions worldwide **every year!** That is why abortion is the preeminent issue to consider when voting. There is ***no other evil in the world that approaches this scale***. And we have not only permitted and fought for it as some sort of warped "right", Catholics have *voted* for it.