

July 12, 2020 Series on “Faithful Citizenship”

Every four years the Catholic Bishops of the United States publish a document prior to the presidential elections called *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. This year they voted to re-issue the one from 2015/16 but add a new introductory letter to it. I have added a link to the document and related materials on our stregis.org website under the post “News Briefs.” Over the next few weeks, before we get into the heat of the presidential election, I want to explore what the bishops say, raise a few questions of my own, and invite everyone to take seriously their civic duty to vote with an informed conscience.

I am sure many of us have experienced the following tension in our own families and among friends. For some, the only issue is to legally ban abortion, and if any political candidate supports abortion in any way, that disqualifies them from consideration for a vote. For others, abortion is a very important and central issue but not a simple thumbs up/down for or against a candidate. Other considerations at times sway one’s vote. In the introductory letter you get a sense of the bishops own internal tensions. Some wanted to focus primarily and almost solely on the issue of abortion and place everything else in a secondary position. Others wanted to keep a more integrated or consistent ethic of life and see all issues as interrelated. They resolve this tension in several ways. First, they quote Pope Francis on how passionate defense of the innocent unborn is essential but that “*equally sacred*” are any area of life that are destroying human dignity: “*the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection.*” Then they focus on abortion as the truly key issue: “*The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed.*” Finally, they remind us of the kind of discourse that is required, no matter our passionately held views and political differences: “*Our commitment as people of faith to imitate Christ’s love and compassion should challenge us to serve as models of civil dialogue, especially in a context where discourse is eroding at all levels of society. Where we live, work, and worship, we strive to understand before seeking to be understood, to treat with respect those with whom we disagree, to dismantle stereotypes, and to build productive conversation in place of vitriol.*” Take a moment this week to think about what currently guides your political decisions—Political party? One specific issue? Family or friends? The “least worst” candidate? An informed conscience?

July 19, 2020

The Catholic bishops of the United States use the term “faithful citizenship” to capture the importance of becoming informed voters and actively participating in the political process. That necessarily means, on an individual level, participating in a partisan political process. But on the Church-wide level this involvement needs to be integrated into a non-partisan approach. The *Faithful Citizenship* document (hereafter FC) is the key vehicle the bishops use to lay out their understanding of the importance of a well-formed conscience, key principles of Catholic Social Teaching that can help guide an evaluation of complex social strategies, and brief descriptions of the bishops’ policies regarding many of the key issues facing us as a nation (human life, family, immigration, racism, military intervention, and more).

Because political decisions are always contingent on a mix of factors, the bishops see their teaching role as helping people to have a well-formed conscience. By definition, one must always follow one’s well-formed conscience. At the same time, it is not always easy, even with a well-formed conscience, to

know who to vote for. For example, the bishops remind us that there are certain “intrinsic evils” which can never be advocated for, because “*Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons*” (FC, 22). They highlight abortion and euthanasia as prime examples of such intrinsically evil actions, and then go on to list many others: human cloning, destruction of human embryos, genocide, torture, targeting noncombatants in acts of terror or war, racism, treating workers as a means to an end, subhuman working conditions, treating the poor as disposable, and redefining marriage against its basic human meaning. They also remind us that it is not just a matter of looking at evil to avoid but to actively work toward the good so that every person can live and thrive (FC, 25).

Introducing the idea of intrinsic evils does lead to some questions. For example, by separating out their discussion on conscience, making prudential judgments, and avoiding intrinsically evil actions from their later discussion on key moral principles of Catholic social teaching and applying those principles to various issues, the bishops could be misinterpreted as suggesting that there is a two-tiered process for making political decisions. One for what are termed “intrinsically evil” issues and another for “contingently evil” issues. That is not the case. If something is objectively morally wrong, whether intrinsically or due to current circumstances, it is wrong. One cannot simply say, “Well, at least it isn’t intrinsically wrong.” The virtue of prudence (FC, 19-20) is precisely the ability to bring all of these together into a whole and make a decision that corresponds to one’s deepest sense of self, one’s well-formed conscience. The decision-making process, when it comes to conscience based political decisions, is not simply whether something is intrinsically evil or not. There are any number of issues that the Church puts into the category of intrinsic evil but does not bring up as core to voting (sterilization, masturbation, etc.).

At the same time, in the way the bishops are using the term “intrinsic evil” they are rightly calling attention to very serious areas of public life, beginning with the protection of every human life from the moment of conception to natural death, which must inform any judgments we make. Not all issues carry the same weight or have a moral equivalence (FC, 28). On the other hand, no one, if they truly want a mature and well-formed conscience, can ignore other issues or think that they are optional (FC, 29). This brings the bishops to the heart of the matter, when it comes to flawed politicians and parties and complex situations where no one embodies every value we would hope. How are we to vote? What does it mean to vote one’s conscience in such a situation? Can we vote for a law that supports an intrinsic evil, if it is better than the current law? Can we vote for a politician, if he/she supports something truly morally wrong (intrinsically or contingently)? More next time.

July 26, 2020

The goal of the bishops’ document on faithful citizenship is to help us have a well-formed conscience, as we enter into the challenge of voting, especially when all candidates fall short of protecting human dignity and the common good. It can lead, the bishops say, to the decision not to vote in that instance at all. But that is not the only option:

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 favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, 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 even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably 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. (#34-35)
Read those words carefully. Over the next few weeks, I will try to unpack “formal cooperation,” “intention,” “intrinsic evil/grave” and more.

August 2, 2020

I ended last week with a quote from the bishop’s document *Faithful Citizenship*, which captures their wisdom about voting, when we have grave concerns about all the candidates. They mention that one might, in conscience, choose to vote for no candidate in that situation. But they also mention that one might “reasonably decide” to vote for a candidate “for other morally grave reasons.” In practice, I think we are often faced with such a dilemma. No vote, or if we do vote, voting for someone who holds positions and/or has done things gravely contrary to our moral teaching. The bishops remind us that, if we choose to vote for such candidates because it is our intent to support such grave evils, then we are guilty of “formal cooperation” in that grave evil. Such formal cooperation with evil is not a justifiable moral stance. It is a sin. On the other hand, if it is not our intent to support grave evils and we have other reasonable and objectively serious reasons for voting that candidate, then it can be a justifiable moral stance. It is important, then, to know what our moral tradition means by “intention” and “cooperation.”

“Intention” is a tricky concept. It is used most often in everyday language in a subjective way, connected to what a person believes to be their intent. In that sense, only the individual person himself/herself knows their true intent. It needs to be stated clearly that this is NOT how the Catholic moral tradition understands intentionality. It is not accidental that there is the aphorism “*The road to hell is paved with good intentions.*” Such an individual subject-centered approach to intentionality would open up almost any action being justifiable, as long as someone felt they had a “good intention.” At times our moral tradition has taken almost the opposite approach. If an objective description of an action can reasonably be foreseen to lead to harming someone, then no subjective intention can justify that action. We see the Church community struggle with that in the early centuries in dealing with killing. Even killing in self-defense or in a combat situation on orders from a superior was thought at the time to require repentance and reconciliation. The taking of human life was never an end that one’s subjective intention could justify. For an even longer portion of our history the same view was held regarding telling falsehoods. A lie was a lie, and even if told with the intent of saving someone’s life or dignity, it was still objectively sinful and required confession and penance.

It will be the great theologians of the Middle Ages, most especially Thomas Aquinas, who try to chart a path that respects the objective nature of actions, yet understand that a person’s subjective intentionality can play a role in describing the objective end intended. This allowed for a more nuanced approach to judging the morality of various actions. Someone taking a loaf of bread when their family is desperately suffering from hunger and they have asked for food from those who have extra but have been denied is described by Aquinas objectively not as “theft” (and therefore always morally wrong) but as an act of justice, and therefore objectively morally good, as long as the intent was to bring a basic level of care to their family. Taking the life of someone who is intending to kill a person is described objectively not as murder (and so always morally wrong) but as an act of self-defense, and therefore morally good, as long as no lesser means was reasonably available to restrain the person.

In the modern era, such insights from Aquinas will be applied to actions that clearly have both good and bad consequences and the principle of “double effect” will be enunciated to help distinguish objectively good from objectively bad intentions in such complex situations. In turn, this will enable our Catholic moral tradition to continue to clarify what intentionality means. Because intent is to be viewed as objectively as possible, the Church understands intentionality to be the reasonably foreseen end of actions, given the specific circumstances surrounding those actions. Good subjective intentions do not override what the objective intentionality is. The subjective intention might lessen the personal culpability of a person, but the objective intentionality is what is the most important moral reality. Applied to the morality of one’s voting for a candidate who supports or does objectively seriously wrong actions, it is not enough to say one believes that their vote is sincere or that they are doing it with “good intention.” Rather one needs to ask what are the reasonably foreseeable ends (both morally good and bad) that will result if candidate “A” versus “B” comes into office? Is the reasonably foreseen moral good sufficient to objectively characterize one’s vote, not as a vote for the promotion of some grave evil(s) but as a vote for an objective good?

August 9, 2020

Last week I looked at what the Church means by an objectively good intention. This week I will look at what the Church’s moral tradition means by “cooperation.” When it comes to making a morally good decision for whom to vote, the U.S. Bishops in their document *Faithful Citizenship* remind us that there is a difference between voting for someone *because* one intentionally agrees with their stance on a morally grave evil and voting for someone *for other* serious reasons. The first case is said to be “formal cooperation” in a grave evil. The latter case might not fall into that category. What is the difference?

In our moral tradition “cooperation” has to do with how close one is or how complicit one is to a moral evil that is occurring. One’s cooperation could be “proximate” or “remote” depending on how closely connected one is to the evil being done. The closer or more proximate one is to the evil, the greater danger one is wrongly cooperating in the evil, and the greater one needs offsetting (proportional) reasons for why one is in proximity to the evil being done. For example, using a vaccine that was developed partially by experiments tested on aborted fetal tissue, but also confirmed by other moral means as well. Is it morally allowable to use such a vaccine? The Church has not forbidden us from using such vaccines for our good and the common good, as long as we do not share in the view that such experimentation was good in itself, because our cooperation is at quite a remote distance. The group of scientists who directly experimented are very proximate to the evil and would be condemned for not using other means to develop the vaccine.

A distinction was also made between “formal” and “material” cooperation. If we do share in the view that an underlying evil is in itself a good, then no matter how close we are to the situation, proximate or remote (in the example above either the vaccine user or scientist), our cooperation is considered to be “formal cooperation” and always wrong. This is contrasted to “material cooperation,” which involves aiding a moral wrong-doer or gaining a benefit from moral wrong-doing but recognizing and not supporting the underlying moral evil. Think about the benefits to certain people and groups that our horrendous destruction and marginalizing of indigenous people enshrined in our history. If we believe it was a moral good to treat people that way, we are in the category of formal cooperation and therefore share in the moral evil done. But most of us though we have benefited from it, would I hope, condemn that history and so are in a position of “material” cooperation.

Whether such material cooperation is morally allowable depends on a third distinction: “immediate” versus “non-immediate(mediate)” cooperation. Even if we are not formally cooperating (we do not

agree with the evil that is done), the moral tradition recognized that we can still be committing an evil by assisting in too immediate a way. For example, suppose someone works at a hospital that performs direct sterilizations for non-medical reasons, does not believe in them personally and is willing to say so, and their work is not directly part of the sterilization procedures but is essential for the hospital's overall success. Can they continue with such a job? The Church's tradition allows for a potential "Yes." The person is proximate to a grave moral evil; but does not formally cooperate in that evil and is not immediately part of the evil action(s) being done. If they have a serious proportionate reason for staying at the job (need to support self and family, etc.), it is objectively morally allowable.

How does this tie into one's voting? No matter proximate or remote, immediate or mediate, cooperation with evil can never be formal, i.e. intentionally concurring with the reasonably foreseen morally wrong ends that will result. Whether voting is immediate or non-immediate material cooperation is open to debate. The bishops do not get into that detail. For most voters, I am not sure that it is, given that voting is part of a much larger system. Supporters of candidates also have to look at the difference between simply voting for a candidate versus actively campaigning for a candidate and contributing money and other resources for their election--the difference between remote and proximate cooperation. The more proximate one is to a candidate's success, if the candidate has done or supports morally wrong initiatives, the greater the proportionate reason one needs for being that close and supportive. Next week I want to use all that I have said to be more specific about the election coming up. Given the Church's moral tradition, can a Catholic in good conscience refuse to vote? Vote for Donald Trump? Vote for Joseph Biden?

August 16, 2020

Given the Church's moral tradition, can a Catholic in good conscience refuse to vote? Vote for Donald Trump? Vote for Joseph Biden? Vote for an alternative candidate? The quick answer is "*Yes, if it truly is a decision of conscience made in a well-informed way.*" I would hope, given the details I have touched on over the last few weeks, that everyone understands that this is not a simple decision. It requires gathering accurate information, reflecting not just on easy slogans or clever memes but on objective (reasonably foreseen) facts and consequences, and of course bringing that to prayer in order to test the peacefulness of our heart before God. It is not a decision to take lightly. We have to face squarely both the character and actions of the person we will vote for and their stance on important areas of life that have moral implications and over which they have significant control. We cannot intend (formally cooperate with) any of the reasonably foreseen moral evils that will result. There will be those who, in the end, lean toward one candidate or another. Are we sure the reasons are significant enough and the moral good we are hoping to achieve important enough to be proportional to any reasonably foreseen moral evils? Even a decision to vote for no one, in the Catholic understanding, needs to be a moral decision from a well-informed conscience, because we have a moral duty to participate in the structures that shape our social-political environment.

In the weeks ahead some might suggest that Catholics "must" vote one way or another. It is one thing to provide voter guides to try to inform and persuade. It is quite another thing to condemn a person's decision of conscience that is different from ours or to deliberately manipulate information so that it seems like Catholics can vote only for one candidate. That is why we must take information and look at it critically. And, my personal opinion, we do best to ignore all political ads because they cannot achieve any depth on an issue. Take in information not just from one site (which can be biased) but from a variety of sites with different points of view. Give yourself a break from all the information for a day or more and pray and come to a peaceful decision. If we truly make such a conscience-based decision, even if others make decisions that go in a different direction, then we are doing what our Catholic wisdom

has asked us to do. We have performed an objectively morally good act. We will have been conscientious Catholics and faithful citizens.

I have focused on Part One of the U.S. Bishops' document *Faithful Citizenship* and, in particular, on the portion which outlines their understanding of the Church's wisdom regarding making decisions in the political realm, when candidates hold both objectively some morally good but also gravely evil public positions on issues. I would encourage you to read the document yourself, as you form your conscience-based decision regarding whom to vote for this fall. A link to the bishops' website is on the parish website under "News Briefs." Another section in Part One covers classic Catholic moral teaching on making good moral decisions by having a well-formed conscience and exercising the virtue of prudence. I have added another link on the same webpage to a series of articles I have done in that regard. Finally, the last half of Part One summarizes Catholic Social Teaching by looking at four key principles: Human Dignity, the Common Good, Subsidiarity, and Solidarity. I invite you to attend a webinar on "Catholic Social Teaching" on Tuesday evening August 25 at 7 p.m., which I have been asked to lead. I will be looking at some biblical and historical foundations to Catholic Social Teaching, and I will cover all the principles mentioned by the bishops. You can register for that webinar by clicking on the appropriate News post at our stregis.org website.

Fr. Buersmeyer