

Frequently asked questions to keep in mind during this year's elections

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Commitment to announcing the Gospel at all times includes our approach to participating in the presidential elections. This newspaper and our diocesan website reference "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." Its introductory note provides a good summary of its contents. One can find video presentations of the overall themes on the USCCB website. Here are responses to some frequently asked related questions.

Briefly, how does the Catholic Church approach these elections?

It is important to remember that there is a duty to vote based on responsibilities rooted in our freedoms. As in other things, these freedoms are served best by informed, correct consciences. Our ordained clergy and others who publicly, formally represent the Church may certainly talk about the issues and not candidates individually. Political public issues are fair topics of conversation, but it is improper to use Church facilities and personnel for partisan advocacy or denigration.

Are there special issues central to contemporary people of faith?

Respect for and protection of human life from conception to natural death is of highest importance, especially after *Roe vs. Wade* opened a still-widening allowance for abortion on demand. Individual states have laws permitting physician-assisted euthanasia. When the value of individual human lives is undermined, other human and social goods are vulnerable. We cannot be neutral in our teachings and actions where lives are unjustifiably threatened.

Can a Catholic legitimately be concerned about other issues while certain laws make some lives directly vulnerable?

The USCCB document and videos referenced above offer examples of other concerns. Those of us in direct contact with men and women in military service know the price of war and have interest in development and diplomacy. Catholic morals and social teachings also address, but are not limited to, accessible and affordable health care, the integrity of marriage between a man and a woman, care of the poor, and abolition of the death penalty.

How can I vote with a clear conscience if parties or candidates don't always uphold moral values that I think are nonnegotiable?

Yes, both the question and our responses are complex. In our country, we mostly vote on candidates, not specific proposals like we do in school referendums.

It is one thing to look at candidates and parties. It is another to look at ourselves as citizens, at aspects of our personal principles and voting actions. Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) gave a precise teaching in his July 2004 letter:

"A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia. When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate."

Please note that this last phrase does not refer to outcomes, to “more good than evil” coming out of an action. It refers to proportionate and serious reasons, reflecting an aspect of the process of moral reasoning.

Shouldn't teaching about virtue and vice, good and evil, virtue and sin be free of philosophical language with technical distinctions?

On one hand, if plainness is our standard, then parts of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights do not measure up. On the other hand, American H.L. Mencken and others have penned variations of this saying: “Every complex problem has a solution that is simple, direct, plausible – and wrong.” St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out that as we descend from general principles to increasingly specific situations, solutions become more difficult. It is easy to say, ‘do good and avoid evil.’ The dilemmas we face in everyday life, even about diet and exercise, doing homework versus hanging with friends, mean that not every good thing can be held simultaneously.

*Any suggestions about staying educated about the crossroads of religious belief and public life?
Anything about all the talk about whether religious liberty is safe or shrinking in America?*

One way to grade ourselves is to ask how much money we spend on Catholic-based publications that care for the Church, and fact-driven outlets that treat ethical and religious matters. Read what fits with our perspective and read things that challenge our comfort zone. Over time, this kind of knowledge demands an expenditure of time and money. The question is whether our religious freedom and conscientious, informed citizenship are worth the investment. The answer should be yes.