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Voting: Responsibility and Challenge

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EXPERIENCE

For those of us who profess Catholic faith, political engagement should be an exercise in discernment. Most Catholics in the United States are as divided as the rest of the nation when it comes to politics, and they tend to fall in line with their party's positions on the issues regardless of the position of the Church. Party ideology has so divided our nation and our Church that we cannot come together even on moral issues, for fear of appearing to acquiesce to the thinking of the "opposing" party. Voting, then, is often as easy as selecting the "straight party ticket" option. For Catholics, however, political engagement never can be this simple.



In preparation for voting, we must evaluate the status of the United States across a wide range of issues and form our consciences according to the teachings of the Church. Faithful reasoning, not partisan loyalty, should inform our political activity.

ANALYSIS

In the United States, we have watched children being torn away from their parents who were fleeing violence and seeking refuge in our country – many never to be reunited. We have witnessed families forced to sleep without shelter as they wait for a court hearing that might be years away. These migrants and refugees have been described in inhumane terms that are meant to evoke fear rather than compassion, and to justify turning them away without a hearing, in violation of international law.¹ Refugee resettlement numbers have been limited to the lowest number in history,² and pervasive factors of persecution, such as gang violence and domestic abuse, have been restricted as relevant factors to refugee and asylum claims – further limiting the ability of persecuted people to find safety.

We have seen the revocation of myriad environmentally-responsible policies, such as our participation in the Paris Accord and requirements concerning limits on pollution from coal production and fuel efficiency in cars.³ Climate change, poor air quality, and contaminated water sources are all exacerbated by these practices, which, in addition to damaging ecosystems, pose significant risks to human health and wellbeing.⁴

We experience exponentially more mass murders than any other developed nation due to the pervasiveness of guns and our largely

unfettered access to them (especially semi-automatic weapons and ammunition).⁵

We also live with the most extreme income inequality of any developed nation – the bottom 90% of Americans have wealth equal to the top .1%,⁶ and inequality affects minorities – especially African Americans – at exacerbated rates. The job market has improved recently, but actual wages have declined, leaving low-income and under-educated people especially vulnerable, since cuts and limits are being proposed for the programs that supplement meager wages.⁷

We see the heavy bias of our criminal justice system against people of color. In fact, “32 percent of black males and 17 percent of male Latinos ... can expect to spend time in prison during their lifetime. This compares to only 6 percent of white males who will go to prison. African-Americans make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, but today compose 40 percent of all prison inmates and 42 percent of those sentenced to death.”⁸ Further, we are the only western nation that has not abolished the death penalty,⁹ joining countries such as China, Iran, and Pakistan in the dubious honor of global top ten for executions.¹⁰

Women still experience gender-based exclusion from full participation in society. Women are much more likely than men to be the victims of sexual assault or intimate partner violence.¹¹ Women experience a professional wage and employment gap, and women still shoulder the majority of unpaid care work.¹² The normative way of being in society is to be male and non-pregnant, and our institutions are structured around this norm, often leaving women forced to choose between professional participation and familial life. Women experience employment and promotional opportunities that lag behind their male counterparts because

they have the capacity to bear children and our society has not developed in ways that support them.

Further, abortion is a brutal consequence of this social bias against women. While some women consider abortion to be one contraceptive among others, more often, the perceived need for abortion results from a society structured such that women are disproportionately victims of violence, must navigate professional life with pregnancy and childrearing considered an impediment to success, and experience the

objectification of their bodies. Nevertheless, it should not be the case that women are encouraged to do violence to themselves or the fetus they carry in the name of equality. A fetus by any scientific measure satisfies both the definition of “living” and the definition of “human,” yet the unborn are not recognized as living human beings under the law.

As we prepare to vote, all of these issues – and more – must be weighed against our values. Catholic social thought (CST) offers a framework for evaluating policies and practices concerning these and all aspects of political life.

REFLECTION

There are four primary principles of Catholic social thought: life and dignity, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* teaches, “the ethical requirement inherent in these pre-eminent social principles concerns both the personal behavior of individuals ... and at the same time institutions represented by laws, customary norms, and civil constructs.”¹³ Examining each of these will help to form our consciences as we seek to promote justice and charity in the political arena, for, as Pope Francis tells us, “Politics is one of the highest forms of charity.”¹⁴

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highest forms of charity.
– Pope Francis**



Life and Dignity

The principle of life and dignity is grounded in the understanding that human beings are made in God's image. As such, each and every person reflects God's love in a unique and utterly profound way: "One's neighbor is ... not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God."¹⁵ Without each person using his or her gifts to participate fully in life, the entire human community is deprived of an aspect of God's love. Further, the principle of life and dignity is foundational because without a right to life, all other rights become meaningless. As Saint Pope John Paul II writes, "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."¹⁶ It should also be emphasized that "respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation."¹⁷

The Common Good

The common good is defined as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as a group or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."¹⁸ This principle

derives from "the dignity, unity, and equality of all people,"¹⁹ and stems from the fact that as human beings created in God's image, we are inherently relational. We cannot be fully ourselves unless we relate rightly to others, enabling others to participate fully in life, as well. Our use of the goods we develop and possess should reflect this relationality, and we should remember that the goods of the earth are not meant to be hoarded, but to provide sustenance and creative space for all. In fact, the following are commitments required by the common good:

The commitment to peace, the organization of the State's powers, a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression, and the protection of religious freedom. Nor must one forget the contribution every nation is required in duty to make towards a true worldwide cooperation for the common good of the whole of humanity and for future generations also.²⁰

CST thus holds that the State's authority comes from its task of facilitating the common good,²¹ which includes both the good of its own citizens and that of the entire human family. Indeed, "To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity. ... Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to [his or her] vocation and according to the degree of influence [he or she] wields in the [State]. This is the institutional path – we might also call it the political path – of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly."²²

The principle of the common good also contains the concept of "the universal destination of

goods,” which demands that human structures and systems such as national borders, market forces, and private property must be maintained in the service of the natural rights of human beings, such as the right to access to goods for sustenance and human flourishing, and the right to migrate to other lands when one’s own home is unsafe.²³ This is not to say that things such as borders and private property should be eliminated – to the contrary, they are critical to human flourishing in society. Rather, CST maintains that human systems and structures must be directed toward the common good and the flourishing of all if they are to serve their purpose. Importantly, “While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern.”²⁴

Solidarity

When we accept that all people are equal to us in dignity and that we are interconnected with all of creation, we should be motivated to live in solidarity with others. Solidarity is both a social principle and a moral virtue: as a social principle, it orders the development of institutions, laws, and markets and counters systemic injustice; as a moral virtue, “it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”²⁵ Solidarity thus applies to individuals, as an interpersonal way of relating to others, but it applies as much to States and institutions:

In the presence of the phenomenon of interdependence and its constant expansion ... there persist in every part of the world stark inequalities between developed and developing countries, inequalities stoked also by various forms of exploitation, oppression and corruption that have a negative influence on the internal and international life of many States. The acceleration of interdependence

between persons and peoples needs to be accompanied by equally intense efforts on the ethical-social plane, in order to avoid the dangerous consequences of perpetrating injustice on a global scale.²⁶



Subsidiarity

The final fundamental principle of CST is the principle of subsidiarity, which recognizes that “the initiative, freedom, and responsibility [of smaller essential cells of society] must not be supplanted.”²⁷ This principle orders the participation of each social cell and institution in facilitating the common good by maintaining that the smallest unit capable of meeting a need should be empowered to do so. Subsidiarity can be “understood in the positive sense as economic, institutional or juridical assistance offered to lesser social entities,” such as families, associations, and other intermediate social bodies; but it also “entails a corresponding series of negative implications that require the State to refrain from anything that would de facto restrict the existential space of the smaller cells of society.”²⁸ This is because the dignity and creativity of each individual is more fully expressed through interpersonal community, so larger social entities should “adopt attitudes of help (“subsidiarity”) – therefore of support, promotion, development – with respect to lower-order societies. In this way, intermediate social entities can properly perform the functions that fall to them without being required to hand them over unjustly to other

social entities of a higher level, by which they would end up being absorbed and substituted.”²⁹ Higher order social groups should facilitate the participation of individuals, families, and communities in contributing to the common good – usurping that creative space denies the dignity of the human person and stifles right relationships.

Importantly, because the principle of subsidiarity calls for respect for the dignity of smaller order associations, “it is opposed to certain forms of centralization, bureaucratization, and welfare assistance and to the unjustified and excessive presence of the State in public mechanisms.” Subsidiarity thus guides our application of the previous principles, since it demands that we encourage the full participation of those who require assistance by limiting the amount and means of assistance so that once they are empowered, they are not oppressed by unnecessary interference. However, because subsidiarity is itself directed toward the common good, its application entails a corresponding need to ensure the protection of individual rights – particularly of minorities – and to develop social systems that enable full participation of all.³⁰



This last point – increasing participation – especially concerns the most disadvantaged, and every policy should be implemented with special attention to its effect on the poor and vulnerable.³¹ In fact, “A basic moral test [for society] is how our most vulnerable members are faring.”³² This requires engagement with and

attentiveness to those human beings, not simply imposing policies and procedures that analysts suggest.

Application

Each of these principles is linked to the others, calling us to authentic dignity as individuals and in social relationships. When we apply them to our political engagement, it is easy to see that their nuances do not sit easily within parameters of any political party. Our task, then, is to determine the candidates that will adhere to and promote these principles most closely. Importantly, after casting our vote, we must continue to advocate for policies and practices that will promote these principles and the dignity of all, especially the poor and vulnerable, regardless of the political party with which such policies align. “It would be a serious mistake ... to use only selected parts of the Church's teaching to advance partisan political interests or validate ideological biases. All of us are called to be servants to the whole truth in authentic love.”³³

For Catholics, these principles must inform our political participation, or we fall into idolatry. “Far too many people, Republicans and Democrats alike, have made false gods of their political affiliations. They feed this idolatry by hating the sins of the other party without acknowledging the sins of their own party.”³⁴ We are not called to be members of one political party or another; we are called to be followers of Christ, who commanded us to love our neighbors and to do good to all. The primary principles of Catholic social thought demand a holistic approach to political issues that neither major party satisfies completely. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, “The tendency to equate our political with our Christian convictions causes politics to generate idolatry;”³⁵ therefore, he adds, “Christians must make these hazardous political decisions with full recognition that others equally devoted to the common good may arrive at contrary conclusions.”³⁶

Further, as the Leadership Conference of Women’s Religious has stated, “Electing a new party to power within the context of a deeply broken democracy and a distrustful, alienated citizenry will not bring the transformation we need. Our institutions and our civic discourse will continue to erode until we are prepared to soften our hearts, to prioritize the common good, to create a culture of inclusion and forgiveness.”³⁷ We cannot expect justice and compassion for the vulnerable if we do not model justice and compassion in our own interactions. We cannot expect unity if we sow divisiveness.

Each of us is called to just and compassionate engagement with others. We ought to maintain a posture of openness, in solidarity, to considering the effect policies and practices will have on others, especially the disadvantaged and marginalized. This also requires a willingness to hear diverse opinions and learn from diverse sources. No one channel of information will be sufficient for arriving at an understanding and appreciation of all those affected by our actions. We are all interconnected – “Hence, let all citizens be mindful of their simultaneous right and duty to vote freely *in the interest of advancing the common good.*”³⁸

“We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty.” – *Laudato Si’* 229

ACTION

Political engagement is one important way that we can “advocate and act for the dignity of life and the care of all creation.” Please see below for helpful resources and actions.

- 1. Be an Informed Voter**
 - a. [Click here](#) to register and find your polling place.
 - b. [Click here](#) for information on your candidates.
 - c. [Click here](#) to read the USCCB’s document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*
- 2. Maintain an attitude of unity** and reconciliation toward the marginalized and vulnerable, as well as your political opponents.
- 3. Reject party idolatry.** Remember to care less about party affiliation and more about promoting dignity, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity.
- 4. [Pray](#)** for the leaders of our nation.

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- ¹ https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Trump_Caravan_Oct22.pdf
- ² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-cap-refugee-admissions-at-30-000-in-2019-pompeo-says-1537222609>
- ³ Michael Greshko, Laura Parker, Brian Clark Howard, and Daniel Stone, "A Running List of How President Trump Is Changing Environmental Policy," National Geographic, accessed October 4, 2018, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/03/how-trump-is-changing-science-environment/>.
- ⁴ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/environment/eco-catholic/voting-booth-weigh-climate-change-pro-life-issue>
- ⁵ Max Fisher and Josh Keller, "What Explains U.S. Mass Shootings? International Comparisons Suggest an Answer," New York Times, last modified November 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/world/americas/mass-shootings-us-international.html>.
- ⁶ https://www.db.com/newsroom_news/Inequality_Jan2018.pdf
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ www.crf-usa.org/brown-v-board-50th-anniversary/the-color-of-justice.html
- ⁹ <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/death-penalty-international-perspective>
- ¹⁰ <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/death-penalty-international-perspective>
- ¹¹ https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datasources/nisvs/summaryreports.html#anchor_1535031475856
- ¹² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/22/gender-pay-gap-facts/>
- ¹³ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), I.4.I.163 .
- ¹⁴ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20181208_messaggio-52giornatamondiale-pace2019.html
- ¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, (1987), 40.
- ¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (1988), 38.
- ¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*.
- ¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.
- ¹⁹ *Compendium*, I.4.II.a.164.
- ²⁰ Ibid., I.4.II.b.166.
- ²¹ Ibid., I.4.II.c.168.
- ²² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 7.
- ²³ John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, III.106.
- ²⁴ USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 50.
- ²⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.
- ²⁶ *Compendium*, I.4.VI.a.192
- ²⁷ Ibid., I.4.IV.a.186.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid., I.4.IV.b.187.
- ³¹ Ibid., I.4.V.a.189.
- ³² "Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching" U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2005 - Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
- ³³ USCCB, *Forming Consciences*, Introductory Note.
- ³⁴ <https://www.catholicvote.org/republican-or-democrat-where-should-catholics-fall-in-line/>
- ³⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Political Controversy," in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D.B. Robertson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1957), 59.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 60.
- ³⁷ Quincy Howard, OP, "A Crucial Midterm Pivot," *Resolutions to Action* (2018), <http://files.constantcontact.com/5c9328ed001/4b42877b-212f-4960-b2bb-2c1c0baf2b20.pdf>.
- ³⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 75.