

How Should Catholics Vote?

Election Cycle 2024

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Voting: a gift and duty

The ability to vote is a great gift, but also a serious moral duty, and an act of Charity.

In 1937 Pope Pius XI wrote to the Catholics of Mexico, “A Catholic will take care not to pass over his right to vote when the good of the Church or of the country requires it.”¹

His successor, Pius XII gave an address ten years later in which he said, “There is a heavy responsibility on everyone... who has the right to vote, *especially when the interests of religion are at stake*; abstention in this case is in itself, it should be thoroughly understood, *a grave and a fatal sin of omission*.”²

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says:

It is the duty of citizens to contribute along with the civil authorities to the good of society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom. The love and service of one's country follow from the duty of gratitude and belong to the order of charity. Submission to legitimate authorities and service of the common good require citizens to fulfill their roles in the life of the political community (2239).

In just the next paragraph, the Catechism continues:

Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes, to exercise the right to vote, and to defend one's country (2240).

¹ Encyclical to Mexico *Firmissimam constantiam*, March 28, 1937, *AAS* 29, 189). This and the following quote from Pius XII I found in “Catholic Voting Principles,”

<https://www.stjoanarc.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Catholic-Voting-Principles.pdf>.

² Speech, September 11, 1947, *AAS* 40, 119.

So voting is a matter of justice, an act of charity, done on behalf of the common good. Yet, we must not simply vote; we must vote with well-formed consciences, enlightened by Faith.

We need to think with the Church and as subjects of Christ

Firstly, we must be faithful to the Gospel! We are citizens of a city above and serve a Heavenly King, who is not elected nor reelected and whose rule and law endures for all times and ages; allegiance to Christ comes before all other human ties and earthly bonds. Furthermore, we must not put our hope in earthly princes. Christ alone in our hope.

As Americans, we ought to have a deep love for our country and our fellow countrymen and a willingness to sacrifice on their behalf. But we are God's servants first, and in fact, because we are His good servants, we are better earthly citizens.

A Catholic-Christian will rarely if ever fit squarely into one political party or another – and that's a good thing! If we could say, "I agree with everything this party holds," chances are we would no longer be adhering to Christ and His teachings. Therefore, we cannot be merely non-critical party-line voters. Furthermore, parties change, because simply they are made up of human beings. What-once-was, may-no-longer-be. Just because our family or the men or women of our family have always voted for a certain party is not a good enough reason to vote for that party. **We must vote based on a hierarchy of objective moral values.**

We need to understand the hierarchy of moral values, that is, moral truths.

There are many issues. Not all have the same weight. We cannot make our decision for a candidate simply based on which issues are personally or subjectively more important to us. We must choose based on external criteria and ultimately based on God's vision of the world, which is the same as objective reality.

Certain policies are discretionary in nature and folks may disagree on the right approach or implementation of them, as long as the various options are morally permissible. These include but are not limited to foreign policy, tax law, immigration reform, workers' rights, healthcare initiatives, criminal justice, etc.

However, when moral absolutes enter in, these are no longer discretionary. Examples of moral absolutes: "all innocent life from conception till natural death

must be safeguarded and protected” and “marriage can only be between a man and a woman.”

Conversely abortion and homosexual “unions” are what moral theology calls “intrinsic evils”. They are never permissible. They are always, everywhere, for every person, and in every situation, morally evil.

The dignity of the unborn, the defense of marriage, and the freedom of the Church to exercise publicly her Faith and to allow that Faith to inform her social institutions, her schools, hospitals, adoption agencies, etc. are issues every Catholic needs to place foremost in evaluating candidates for office.

This does not mean that other social-moral issues are unimportant. The plight of immigrants, workers, the poor, and racism are all important issues. However, in the hierarchy of moral values, if one does not defend the life of the unborn, the sanctity of marriage (the basic building block of society), and the rights of the Church to speak out and live her beliefs in the public square, all other categories will also be undermined, ultimately defenseless, and meaningless.

In 1979 John Paul II visited Washington, D.C. and celebrated Mass on the Capital Mall. In his homily, he said, “Let me repeat what I told the people during my recent pilgrimage to my homeland: ‘If a person's right to life is violated at the moment in which he is first conceived in his mother's womb, an indirect blow is struck also at the whole of the moral order, which serves to ensure the inviolable goods of man. Among those goods, life occupies the first place. The Church defends the right to life, not only in regard to the majesty of the Creator, who is the First Giver of this life, but also in respect of the essential good of the human person’”.³

I can almost hear someone query, “But father, surely we cannot be one issue voters, can we?” In fact, I have presented you not with one issue but three foundational ones: the dignity of the unborn, the defense of marriage, and the rights of people of Faith, precisely of the Church, to exercise that Faith.

Listen to then Bishop Martino of Scranton, PA. In 2008, responding to this type of question, he stated: “Being ‘right’ on taxes, education, health care, immigration, and the economy fails to make up for the error of disregarding the value of a human life. Consider this: the finest health and education systems, the fairest immigration laws,

³ [Holy Mass at the Capital Mall, Homily of His Holiness John Paul II, Washington D.C., October 7, 1979.](#)

and the soundest economy do nothing for the child who never sees the light of day. It is a tragic irony that ‘pro-choice’ candidates have come to support homicide – the gravest injustice a society can tolerate – in the name of ‘social justice.’”⁴

Again, we must look at these values not merely from a human perspective, but from a supernatural one, that is, from God’s point of view. In Scripture, four types of sin cry out to God for retribution, even vengeance on His part. They are homicide, sodomy, oppression of widows and orphans, and cheating laborers of their wages. “All of these sins cry out to God, but the four are not equal. The sequence in the text suggests a hierarchy of value, and it is a tightly linked hierarchy. One sin leads to another, from the gravest to the least.”⁵ All of these sins are such affronts to human dignity, that God must punish them and often the whole society that has permitted or been complacent about them.

Take the first sin crying out to heaven – homicide, murder. The annual toll in the United States for those who die by murder or non-negligent manslaughter is under 30,000. This number includes only those outside the womb. Yet, 60 million children have been aborted since the Supreme Court Decided Roe vs. Wade in 1973. In the last twenty-three years alone, yearly near a million are violently killed in the womb, the low mark being one year about 862,000 to the high mark of over 1.3 million. What an utter tragedy, not only for these children, but also for their mothers and fathers, who were lied to, for the fabric and prosperity of our society. Abortion is the greatest sin, wound, and scourge of our land. It is greater than slavery itself and because it often targets minorities, it is also a form of racism and often eugenics. It is the stuff totalitarian regimes are made of. Therefore, it is not enough to simply vote, we must also bring healing and build a welcoming and supportive culture of life. While the Supreme Court returned the decision regarding abortion to the states, one of the presidential candidates, wants no restrictions on abortion and to make Roe the law of the Land again. I ask you, how can a just God stand by and not punish a nation that refuses to protect its most vulnerable member, the unborn child?

⁴ “Bishop Martino's Pastoral Letter for Respect Life Sunday,” October 5, 2008. This quote is found in the fourth paragraph and can be viewed at

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8456>

⁵ See this short article for Scripture passages and an overview of these four sins that cry to heaven. The quote is from the last paragraph of the article.

<https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/crying-to-heaven-for-vengeance-8257/>

Now take the second sin that cries to heaven, sodomy, or unnatural sexual acts. Let us learn a lesson from biblical history. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah by sulfur and fire falling from heaven because of their great wickedness. Scripture explicitly mentions as part of this wickedness, their unnatural relations between members of the same sex.

If we love our country, we must pray, fast, and vote in a way to minimize sins which call down God's wrath upon her.

The Catholic Church is the greatest moral voice in the world and the greatest defender of human dignity. Her international dimension, her intellectual patrimony and her divine mandate, lend a powerful voice to the most vulnerable and those with no political or social standing. Silence her, and all forms of tyranny abound. Former president [Trump's record regarding religious liberty](#) is clear.

However, current vice president Harris' record is not so easily remembered. Yet, as attorney general, she filed a brief asserting that Hobby Lobby owners had no religious liberty or Conscience Rights and should be compelled to supply abortion drugs to employees.⁶ In 2018, she opposed several nominees, claiming they could not be impartial because they belonged to the Knights of Columbus which opposes abortion and same-sex marriage. This "religious test" contradicts the Constitution and could be seen as anti-Catholic bigotry. Furthermore, the same year, she introduced the "Do No Harm Act" to stop churches from relying on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which the Supreme Court has ruled exempts religious organizations from being required to cooperate with abortion, homosexual and other objectionable policies. Fortunately, this also failed. These points are taken from [an article by Robert G. Marshall](#). More on that shortly.

We must distinguish objective truth from feelings and opinions

Our passions to be good in the truest sense must be brought in line with right reason. In other words, feelings, emotions, and gut reactions to a particular candidate and/or party are understandable. However, when evaluating for whom to vote, we need to look at things in a reflective calm with the light of reason and faith.

Being polite, polished, and nice is not the height or epitome of virtue. Granted someone who has these qualities, is more pleasant to be around. But a vicious or

⁶ The Supreme Court disagreed (*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, 573 U.S. 682 (2014)).

evil man or woman can also be polite at times, very polished, and convincingly or deceptively nice. The point is that we cannot judge a candidate merely or even primarily by his or her personal character charms and graces or flaws and foibles.

We need to distinguish between the personal or private life of an individual and his or her public policy. (The private and the public spheres of an individual are not unrelated, but there is a difference.)

We need to judge a candidate not just by what he or she says, but more so by their records. **We are fortunate that in this election there are clear records for both candidates.**

You should look at Robert G. Marshall's article, "[Trump: The lesser of two evils is a moral choice](#)". Of course, the title reveals his conclusion. Even if you don't agree with everything he says, the value of his piece is that he lays out a record for Kamala Harris regarding many key issues. You should also read the [party platforms](#) or consult a comparison of the issues. I found helpful the Family Research Council's 2024 "Party Platform Comparison". You can find it at [frcaction.org](#).

What about two unworthy candidates?

When two (or more) unworthy candidates present themselves, it is permissible to vote for the one who will uphold or defend the highest moral absolutes, or as the case may be, do the least evil.

The Catholic theologian Tanquerey said that if the vote is between two evil persons, however one is worse than the other, one may vote for the less evil and most profitable to the cause of good. Prummer another moral theologian said the same.⁷

The Dominican Merkelbach states that when given a choice between two unworthy candidates, it is licit to elect the better candidate to prevent a more unworthy candidate from coming into power if there is no hope that a good candidate will be elected.

Perhaps you are one of those who are really struggling and do not see how you can vote for either of the two major candidates and are thinking about voting for a third party or more worthy write-in. Again, the Dominican Merkelbach has this to say,

⁷ The references and quotes in this and the following three paragraphs I found in "Catholic Voting Principles," <https://www.stjoanarc.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Catholic-Voting-Principles.pdf>. One can find citations for original sources there. See pages 1-2.

“by the virtue of distributive justice [that is what we owe to society] one should elect the more worthy candidate, not absolutely, but among those that can be had. If the vote for a more worthy candidate will not be beneficial (effective), then one can elect a less worthy candidate to avoid the election of the more unworthy candidate.” In layman’s terms, he’s saying, “you don’t have to vote for the best candidate, if there’s no chance of that person winning. You can vote for a less worthy candidate to block an even worse one.”

The French Bishops writing to the Catholics of their dioceses in 1921 said something similar, “It is your duty to vote wisely; that is to say, in such a way as not to waste your votes. It would be better to cast them for candidates who although not giving complete satisfaction to all our legitimate demands, would lead us to expect from them a line of conduct useful to the country, rather than to keep your votes for others whose program indeed may be more perfect, but whose almost certain defeat might open the door to the enemies of religion and of the social order.”

Having gone through a careful process of prayerful evaluation, we may discover that we must vote for someone whom we personally dislike or distrust. Yet, we must do what is morally and objectively right, even if we are afraid some other physical or social evil may arise as a result, such as social unrest.

In summary, a man or woman of Faith votes, not based on foreseeable outcomes nor societal consequences, far less on personal preferences. Rather he or she votes, having sought to conform mind and heart—one’s judgement—to a law greater than oneself. He or she must be practical and may vote for a less than worthy candidate in order to preserve greater goods or prevent greater evils. However, he or she does not primarily vote based on outcomes, but rather knowing that one must ultimately give account to Him, the bestower of human life, the author of marriage, and the guarantor of the Church’s right to free exercise. In the end, we will be judged based on how we have loved and sought to defend, what God loves and upholds.