



By Bishop Robert McElroy

How are we, as members of the Catholic community in the United States, called to confront this challenging electoral moment in our country's history, and transform it into an opportunity to bring the vision of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the social teaching of the Church into the core of our national life?

Pope Francis answers this question by proposing starkly that our political lives must be seen as an essential element of our personal call to holiness. This certainly means that our political actions must reflect and flow from our Catholic faith. But Francis is demanding much more. He proposes that we can only fulfill our vocation as faithful citizens who love our nation if we come to see in the very toxicity and divisiveness of this current moment a call for deeper conversion to Jesus Christ. It is not enough for us to ignore the corrosive elements of political life in the United States, nor even to navigate our role as citizens and voters without succumbing to the tribalism that bisects our society. We are called in our lives as citizens to be missionaries of dialogue and civility in a political culture that values neither. And that requires deep spiritual reflection, courage and judgment. It demands a Christ-like dedication to seeking the truth no matter where it may lie, and defining our politics and voting in the light of the Gospel.

This conversion to the Gospel demands that we conduct ourselves in these days not primarily as Republicans or Democrats, Biden supporters or Trump supporters, but as Americans who place national unity, substantive justice and the dignity of the human person ahead of any partisan category or aim. We must understand that the current party structures of the United States bifurcate Catholic social teaching, with each party embracing some core elements of Catholic teaching while rejecting many others. Thus the faithful Catholic voter is automatically homeless in our political world, never feeling at peace with the specific constellations that her party has chosen to accept, and certainly never feeling at peace with the partisan tribalism in both Democratic and Republican cultures that deforms our politics and our nation. For every voter, political choice is a mixture of satisfaction and regret. For the faith-filled Catholic voter, these themes are greatly magnified.

But given that we live in a real world that confronts us with limited choices in this political season, how should a Catholic voter discern the candidates that will most powerfully advance the dignity of the human person and the common good? This discernment must begin with an evaluation of the principles of Catholic social teaching applied to the current historical moment.

Salient Issues of Catholic Social Teaching

The comprehensiveness of Catholic social teaching points toward an understanding of justice, life and peace that refuses to be confined to narrow boxes or relegated to partisan categories. Taking a profoundly moral and spiritual perspective, it asks the question: How should humanity move in transforming the world to reflect more fully the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

As the 2020 election cycle comes to a conclusion, at least 10 salient goals emerge from the Gospel and the long tradition of Catholic faith:

- The promotion of a culture and legal structures that protect the life of unborn children.
- The reversal of the climate change that threatens the future of humanity and particularly devastates the poor and the marginalized.
- Policies that safeguard the rights of immigrants and refugees in a moment of great intolerance.
- Laws that protect the aged, the ill, and the disabled from the lure and the scourge of euthanasia and assisted suicide.
- Quality health care for all Americans.
- Vigorous opposition to racism in every form, both through cultural transformation and legal structures.
- The provision of work and the protection of workers' rights across America.
- Systematic efforts to fight poverty and egregious inequalities of wealth.
- Policies that promote marriage and family, which are so essential for society.
- The protection of religious liberty.

At this moment in our history, three of these issues constitute particularly strong claims upon the Catholic conscience. The killing of more than 750,000 unborn children each year demands legal protection for these most vulnerable among us. The impact of climate change threatens humanity itself if changes in global policies are not undertaken in the coming years. And the growing culture of exclusion in our nation, built upon racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, religious prejudice and social division, is crippling our very ability to function effectively as a society and nation.

The challenge to faith-filled voters in conscience is to weigh these issues and evaluate them as Christ would in advancing the common good at this moment in our national history.

Leadership, Competence and Character

In America today, a faith-filled voter is called to approach voting from a stance of bridge-building and healing for our nation. Such a voter is also called to integrate into his voting decisions the major salient elements of Catholic teaching that touch upon the political issues of our day, understanding that these teachings vary in priority and claim, but are united in their orientation to the common good.

But voting for candidates ultimately involves choosing a candidate for public office, not a stance, nor a specific teaching of the Church. And for this reason, faithful voting involves careful consideration of the specific ability of a particular candidate to actually advance the common good. In making this assessment, leadership, competence and character all come into play.

Particularly in the election of a president, leadership is a critical criterion for voting. Good leadership comes in many forms. It can be vigorous and rousing, moving forward in a clear direction. It can be inspiring and motivational. It can be healing and unifying. What form of leadership does the United States need at this moment in its history?

Competence is also a central metric for faith-filled voters to consider. It does little good to elect a saint who echoes Catholic social teaching on every issue if that candidate does not have the competence to carry out his duties effectively and thereby enhance the common good. Faith-filled voters must assess the intelligence, human relations skills, mastery of policy and intuitive insights that each candidate brings to bear, for voting discipleship seeks results, not merely aspirations.

Finally, because our nation is in a moment of political division and degradation in its public life, character represents a particularly compelling criterion for faithful voting in 2020. Today, leaders in government embrace corrosive tactics and language, fostering division rather than unity. The notion of truth itself has lost its footing in our public debate. Collegiality has been discarded. Principles are merely justifications for partisan actions, to be abandoned when those principles no longer favor a partisan advantage. There is a fundamental lack of political courage in the land.

In the end, it is the candidate who is on the ballot, not a specific issue. The faith-filled voter is asked to make the complex judgment: Which candidate will be likely to best advance the common good through

his office in the particular political context he will face? Such a decision embraces the planes of principle and character, competence and leadership. And for the faithful voter, the very complexity of this moral judgment demands a recourse to the voice of God which lies deep within each of us — our conscience.

Conscience and Prudence

For the disciple of Jesus Christ, voting is a sacred action. In the words of *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, it touches “the crossroads where Christian life and conscience come into contact with the real world.”

How, then does the faith-filled voter navigate this crossroad in a way that integrates the tenets of Catholic social teaching, recognizes the role that leadership, character and capacity play in the real world of governing, and preserves a stance of building unity within society?

The answer is prudence. In the words of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience.” In Catholic social teaching, prudence is called “the charioteer of the virtues”; it brings into balance all of the virtues of the Christian moral life to provide a singularly incisive moral perspective for the disciple confronting ethically complex problems. It is at the heart of the workings of conscience.

This is certainly true in voting for candidates for public office. The constellation of substantial moral elements that are relevant to deciding which candidate is most likely to advance the common good during her time in office can only be morally comprehended through the virtue of prudence. There cannot be faith-filled Catholic voting without the virtue of prudence, exercised within the sanctity of well-formed conscience.

In the closing remarks of his address to Congress in 2015, Pope Francis said a nation is great when it defends liberty as Abraham Lincoln did, when it seeks equality as Martin Luther King did, and when it strives for justice for the oppressed as Dorothy Day did. Let us pray that our nation embraces the pathway of such greatness in this election year, and that faith-filled, prudent disciples are leading the way.

source: <https://www.thesoutherncross.org/bishops/conscience-candidates-and-discipleship-in-voting/>