

Make voices, informed by Gospel, heard by elected officials

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In the midst of our presidential election's contentious campaign, many of our faithful have been telling me about their concern for the future of our country. I, as your bishop, and all of our clergy, too, are being asked to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth.

Voting is an opportunity to love our neighbors by electing candidates who will enact laws that protect the vulnerable, strengthen families, promote conditions for all to flourish, and ensure that citizens can practice their faith without fear of punishment. The responsibility to make choices in elections rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, but our participation in political life should go well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.

The dignity and value of every human person is at the heart of the Good News and we are called to live and share "the Gospel of fraternity and justice" (*The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 179). In American society today, as the bishops of our country recently stated, the threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority, so the "Gospel of fraternity and justice" compels us to stand up to defend and protect the dignity of the unborn. We do this by working to promote the sanctity of human life, praying for an end to abortion, providing real help and encouragement to mothers in difficult situations, and supporting policies and programs that do the same.

It also means standing up and working for the elderly, the sick and those with disabilities. We must see that the rhetoric surrounding assisted suicide and euthanasia is a counterfeit and misguided notion of compassion that must be rejected. We must work for justice for immigrants who flee desperation and violence in their homelands while also working to eradicate racism from our midst. We must never grow indifferent to the plight of the hopeless caught in the destructive cycle of addictions, which plague our modern society. It means standing up and protecting the environment and world God Himself created, and working for people living in poverty, struggling for food, shelter and even health care in the midst of a world of wealth and abundance. We must never forget that the Gospel of Jesus reminds us "Whatever you do to the least of my people, you do to me." (*Mt 25:40*) We need to elect government officials who protect our precious religious freedom, so that we can continue to freely live our beliefs and values.

As you well know, at present our American political system is guided by two major political parties which at times are moving to more extreme positions. It should be clear to any Catholic who is informed by the Church's teachings that both parties, at times, fail in serious ways to respect and protect human dignity in their positions and platforms. Too often, we allow ourselves to be Democrats or Republicans first, and Catholic second. That way of prioritizing our values and forming our conscience is a scourge upon authentic Catholic living. With some of the policies and platforms that have been adopted, it can be difficult for Catholics to choose a party and to be comfortable in it. While everyone is free to be a member of the political party of their choice, our political responsibility requires of us that we should work to form, and criticize where necessary, the stances of these parties that are inconsistent with Catholic social teaching. Indeed, sometimes criticism of one's own party is more effective than criticism of the "other" one. We should make sure our voices and concerns are heard and heard clearly.

Our election gives us an opportunity to research the candidates and issues and to learn about Catholic social teaching. There are seven principles of Catholic social teaching that can serve as a guideline when deciding on which candidates and issues to support. To learn about these principles, visit: www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching

We cannot place all the competing issues of the election on the same level because certain issues deal with “intrinsic evil” which must always be opposed, while others do not. Some actions are always incompatible with the love of God and neighbor. Whereas there can be varying solutions to health care, immigration and welfare; there can be no debate on the admissibility of actions such as abortion, euthanasia or genocide because such acts involve the intentional taking of innocent life and are always evil and never morally acceptable.

As is stated in the new introductory letter for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility*: “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed. At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty.”

While we are called to always avoid evil, we are also called to do good. Therefore, Catholics are encouraged to consider the wide range of issues important to the Church, to avoid acting as single-issue voters, and to weigh each issue according to its moral importance. The USCCB has compiled many excellent resources for those who would like to learn about issues important to the Church on the website: www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

Another resource New Jersey Catholics can access for information on issues can be found at the website of the New Jersey Catholic Bishops: www.njcatholic.org/issues. Respect life, family life, social concerns and education are the major sections included, each of which contains several specific topics. It is a place where you can obtain up-to-date information on key issues and sign up to receive legislative action alerts so that you can be an active faith citizen year-round.

This election ballot will ask New Jersey voters to consider changing the state constitution to allow recreational use of marijuana. The Catholic Church teaches “the use of drugs inflicts very grave damage on human health and life. Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense.” Legalizing a drug for recreational use that may have damaging effects on the human body, particularly on our youth, is not a path that civil society should choose to take in order to help balance our state budget.

While it may seem burdensome to research these various issues, this year is a very important election and so your vote will be important. I ask you to study the issues and then pray to Jesus for guidance. The candidates’ positions can be found on their websites. Your vote is a matter of your informed conscience. As serious disciples of Christ it is our responsibility to become aware of the candidates/platforms and to view them in light of the Gospel truth found in Catholic social teaching.

While this election is frustrating in many ways because we may see no “perfect” candidate. We must not allow our emotions to override our reason. At the end of the day, our real joy and peace

must be found in being faithful in the eyes of the Lord, regardless of an election outcome. I have been heartened by the interest our faithful have shown in wanting to do the right thing with this coming election and pray we will all avail ourselves of the resources which can help us in making the best choice at the ballot box. Likewise I pray that you make your voices, informed by the Gospel, heard by our elected officials; they should not take us for granted.

Be assured of my ongoing prayers and love for you and for our country, too. I continue to ask that you please pray for me too. God bless you and God bless our country!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James F. Checchio". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend James F. Checchio, JCD, MBA
Bishop of Metuchen