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BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE IN A PLURALISTIC DEMOCRACY

CURRENT POLLING suggests that American Catholics break right down the middle on their support for one or the other candidate of the two major parties in this November's election. Both the election itself and the Catholic vote are too close to call. Interestingly, recent commentary in the British Catholic press claims that the US election is too close to call because the Catholic vote is too close to call. This ought not to surprise us, as one-in-four voters self-identifies as Catholic. Nonetheless, when it come to practicing Catholics, that is, those who attend Mass on Sundays, who remember that there are such things as Holy Days of Obligation, who fast during Lent, who pray daily, and who observe the Precepts of the Church, the number of voters is much smaller indeed – less half the total that self-identifies as Catholic.

If the teaching of the Church with regard to the Right to Life does not swing this particular ballot, it will indicate more the collapse of long-term moral formation and catechesis on the part of the Church than a failure of this year's strategies for messaging or politicking. The truth is, Catholics could swing every single election, if they were not so dismally divided by misinformation and naive commitment to partisan politics. If Catholics were to vote as a block, based on the priorities of the clear moral teaching of the Church, not only would we have reversed *Roe v Wade* by now, but we would have begun seriously and fruitfully to address the host of other social problems deriving from poverty, inequity, war, violence, corruption and apathy that Gospel values compel us to care about. Instead, the potential for concrete social good coming from a unified Catholic vote has been completely wrecked by a *de facto* divide-and-conquer policy which is part and parcel of partisan politics in a two-party system.

The first most important thing for Catholics to do is to detach themselves emotionally from partisan commitments as such. The platforms of any political party change from year to year, but the moral ground of the Gospel never changes. Let's start there.

+ *Pax et bonum*,
Friar Francisco Nahoe OFM Conv
23 September 2012

Catholics and the Coming Election – Part 2

LAST WEEK, I wrote about the *de facto* divide-and-conquer technique that has been used to nullify the social force for good of a united Catholic vote in America and I suggested that this is a permanent feature of partisan politics in a two-party system. If I am correct, this means that it will always be counterproductive for the Catholic to identify too closely with any political party. Instead, we should think of ourselves as a voting commodity in the marketplace of the pluralistic democracy. Thus, a political party, any political party, should have to compete vigorously for Catholic votes. If political parties want the support of Catholic voters, then they should be prepared to advocate and defend, rather than denigrate and attack, Catholic moral values as they are authentically proposed by the Church.

But aren't all social values more or less of equal importance? To put it bluntly, no, they're not. Some issues of their very nature outweigh even aggregates or clusters of other matters. Firstly, the dignity of human life, from conception to natural death must be the highest value in the political calculus. If it is not, then what possibly could be? Economic wellbeing? Healthcare? Security? What are those other things for, if not to preserve and defend life? Secondly, nothing more gravely or fundamentally abuses the dignity of human life than abortion. No political party or individual politician can claim authentically to value human dignity through funding for anti-poverty programs or providing universal healthcare while, at the same time, defending the willful destruction of human beings *in utero*.

But, some may object, isn't this obsessive, single-issue voting? No, it isn't. The Right to Life is not a single issue among many issues. It is rather a foundational issue. The very term *single-issue voting* is a slur against the Catholic voter who values human life and dignity above every political matter. Without making the eradication of abortion our highest priority, we will never successfully address subsidiary problems of poverty, violence and lack of healthcare, because we will not have affirmed the centrality of human life as the wellspring from which all other human and civil rights flow. The US Catholic Bishops put it this way: *The failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community.* This is sage advice, both for Catholic politicians and for Catholic voters to heed.

+ *Pax et bonum,*
Friar Francisco Nahoe OFM Conv
30 September 2012

Catholics and the Coming Election – Part 3

CATHOLICS ARE ADMONISHED to vote according to their conscience. But what does it mean to exercise one's conscience in the sphere of political life? Well, first of all, let me answer by saying what it does not mean. The exercise of conscience is not simply a matter of the individual voter expressing a preferential option for one candidate or one party. Conscience is not the same as individual preference. If that were the case, then it would be perfectly legitimate to cast a vote on the basis of prejudices or emotions or any other arbitrary influence that may individuate us. The exercise of conscience is never a matter of deciding what works best for me. Rather, the exercise of conscience is first and foremost an exercise of reason.

Conscience takes into account objective moral truth, like the Commandments, and applies sound principles to uphold that moral truth while sorting out the particular issues of the day. A moral conscience may potentially err without loss of dignity, but certain fundamental principles always hold true: (1) One may never do evil so that good may result from it; (2) Whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them; and (3) it is never right to do anything that causes another to sin (Catechism 1789). Thus, when the Catholic bishops admonish the faithful to follow their conscience, they are never saying, "do whatever you think is best." Rather, they are saying, "start with the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church, use carefully reasoned judgment, and vote in a way consistent with the principles of moral reasoning articulated above."

For too long, a significant number of Catholics (approximately 57% of Catholic voters) have either misunderstood or ignored what the Church teaches regarding the exercise of conscience. They've taken it as a free pass on the abortion issue. Then, having neutered the Right to Life as a factor in voting, they've been split right down the middle on the rest of the political spectrum, thus rendering impotent what could otherwise be an awesome and consistent force for good in America.

+ *Pax et bonum*,
Friar Francisco Nahoe OFM Conv
7 October 2012

Catholics and the Coming Election – Part 4

IN TODAY'S FIRST READING (Wisdom 7:7-11), we hear these words: *I prayed, and prudence was given me; I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.* This text from the Book of Wisdom underscores a vitally important dimension of our own preparation for next month's election: prayer. In order to discern effectively, we must pray. Only then will prudence be given; only then will the spirit of wisdom come. Prudence, of course, is vital.

Saint Thomas Aquinas reveres prudence, for it is the virtue that allows us to judge correctly what is right and what is wrong in any given situation. If we mistake an evil action for good one, then we would not be exercising prudence, we be showing a lack of it. Prudence applies universal knowledge to a particular case, and so demonstrates how right reason functions in matters of action. Prudence allows one to do what is good because it is good. Thus, for one to act prudently, he must have both knowledge and rightness of desire. Finally, prudence requires knowledge of both general moral principles and of a particular situation or set of circumstances.

Putting this week's discourse on prudence together with last week's reflection on conscience, I believe we can now specify that in order for the Catholic voter's conscience to act rightly, we must possess prudence and be willing to exercise it. There are many reasons that the exercise of conscience receives such strong emphasis in Catholic social teaching. One of them is quite simple. The Magisterium of Church could not possibly review every imaginable political or social scenario, every possible ballot measure or potential candidate for political office in the world and make definitive pronouncements about them. Instead, the Church seeks to form the conscience of believers so that they may prudently exercise their well-formed conscience in the context of the pluralistic democracy in which they themselves live.

Voting, then, is precisely a matter of applying general moral principles to the specific sociopolitical conditions within which the voter lives and about which the voter is expected to be informed. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the moral principles we start with do not pop out of thin air, but derive from two complementary sources: the exercise of reason and the doctrine of the Church.

+ *Pax et bonum,*
Friar Francisco Nahoe OFM Conv
14 October 2012

Catholics and the Coming Election – Part 5

THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS has clearly stated the following: *Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods. A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate's opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference... to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity* (USCCB, *Faithful Citizenship* 2011).

So, let's talk turkey. May a Catholic, in good conscience, vote for a candidate because that candidate supports abortion, euthanasia, and gay marriage? **The answer is no, no and no.** To do so would make the Catholic voter complicit in those moral evils.

Now, a second, distinct, but related, question: May a Catholic, in good conscience, vote for a candidate who happens also to support abortion, euthanasia, or gay marriage, even though those are not the reasons that the Catholic would vote for that candidate? **The answer is still no**, unless certain conditions obtain, an example of which I will discuss below.

Suppose there are two publicly pro-choice candidates running against one another in a particular race without other candidates. One candidate absolutely opposes any kinds of restrictions on abortion whatsoever. The other candidate at least favors parental notification and opposes third-trimester abortions. A Catholic could, in good conscience, vote for the latter candidate, in spite of that candidate's pro-choice stance. In such a case, the Catholic voter does not impair his conscience or cooperate with an intrinsic evil. On the contrary, in the absence of any option for a vote against the evil of abortion, the Catholic voter may nonetheless vote in favor of two policies that at least restrict access to abortion and will certainly reduce the actual number of abortions.

Such is not the case, however, when there is a clear and unambiguous distinction between one candidate who favors abortion and another who opposes it. A Catholic cannot, in conscience, vote for a candidate who supports an intrinsic evil in such a case.

+ *Pax et bonum*,
Friar Francisco Nahoe OFM Conv
21 October 2012

THIS SUMMER, during the period of the national conventions of the two major political parties, much ado was made of the exclusion and later inclusion of a single passing reference to God in the national platform of one of those parties. Some may consider the publicity generated by this affair a mere tempest in a teapot, but I think it was, in fact, a brilliantly executed diversionary tactic designed to draw attention away from two intrinsic moral evils embedded in that same party's official platform.

The first intrinsic evil is the party's demand for access to abortion regardless of the ability to pay (which also means, by the way, that it is OK, in principle, to require either tax-payers or insurance premium-payers to cover someone else's abortions). The second intrinsic evil is the party's commitment to repeal the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, signed into law by President Clinton, which defines marriage as the legal union of one man and one woman.

To be sure, the opposing party has troubling elements in its official platform as well, but however dubious one may regard such policies, indeed, however much one may actively oppose them, they do not in fact commit the opposing party to any intrinsically immoral positions. While that does not mean that the Catholic voter is allowed to be indifferent with regard to issues that involve prudential decisions, it certainly does mean that one party has officially committed itself to moral evils and the other party has not.

Still, that a pretty big deal, isn't it? In my mind, it is a matter of staggering significance, especially since I, as a non-partisan, have nonetheless to find my moral and political way in an electoral system dominated by only two parties. For nearly twenty years now, I have been a non-partisan precisely because I could not continue as a member of a party that committed itself officially to intrinsic moral evils and I could not bring myself to join the party opposite with which I continue to have so many ideological differences. But not joining a party does not mean that I don't vote, it just means that I have to think more carefully about whom and what to vote for. Choosing whom to vote for in such circumstances is often distressing, but it is never really difficult. Once you've eliminated the possibility of cooperating with intrinsic moral evils, then there are only two choices: (1) a non-impactive vote or (2) a vote for the party or candidate that has not committed itself officially to intrinsic moral evils and even opposes them.