



Election 2020: A Reflection by Minnesota Catholic Conference Staff

“In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.” (USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 13)

Early voting has begun in Minnesota. Voting is an important component of representative government. Those chosen for elected office are entrusted to make decisions that should protect the life and dignity of the human person from conception to natural death and advance the common good for all. To that end, we want to offer you clarity on the role of the Church during election cycles.

Politics, says Pope Francis, is one of the highest forms of charity because it serves the common good. We should be grateful that courageous people step forward, sometimes at great personal sacrifice, to run for public office. That said, it is a tremendous responsibility to be entrusted with the public good, and candidates for office should reflect on their role as one of service and not merely holding the reins of power. In other words, they are elected to do something, not to be someone.

Often, we are asked to clear up confusion about the right way to vote. In many cases, however, we must be candid that those requests are less interested in hearing us enunciate the principles of the Church’s social teaching, but instead they hope we shame their friends, family, and fellow parishioners into voting a certain way. The Church, however, is principled; she is not partisan.

Rooted in Catholic Social Doctrine

Under our nation’s political system, in which it is the people themselves who govern, and who advance their interests by forming political alliances, coalitions, and associations, it is prudent that clergy and those in Church leadership limit themselves to articulating the principles of the Church’s moral teaching (Catholic social doctrine), rather than aligning herself with political parties.

Catholic social doctrine is a set of moral facts—the theological architecture, mental model, or prism (depending on your preferred analogy) through which well-formed Catholics evaluate social and moral questions. The doctrine is the Church’s discernment of the best way for men and women to live together in peace and justice, consistent with God’s providential ordering of Creation. It is not a ready-made set of answers to every conceivable policy question, nor is it designed to be. Rather, it is a set of guiding principles, useful to all people of good will across time and place.

It is the responsibility of the laity (*Faithful Citizenship*, 16) to apply those principles in their everyday life—in their place of work, at home, in their use of natural resources, and especially in the voting booth when they evaluate candidates for offices as diverse as U.S. Senator and county commissioner. Those principles require their prudent application in a variety of life circumstances, and in a variety of electoral settings.

Because the responsibility of those offices (not every office holder, for example, deals with immigration or abortion) and the candidates themselves are so different, it would be imprudent for the Church as an institution

to opine on a whole host of candidates who are best evaluated by the people in those communities. That is the principle of subsidiarity in action—decisions should be made at the level most appropriate to properly address the concern.

Furthermore, clergy are pastors first and foremost. Though ordination does not render clergy incompetent to speak to specific policy issues or the suitability of certain candidates for office, it is wise for the clergy and their collaborators, as a general matter, to limit their political intervention to our teaching role—communicating the Church’s social doctrine and speaking to a limited range of legislative matters of great public importance. Again, it is up to the laity to be the salt and light in their communities.

Embracing a Presumption of Goodwill

As Catholics apply those principles, they will sometimes come to different conclusions about the best policy prescriptions or best candidates. Indeed, many Catholics have strong opinions about different candidates, and about which party will best improve the lives of Minnesotans.

During this presidential election, we have heard from Catholics who believe it inconceivable that a faithful Catholic could vote for Vice President Biden, and many others who feel that one cannot vote for President Trump. Other Catholics believe just as strongly that both Biden and Trump are unfit for office because of some of the troubling aspects of each’s character and positions. (cf. *Faithful Citizenship*, 36)

Such differences reflect the judgment of people of goodwill and should be treated as such by fellow Catholics. It pains us to see Catholics fostering division among the body of Christ by calling into question the faithfulness of others who vote differently. We are all responsible for our moral choices, including voting, and we must do so in accordance with a well-formed conscience. On the day of judgment, we will all have to answer for how we formed our conscience and informed our vote.

To say that there is difference of opinion about specific candidates does not mean that there is never a right answer about who will best advance the common good. Indeed, we have candidates for state and federal office during this election cycle who have said and threatened things that, on their face and in a vacuum, should be disqualifying. There may come a day when explicitly opposing a particular candidate or party is required of the Church to be a witness for Catholics and the whole community. But in the judgment of the bishops, that day has not yet come.

Though we are witnessing great injustices that move people, including some priests, to support candidates on both sides of the aisle, the Church must remain principled and not partisan, serving as a source of unity in a fragmented world and gathering in all peoples as our Lord did. During the elections, we must trust that well-formed Catholics guided by the Holy Spirit will choose the best candidate, or at least the lesser of two evils. As a general matter, the cost of the Church intervening and presenting herself as partisan is greater than any potential confusion regarding a particular candidate’s suitability for office.

Cultivating Detachment and Civic Friendship

And that leads to an important point: the importance of detachment from the results of the election. Whenever the results of this election are determined, roughly half the country and half the state will be disappointed. Many will be deeply upset. Here again, the Church must be a voice of reconciliation. We can disagree, but we need not be disagreeable.

For the republic to stay together, we must see ourselves as friends and not as enemies. That has become increasingly difficult, but the Church can and should be a model to the whole community of both legitimate diversity and reconciliation.

Being Christ to one another should be our priority. We are Catholics first and foremost, not Americans of one political stripe or another. We should see all people through that lens and treat them accordingly. The citizenship to which we must be most faithful is to the City of God, not the city of man.

Doing so is made easier by recognizing that politics cannot save us. We have one savior, and it is not an elected official or any group of them. It is Jesus Christ. Any time spent around legislators should help foster the detachment we propose—they are a cross-section of the population and suffer from original sin like the rest of us. “Put not your trust in princes . . .” (Psalm 146).

Ultimately, it is vital that the Church and her clergy be able to transcend the partisan divide so that they can render judgment and critique on all parties and policies. Endorsing candidates or directing people to avoid one party or another endangers the Church’s ability to reach all people with the Gospel and foster holiness in their lives.

Holiness is indeed the best antidote to the troubled times in which we live. Imagine how many problems could be solved if more people sought to conform their lives to Christ and live by his Holy Spirit? Let it not be said that no saints emerged during this time. Grace surrounds us; it is up to us to respond.

Please know of our prayers for you as you work to form your conscience and inform your vote. We hope that this reflection has offered clarity on the respective roles of clergy and laity during the election, as well as the importance of nurturing detachment from electoral results. We must keep our eyes fixed on loving God and our neighbor, thus fulfilling our responsibility as citizens of the heavenly city.