

Voter's Guide 2020

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In light of the upcoming elections in the United States, I offer this guide on our responsibility to vote and participate in the public square. I am not telling you how to vote, nor am I supporting any political party or candidate. Rather, I am speaking to moral principles that we are called to embrace, and it is your responsibility to consider prayerfully how to vote in light of these principles. In doing so, we are not imposing our Catholic faith on others. The moral principles that I will be discussing are rooted in basic truths about the human person. Thus, they are applicable to everyone. Given space considerations, I will not be able to treat every issue in detail. Instead, I intend to provide a summary. For a more complete treatment, see the document of the US Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-title.cfm>

This voter's guide is divided into three parts: the four basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching to be applied to public life; the obligation to do good; and the necessity of avoiding evil.

Part One: Four Basic Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

All public policy should embody four fundamental principles: (1) the dignity of every human person, (2) the common good, (3) subsidiarity and (4) solidarity.

The Dignity of the Human Person

Every human being, from the moment of conception to natural death, is endowed with incomparable dignity. It is fundamental for the government to respect each person's dignity and the inalienable rights that are rooted in it, such as the right to life. Threats to the dignity of the human person include but are not limited to abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, human cloning, *in vitro* fertilization, the destruction of human embryos for research, unjust war, terrorism, genocide, attacks against noncombatants, torture, racism, and human trafficking. Moreover, respect for the dignity of the human person urges us to overcome poverty and suffering (*Faithful Citizenship*, 44-45)

The Common Good

The common good is "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26). Human fulfillment should not be viewed merely in a material or economic sense. Human flourishing entails living a life of virtue and excellence. "The common good consists of three essential elements: respect for and promotion of the fundamental rights of the person; prosperity, or the development of the spiritual and temporal goods of society; the peace and security of the group and its members"

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1925). Since the human person reaches fulfillment not by himself, but rather by living with others and for others, all people have a responsibility for promoting the common good. Moreover, the promotion of the common good is the reason for the existence of the State (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 165, 168). Thus, in prayerfully discerning for whom to vote, we should ask how well the candidate's policies promote the common good. Does the candidate strive to safeguard basic human rights? Is the right to life and religious liberty respected? Is the prosperity and development of society fostered so that people can obtain food, housing, education, employment, and health care?

Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity highlights the importance of small and local groups in society, of which the family has the pride of place. According to the principle of subsidiarity, there is a preference to address matters on as local a level as possible and avoid over centralization and the undue control of by higher levels of government. Higher levels of government do have responsibility to act, however, when the common good cannot be adequately fostered on the local level. Yet when higher level government institutions act, it should be with the attitude of help, support and promotion of the more local institutions – not strive to substitute them. (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 186-187; *Faithful Citizenship*, 48). Thus, in prayerfully discerning for whom to vote, we should ask how well the candidate's policies respect the principle of subsidiarity. Does the candidate promote big government control, or instead respect smaller, and more local levels of government and other smaller groups in society?

Solidarity

The principle of solidarity highlights the fundamental unity we have with one another, our social nature, and the equal rights and dignity of every human person. Solidarity calls us to reach out to the marginalized, welcome the stranger among us (including immigrants) and promote peace. It underscores the preferential option for the poor and prompts us to share our goods with one another. In light of our solidarity with one another, we recognize that we are not self-sufficient individuals. We must depend on each other and thus we all have a debt to society. (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 192-194; *Faithful Citizenship*, 52-54; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1939-1942). Thus, in prayerfully discerning for whom to vote, we should ask how well the candidate's policies respect the principle of solidarity. Does the candidate foster the obligations that each individual and society as a whole have to care for the needs of all?

Two sides of a Coin

The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity are two sides of a coin. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to emphasize one to the neglect of the other. Subsidiarity without solidarity can degenerate into isolated groups dominated by self-interest without concern for common good of society as a whole. Solidarity without subsidiarity can degenerate into a 'welfare state' that stifles personal responsibility and local initiative. (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 351). In other words, we should strive for a balance.

Part 2: Do Good

In addition to examining the candidates' positions in light of the four principles of Catholic Social Teaching, we must also be cognizant of our obligation and the government's obligation to do good.

Promote the Common Good of Society

There are many areas of public life that we should address to promote the good of society. These include, but are not limited to, the following: striving to overcome poverty, hunger and disease, and promoting peace, education, health care, and employment. It is good to provide the infrastructure that society needs, such as clean water, roads, bridges, etc. We should work toward immigration reform, the promotion of strong families founded on the marriage of one man and one woman and the protection of the environment. We should safeguard fundamental human rights such as the right to life, religious liberty, the freedom of conscience, the freedom of speech and the rights of workers. We should foster agriculture, business and promote entrepreneurship.

Prudential Deliberation

When it comes to promoting the good of society, there is room for differing opinions on the best way to achieve the good. Thus, we need to examine the candidates' differing policy proposals to achieve these goods and make a prudential decision on which is the best proposal. The virtue of prudence helps us to deliberate about the means to achieve these good ends. While there is room for disagreement, there are still some non-negotiable parameters. For example, we may never choose to do something evil in order to achieve a good end. The end does not justify the means. For instance, it is laudable to strive to overcome disease. However, we ought not to destroy human embryos in order to find cures for diseases. We will talk more about avoiding evil below.

In addition to avoiding evil, our prudential deliberation should evaluate policy proposals to do good in light of the four principles that we considered above. Let us examine three of the goods that we should promote in this way, namely, health care, overcoming poverty and immigration reform. Time and space prevent me from addressing all the issues, but I hope that these examples will serve as a guide for your reasoning about the others.

Health Care

It promotes the common good for quality, affordable health care to be available, yet there is room for disagreement on the best way to do this. Each of us needs to examine the candidates' policies and determine which is better. In light of the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, there is a preference for private initiative and local levels of government in the provision of health care. However, higher levels of government still have responsibility if it cannot be adequately provided at a local level. Moreover, the provision of health care must safeguard the dignity of the human person and protect fundamental human rights such as the rights to life, religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

Poverty, Families and the Economy

It serves the common good to overcome poverty, yet it is a complex matter that does not admit of an easy solution. Many factors are involved. There is a strong correlation between the dissolution of families and the increase of poverty. Thus, to combat poverty it is important to strengthen families and address the cultural and economic factors that undermine family stability (cf., *Faithful Citizenship*, 75).

Moreover, it is important to grow the economy to overcome poverty. Strong agriculture, business and entrepreneurship create jobs and provide the food and material things that we need. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* indicates that the primary responsibility for the economy rests with individuals and other groups in society and not the State or government (CCC, 2431). However, the State or government does have role in the economy, which must be exercised in accord with the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states:

In order to respect both of these fundamental principles, the State's intervention in the economic environment must be neither invasive nor absent, but commensurate with society's real needs. "The State has a duty to sustain business activities by creating conditions which will ensure job opportunities, by stimulating those activities where they are lacking or by supporting them in moments of crisis. The State has the further right to intervene when particular monopolies create delays or obstacles to development. In addition to the tasks of harmonizing and guiding development, in exceptional circumstances the State can also exercise a substitute function".

*The fundamental task of the State in economic matters is that of determining an appropriate juridical framework for regulating economic affairs, in order to safeguard "the prerequisites of a free economy, which presumes a certain equality between the parties, such that one party would not be so powerful as practically to reduce the other to subservience". Economic activity, above all in a free market context, cannot be conducted in an institutional, juridical or political vacuum. "On the contrary, it presupposes sure guarantees of individual freedom and private property, as well as a stable currency and efficient public services". To fulfil this task, the State must adopt suitable legislation but at the same time it must direct economic and social policies in such a way that it does not become abusively involved in the various market activities, the carrying out of which is and must remain free of authoritarian — or worse, totalitarian — superstructures and constraints. (CSDC, 351-352. The internal citations are from John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 15 and 48)*

Finally to combat poverty, welfare should not create dependency on the system but be aimed at stimulating personal responsibility and initiative, helping people to rise out of poverty through education and gaining necessary skills and work. Moreover, there should be assistance available for those who are disabled and cannot work (cf. *Faithful Citizenship*, 75).

While striving to overcome poverty is non-negotiable, there is room for debate as to the best way to achieve this goal. Once again, we need to evaluate a candidate's policies to overcome poverty in light of

the common good, the dignity of the human person and the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, and make a judgment as to which policies are the best.

Immigration Reform

To help us evaluate a candidate's position on immigration, it is helpful to examine five basic principles that guide the Church's response. These principles and other helpful information can be found on the website established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

<https://justiceforimmigrants.org/>, in particular see the document: <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Principles-of-Migration-1-18-17.pdf>

First, persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

Second, persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families. When opportunities for work to support themselves and their families are lacking in one's own country, people do have the right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Nations should provide ways to accommodate this right, and in this light, the immigration laws in the United States need to be reformed.

Third, sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. "The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a strong obligation to accommodate migration flows."

Fourth, refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. "Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority."

Fifth, the human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected. "Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment by enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary."

Once again, we should evaluate the candidates' positions on immigration reform and make a judgment on which candidate has the best policy to do good.

Complete Agreement with a Candidate is Unlikely

It is unlikely that we will completely agree with all a candidate's policies to do good. Thus, in choosing for whom to vote, we need to make a judgment about which candidate for office overall all has the best policies for doing good. However, there is one more important factor that we must examine. We and the government must never do evil.

Part 3: Avoid Evil

Intrinsically Evil Acts

In order to safeguard the dignity of every human person and the common good, we and the government must avoid evil. Evil actions directly threaten the dignity of the human person and the common good of society. Some actions are always evil, and we call them intrinsically evil acts. These include but are not limited to abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, the destruction of human embryos, human cloning, genocide, torture, the direct and intentional targeting of noncombatants in war, terrorist attacks, racist actions, and redefining marriage contrary to its essential meaning. Since the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, there have been more than 60 million abortions in the United States – a number greater than the entire population of England. This underscores the fact the abortion is the gravest issue. In addition, when doing evil is falsely considered a “right” that ought to be protected, it makes the matter even more serious. (cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 11)

The Supreme Court and Intrinsic Evils

In addition, due to the role that the Supreme Court has had in promoting the intrinsic evils of abortion and the redefinition of marriage, it is crucial to examine a candidate’s position with regard to the appointment of Supreme Court Justices. This would be applicable to candidates for the Senate, which approves the President’s nominations, as well as for candidates for President, who nominates the Justices.

Intrinsic Evils and Voting

It is never permissible to commit an intrinsically evil action. Thus, we must never vote for a candidate because a candidate supports an intrinsically evil action. To do so would be to intend to promote evil directly (*Faithful Citizenship*, 31).

Moreover, even if we do not support a candidate’s position to promote evil, it is not morally permissible to vote for that candidate unless there are truly morally grave reasons to do so (*Faithful Citizenship*, 35).

How do we determine whether there are truly morally grave reasons? First of all, in a situation where some candidates promote intrinsically evil acts and other candidates do not, we must choose from the candidates who do not promote intrinsic evils. One might wonder, however, about the situation in which a candidate who promotes an intrinsic evil also has better policies, in our judgment, to do the good, such as promoting the economy and overcoming poverty, than another candidate who does not promote intrinsic evil. Such a situation does not constitute a morally grave reason for voting for the candidate who promotes evil. As we learned above, there is room for debate on the best way to do good. Differing opinions on the best way to do good do not justify involvement in promoting evil.

However, there are other situations in which all the candidates for a given office promote one or more intrinsic evils. In such a situation, a person after careful deliberation could be justified in voting for the

candidate who would do the least evil in the person's judgment (*Faithful Citizenship*, 36). This would constitute a morally grave reason for voting for a candidate who promotes an intrinsic evil. To make this judgement on which candidate is likely to do the least evil, we must also consider carefully that some intrinsic evils are graver than others. Another option is the decision not to vote for any candidate for that office (*Faithful Citizenship*, 36), or to write in one's vote for a candidate who is not on the ballot.

Conclusion

We have examined four fundamental principles of Catholic Social Teaching that inform our discernment about voting: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity. In addition, we have underscored the obligation to do good and avoid evil. While doing the good is non-negotiable, there is room for legitimate disagreement on the best way to achieve the good. It is also non-negotiable to avoid evil; thus, we should not vote for a candidate who promotes intrinsic evil without grave moral reasons. Let us remember to pray for our country in the upcoming elections and ask our Lord to guide us as we exercise our responsibility to participate in public life through exercising our right to vote.

Sincerely in Christ,

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