

Supporting the conscience of the voting Catholic

Elections are about choices. Good choices can result in good consequences; bad choices can result in bad consequences. How does the Catholic who is honestly and faithfully living her or his faith come to make the best choices when exercising the right to vote? Ranking high among the answers to the question is the person's conscience. What is the conscience? "Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins her or him ... to do good and to avoid evil" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 1777). Every human being is born with a conscience which not unlike all human qualities and possibilities requires development, both in the mind and in the heart, in order to properly assist the person in making the best moral choices.

"The education of the conscience is a lifelong task" (CCC, para 1784) beginning with a child's earliest years. It is hoped and expected that the child's parents would not neglect their responsibility to teach the child to distinguish right from wrong. As the child grows into adulthood, informing the conscience takes on a greater urgency with more advanced means to do so. Religious moral education, academic ethical education, personal efforts at critical thinking - all can play a part in "sharpening" one's conscience and empowering it to serve the person facing important choices. A person's well informed conscience is the ultimate guide in making moral decisions - including voting for a political candidate.

"In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path" (CCC, para 1785). The Bible - and especially the New Testament - is the most authoritative guide in assisting Catholics in correctly forming their conscience.

Both Testaments of the Bible reveal a clear purpose in gradually forming the consciences of God's people, both as individuals and as a society. Permit me to offer some illustrations. In the second chapter of the Book of Genesis - among the very earliest of biblical texts - God, having fashioned the first human from the clay of the earth and having given him life by blowing God's own divine breath into the nostrils of the man (2:7), next introduces the man to precise notions of right and wrong - the foundation pillars of conscience. "God gave the man this command, 'You are free to eat of all the trees in the garden. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat; for, the day that you eat of that, you are doomed to die.'" (2:16-17). Choose what is right and good and you will live; choose what is wrong and evil and you will be ultimately doomed to die. To find a suitable helper for the man, God fashions the woman from the man's own flesh. That the man communicates God's warning about not eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is made evident in the woman's response to the serpent's temptation question: "Did God really say that you were not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" (3:1). The woman replied, "We may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden. But of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden God said, 'You must not eat it nor touch it, under pain of death.'" (3:2-3) The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is "in the middle of the garden." Distinguishing between good and evil - the task and purpose of the well informed conscience -

Is “central” to the moral life of the believer.

The same principle of choice based on conscience appears in the Book of Deuteronomy 30:19-20 - “I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live in the love of Yahweh your God, obeying his voice.”

Finally a reference to the Prophet Jeremiah 31:33-34 - “Within them I shall plant my Law, writing it on their hearts.” As distinguished from the laws, rules, regulations, and statutes found in Torah, this refers to conscience deep within the mind and heart of the person - a conscience informed by God.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 8, an angry crowd confronts Jesus with a frightened woman and challenges His judgment regarding her fate. Torah teaches that she is to be stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10). What does He think? With neither a yes nor a no, Jesus notes silently that the woman’s adulterous male companion is not identified. And yet Leviticus states that both the man and the woman are to die. Jesus delays a response, giving his all male audience an opportunity to reflect. Then he challenges them: “Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her” (8:7). He appeals to the fairness of their conscience. They too are guilty of sin and as such have no right to judge this woman. One by one all the men depart. Jesus turns to the woman without condemnation but urges her to never commit adultery again. Conscience formation.

Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians 13:11 - “When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult, I have finished with all childish ways.” Ideally a person’s conscience grows and is strengthened as the years pass thanks to a better understanding of God’s liberating truth (John 8:32). Life experience can also be a successful teacher of right and wrong and their respective consequences.

The concern of conscience is in making the best choices in the areas of core values, morals, and ethics. Conscience is not discourse about the Trinity, about Jesus as Savior, or about Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus. It’s about human activity, the rightness or wrongness of which not only reflects our values and morals, it also contributes to or weakens our fundamental humanity and individual personhood. The directives our conscience gives reveal ultimately if we are growing, standing still, or retreating in our human identity. “Conscience calls us to grow,” James F. Keenan, SJ, Moral Wisdom, Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition, third edition, 2017. Conscience is very important.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) spoke of conscience and its importance in its document on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. “It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law. He is bound to follow this conscience faithfully in all his activity so that he may come to God, who is his last end” - Chapter 1, para 3.

Likewise in the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World - *Gaudium et Spes* - the assembled bishops articulated this authoritative formulation: "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths" (GS 16).

In our everyday lives, conscience usually comes into play in evaluating individual issues, one at a time. In popular elections, conscience aims at fostering the common good - many policies and initiatives which benefit society as a whole by promoting social justice and by discouraging all that favors inequality and discrimination. Conscience is allowed to do what it can do best when voters consider the most important issues at stake in an election, issues directly related to aforementioned core values, morals, and ethics. Conscience is held captive when a voter blindly votes a party affiliation - "my political party, right or wrong." "I'm a life-long member of this or that party; I always vote the party ticket whatever it is." These are not the perspectives of the conscientious voter. The common good is decidedly more important than any political party affiliation. Likewise the decision to vote for a particular candidate just because he is my party's candidate or because he/she thinks like me - no matter the candidate's personal deep-seated moral convictions - is a betrayal of the true spirit of a democracy. When a person votes without most serious consideration having been given to the clear mandates of her or his conscience, without making the time and the effort to apply the principles of critical thinking to the issues of the election and to the characters of the candidates, the person is wasting the opportunity to do right by his/her fellow citizens and by her/his country. Conscience does indeed matter. A lot.

The common good in an election is never a one-issue contest. "It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society." CCC, 1994, para 1927. "As Catholics we are not single issue voters. A candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support" USCCB, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship - Part I - The USCCB's Reflection on Catholic Teaching and Political Life, para 42.

"The consistent life ethic is reason enough to think twice about single-issue voting; another reason to be careful about single-issue voting is that some candidates say or do whatever is politically expedient for getting elected. Politicians have been known to change their opinions, parties, staff members, even the boundaries of their voting districts in hopes of maintaining high approval ratings. It's important to view each candidate's record in order to gauge which professed beliefs she or he is most likely to act upon. A voter who chooses a candidate based on campaign promises about a single issue may be disappointed if it turns out that the candidate's stance wasn't deeply rooted." Florence Caffrey Bourg, Ph.D. and others, Spirituality, Morality, and Ethics, The Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2018, page 177-178. No issue has been more abused by politicians than promises to work for an end to abortion. Consider that the Supreme Court decision to approve of abortion in the case of Roe vs. Wade took place on January 22, 1973. And today most unfortunately abortion in this country is still legal. And many

politicians continue to promise, if elected, to change that. Is that a sincere commitment or is that a proven yet insincere strategy?

The issues which the Catholic with an informed conscience must seriously consider when evaluating a persons' candidacy for elected office always begin with "the direct and intentional destruction of human life," but also include "other serious threats to human life and dignity. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care, or an unjust immigration policy" - USCCB, *Forming Consciences*, para 28-29. To these one should add, as taught by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, respecting the science on climate change and taking personal and social initiatives to protect the earth and all its inhabitants.

Our Roman Catholic Church offers biblically-inspired teaching on the formation and the proper exercise of conscience to all baptized members of the Body of Christ. Catholic clergy however, whatever their "rank" in the hierarchy, should never publicly endorse a particular candidate for political office or a political party - although that was done numerous times in the 2016 election and has recently been done by more than one prelate.

Here follow excellent commentaries on the issue taken from the work of Florence Caffrey Bourg Ph.D. and others, [Spirituality, Morality, and Ethics](#), The Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2018, pages 176 and 176. "Catholic clergy are expected to refrain from endorsing or opposing political candidates or parties publicly, or when functioning in a professional capacity," - (I inject here that this rule is found in the Code of Canon Law, 1983, in canon 287, second paragraph.) "The hierarchy's political activism should be directed toward informing consciences" (Pope Francis has commented that clergy should inform people's consciences, not replace them.) - "When Catholic clergy give partisan or candidate endorsements in any context where they could be construed as spokespersons for the institutional Church, this can be considered an occasion of scandal, in the theological sense. Such endorsements send a confusing message in several ways. First, they can suggest "the Church" has ulterior motives in supporting candidates or parties who will be expected to repay political favors. Second, many people don't understand that there are different levels of church teaching authority. It can be predicted that some Catholics will mistakenly think their favorite cleric's party/candidate endorsement carries the weight of authoritative doctrine, or even infallibility. If it's falsely assumed that "the Church" endorses/opposes a particular candidate/party, a third faulty conclusion could follow - namely, that any Catholic who thinks or votes differently, for whatever reason, is in a state of mortal sin, isn't a Catholic in good standing, or doesn't respect the magisterium. Damaging divisions in the Catholic community can result from such indiscriminate accusations."

It should also be noted that there can be negative legal consequences when churches as organizations or their clergy as individuals publicly endorse political parties or their candidates.

"In 1954, Congress approved an amendment by Sen. Lyndon Johnson to prohibit 501(c)(3) organizations, which includes charities and churches, from engaging in any political campaign activity. Currently, the law prohibits political campaign activity by charities and churches by defining a 501(c)(3) organization as one **"which does not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."** - IRS internet website, "Charities, Churches, and Politics.

Each of us has a God-given conscience which has been gradually and, it is hoped, correctly informed over the years by the Word of God enshrined in Sacred Scripture, by an honest evaluation of our own life's choices and of those of people we know, respect, and admire, and by the authoritative teaching of Catholic Church leaders. We have the means to make the best use of our consciences when we vote. Please use them. And vote.