

*The following is an excerpt from a talk given by Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego at the Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture at the University of San Diego on February 6. It was published in the February 7, 2020 edition of the National Catholic Reporter.*

In *Evangelium Gaudium*, Pope Francis points powerfully to the vocation of faith-filled citizenship: *An authentic faith...always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.* It is primarily through the votes of Catholic women and men, rooted in conscience and in faith that the Church enters into the ordering of society and the state.

Yet comparatively little attention has been paid in Catholic moral theology to the moral nature and structure of the act of voting for specific candidates. Much focus is placed on individual policy issues and their moral implications in Catholic social teaching. If the primary role of citizens were to vote on specific issues, this might be sufficient. But a vote for individual candidates inevitably encapsulates a wide range of policy options reaching out into the future, as well as varying capacities and intentions among the candidates. Where does Catholic theology begin in assisting believers to carry out their role of ennobling the world?

Pope Francis answers this question by proposing starkly that our political lives must be seen as an essential element of our personal call to holiness. We are called in our lives as citizens and believers to be missionaries of dialogue and civility in a moment that values neither. And this requires deep spiritual reflection, courage and judgment. It demands a Christ-like dedication to seeking the truth no matter where it may lie, and defining our politics and voting in the light of the gospel.

In this task, the principles of Catholic social teaching as they are applied to the core political issues of American society today provide a rich and sacred source of guidance in weighing the policy proposals of competing candidates. The comprehensiveness of Catholic social teaching points toward an understanding of justice, life and peace that refuses to be confined to narrow boxes or relegated to partisan categories. At the same time, this very comprehensiveness makes the prioritization of Catholic teachings difficult for voters. As the 2020 election cycle begins, at least ten salient points emerge from the Gospel and the long tradition of Catholic faith:

- The promotion of a culture and legal structures that protect the life of unborn children.
- The reversal of the climate change that threatens the future of humanity and particularly devastates the poor and marginalized.
- Policies that safeguard the rights of immigrants and refugees in a moment of great intolerance.
- Laws that protect the aged, the ill, and the disabled from the lure and the scourge of euthanasia and assisted suicide.
- Vigorous opposition to racism in every form, both through cultural transformation and legal structures.
- The provision of work and the protection of workers' rights across America.
- Systematic efforts to fight poverty and egregious inequalities of wealth.
- Policies that promote marriage and family, which are so essential for society.
- Substantial movement towards universal nuclear disarmament.
- The protection of religious liberty.

Frequently in discussions of the application of Catholic social teaching to voting, the question is raised whether one issue has a unique priority among all of the other issues in its claim upon believers in the current election cycle. Some have categorized abortion in that way. Others, climate change. This question deserves deeper scrutiny.

More than 750,000 unborn children are directly killed in the United States every year. At one time there was bipartisan support for erecting policies that made abortion rare. Now that commitment has been eviscerated in a capitulation to notions of privacy that simply block out the human identity and rights of unborn children. Even in an age when sonograms testify with the eloquence of truth and life itself that children in the womb are genuinely our brothers and sisters, our daughters and sons, the annihilation of their humanity in perception and in fact continues. Catholic social teaching has consistently demanded that there be legal protection for the unborn, as they are the most vulnerable and victimized of humanity. But we are rapidly moving toward becoming a nation split in two: with half of our country moving toward laws safeguarding the unborn and the other half of our country

adopting even more extreme laws that allow the killing of children on the verge of birth.

At the same time there is a clear international scientific consensus that climate change caused by the use of fossil fuels and other human activities poses an existential threat to the very future of humanity and that air pollution resulting from fossil fuels is already a major cause of premature death on our planet. Existing trajectories of pollutants being placed in the atmosphere by human activity, if unchecked, will raise the temperature of the earth in the coming decades, generating catastrophic rises in human exposure to deadly heat, devastating rises in water levels and massive exposure to a series of perilous viruses. In addition, there will be severe widespread famines, droughts and massive dislocations of peoples that will cause untold deaths, human suffering and violent conflict. The devastating fires in Australia are a sign of what lies before us, and a testimony that, on so many levels, our current pollution of the earth is stealing the future from coming generations. Because the trajectory of danger unleashed by fossil fuels is increasing so rapidly, the next ten years are critical to (stopping) the threat to our planet. The United States, which was once a leader in this effort, has become the leader in resisting efforts to combat climate change and in denying its existence. As a consequence, the survival of the planet, which is the prerequisite for all human life, is at risk.

Against the backdrop of these two monumental threats to human life, how can one evaluate the competing claims that either abortion or climate change should be uniquely preeminent in Catholic social teaching regarding the formation of Americans as citizens and believers? Four points should be considered.

- There is no mandate in universal Catholic social teaching that gives a categorical priority to either of these issues as uniquely determinative of the common good.
- The death toll from abortion is more immediate, but the long-term death toll from unchecked climate change is larger and threatens the very future of humanity.
- Both abortion and the environment are core life issues in Catholic teaching.

- The designation of either of these issues as the preeminent question in Catholic social teaching at this time in the United States will inevitably be hijacked by partisan forces to propose that Catholics have an overriding duty to vote for candidates that espouse that position. Recent electoral history shows this to be a certainty.

The question of preeminence is further clouded by a third compelling issue our country faces in this election cycle – the culture of exclusion that has grown so dramatically in our nation during the last three years. Racial injustice is on the rise, buttressed by a new language and symbolism that seeks to advance the evil of white nationalism and create structures of racial prejudice for a new generation.

Immigrants and refugees, who have been at the core of America's history as a source of vitality and richness, are portrayed as a cause for fear and suspicion in our society rather than of solidarity. Members of the Muslim community are widely characterized as aliens whose religion automatically means they cannot be trusted, while incidents of vile and pervasive anti-Semitism are on the rise.

This growing culture of exclusion does not emerge as a specific policy question in our contemporary national politics; rather, it seeps into all of the most salient questions of life and dignity that our society faces and corrodes each one in turn.

The culture of exclusion has unleashed a poison of animosity against immigrants that paralyzes our politics so deeply that we cannot even find a pathway to protect young men and women who came to this nation and now thirst to be citizens of the only land they have ever known. Racial and ethnic disparities in education, health, job availability and housing which are rooted in our nation's historic culture of exclusion dramatically propel the breakdown of marriage and family life. And inequalities of wealth and income make it all but impossible to overcome the enduring challenges of work and poverty in our nation.

On virtually every question of human life and dignity the growing culture of exclusion in our nation reinforces and propels cleavages that are highly destructive to all of the goals that lie at the center of Catholic social teaching. For this reason, many faith-filled Catholics believe that in this election cycle the most compelling issue that arises from Catholic social teaching for American voters is the need to

repudiate radically this culture of exclusion before it spreads further and leads to new levels of moral paralysis and division.

Seen against this background of abortion, climate change and the culture of exclusion, it is clear that the faith-filled voter who seeks to be guided by Catholic social teaching is confronted by compelling moral claims that cut across the partisan and cultural divides of our nation. The pathway from these cross-cutting moral claims to decisions on particular candidates is not a direct and singular one in Catholic teaching, rooted in one issue. For this reason, the drive to label a single issue preeminent distorts the call to authentic discipleship in voting rather than advancing it.

In America today a faith-filled voter is called to approach voting from a stance of bridge-building and healing for our nation. But voting for candidates ultimately involves choosing a *candidate* for public office, not a stance, not a specific teaching of the Church. And for this reason, faithful voting involves careful consideration of the specific ability of a particular candidate to actually advance the common good. In making this assessment, opportunity, competence and character all come into play.

The question of opportunity is pivotal in voting discipleship. What are the elements of human life and dignity that a specific candidate will actually be able to advance given the scope of the office (the candidate) is seeking? In short, what capacity will (the candidate) have to transform law and public policy in key sectors in order to promote the common good?

Competence is also a central metric for faith-filled voters to consider. Faith-filled voters must assess the intelligence, human relations skills, mastery of policy and intuitive insights that each candidate brings to bear, for voting discipleship seeks results, not merely aspirations.

Finally, because our nation is in a moment of political division, character represents a particularly compelling criterion for faithful voting in 2020. Today, leaders in government embrace corrosive tactics and language fostering division rather than unity. The notion of truth itself has lost its footing in our public debate. Collegiality has been discarded. Principles are merely justifications for partisan

actions, to be abandoned when those principles no longer favor a partisan advantage. There is a fundamental lack of political courage in the land.

For all these reasons, character is an even more essential element in effective faith-filled voting at the present moment, and another reason why faith-filled voting cannot simply be reduced to a series of competing social justice teachings.

In the end, it is the candidate who is on the ballot, not a specific issue. The faith-filled voter is asked to make the complex judgment: which candidate will be likely to best advance the common good in a particular political context.

How, then does the faith-filled voter choose candidates in a way that integrates the tenets of Catholic social teaching, recognizes the role that competence, character and capacity play in the real world of governing, and preserves a stance of building unity within society?

The Church locates this pathway in the virtue of prudence. In the words of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it. ...It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience.” There cannot be faith-filled Catholic voting without the virtue of prudence, exercised within the sanctity of well-formed conscience.

In the closing remarks of his address to Congress in 2015, Pope Francis said a nation is great when it defends liberty as Abraham Lincoln did, when it seeks equality as Martin Luther King did, and when it strives for justice for the oppressed as Dorothy Day did. Let us pray that our nation moves toward such greatness in this election year, and that faith-filled prudent disciples are leading the way.

