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Role of Conscience in Voting

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Voting is a solemn civic ceremony that has been won and defended by the blood of countless American men and women throughout our Nation's history, up to the present day. Please exercise this precious right. For the Catholic, voting also has grave moral obligations and consequences. Voting can never be taken lightly nor be contrary to a well-formed conscience.

A "well-formed conscience" for the Catholic is one that has been formed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer, studying Scripture, and honestly informing oneself about the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. In 2002, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) wrote, "Democracy must be based on the true and solid foundation of non-negotiable ethical principles, which are the underpinning of life in society." (Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, 2002, no. 3)

While there is no initiative on the part of the Church to support one candidate over another, it is an indispensable obligation of bishops, priests, and deacons to inform the faithful about the hierarchy of issues that must be considered in conscience by every voting Catholic.

In consistent Catholic teaching, recently re-affirmed by our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and the body of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, abortion and euthanasia are the "preeminent" issues in forming an opinion about how to vote. "...[T]he right to health, to home, to work, 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." (Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 1998, no. 38, emphasis in the original)

Hence, a Catholic voter is to approach the ballot box with the defense of innocent human life uppermost in his/her mind and conscience. As voters, we must carefully examine our consciences to determine if our vote cooperates with a candidate's promotion of the grave sins of abortion and euthanasia. The United States Bishops gave stark guidance to politicians in 1998, "No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate for or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life." (*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge for American Catholics*, no. 32) While this statement addresses public officials once elected to office, in intellectual and moral honesty, we must extend these words to us citizens who, by our vote, elect the candidate to office.

Admittedly, the coming elections pose many challenges and much soul-searching for Catholic voters. There never are, and are not now, perfect candidates for office. Most likely for us, none completely matches our desires on temperament, social justice, immigration, or foreign, domestic, or economic policies. For this reason, the Church offers guidance for Catholic voters in correctly forming their consciences, especially on the overriding, foundational issues of abortion and euthanasia.

Some may see these words of guidance as an intrusion into the political arena. To the contrary, the Church and her bishops have a serious obligation and right to participate in public discourse and to assist the faithful in properly forming their consciences to be able to participate fully, with free and informed will, in the moral and civic act of voting.

Please pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance as you prepare to cast your vote, and God bless you for participating in such a profound American tradition.

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