

THE ISSUE THAT MATTERS MOST

Catholics, Voting, and Abortion

Not all political issues are equal. They vary in importance for many reasons. For instance, they may deal with subjects that are more serious or less serious, more urgent or less urgent; or they may demand action that is relatively clear-cut or more debatable by people of good will.

For one example, in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, legal slavery was an issue so serious and so urgent that, we can all agree today, it could be addressed in only one way: complete abolition.

Abortion is the most serious and urgent social issue of our day.

No voter of that time who chose a candidate based on whether he believed human beings could be legally bought, sold, and forced to labor would be considered too “single-issue” today. That’s because slavery was a *preeminent* issue: the issue before and above all others.

In our day, in this upcoming election, there is an issue equally serious and no less urgent: abortion, the legal killing of unborn children in the womb. More than sixty million unborn children have been killed by abortion in the U.S. since its nationwide legalization in 1973, and nearly a million more continue to be killed every year. That’s why the United States Conference of Catholic Bish-

ops calls it “our preeminent priority” as faithful citizens.

Of course, abortion is hardly the only issue or even the only serious issue for Catholic voters to think about. Many people point out that there are even other “life issues” in the political world: health care, immigration, and criminal justice, for instance. All those issues and many others deserve careful consideration, and Catholics should scrutinize politicians’ positions to see which ones most closely follow Catholic teaching and practical reason.

But abortion is not merely one “life issue” on a menu of other, equally important ones, for two reasons.

First, because of the incomparable gravity and scope of abortion. It is the *direct killing of innocent human beings*—and not just any human beings but the most powerless and vulnerable human beings of all, the ones

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we should most try to protect. This legal murder is not something that happens just a handful of times each year but claims more than 2,000 victims a *day*. Nothing in our American political status quo is more evil, more unjustifiable, and more irredeemable than the regime of legal abortion.

Second, because as with slavery there is only one final goal for dealing with this evil: ending it completely as soon as possible. With most other issues, the matter isn’t so clear-cut.

Yes, we all should want to help the poor and the stranger, to promote public health and human dignity, and accomplish many other worthy social goals. But good people of all political persuasions are free to disagree

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about the best specific policies—like tax rates, welfare programs, education reforms, and so on—for doing so. In making these *prudential judgments*, we can even agree on compromises between competing goods when both sides are partly right.

For a Catholic, though—indeed, for any honest person who values human life—abortion is different. The total abolition of abortion, even if achieved in stages, is the one specific, non-negotiable objective. There’s no long-term compromise solution.

That’s because abortion is what’s called an *intrinsic evil*. This means that no good motive or circumstances can justify it and no just society can tolerate it. We wouldn’t be satisfied with laws that permitted other grave intrinsic evils like rape or racism in

some circumstances, and the same goes for abortion.

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But what about the claim that the way to reduce abortion is not to make it illegal but to address its “root causes”—the social and economic conditions that may lead women to seek abortions in the first place?

It makes sense to vote for candidates and policies that we think will materially improve people’s lives, especially the lives of women facing crisis pregnancies. But we should do this in addition to, not in place of, advancing laws that secure the fundamental right to life for all people, including the unborn. All other human rights and goods depend on this right.

This is why the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* says that

THE RIGHT TO LIFE PRECEDES ALL SOCIAL SOLUTIONS.

the right to life “is the first among all rights and the condition for all other rights” (553). And why Pope Francis insists that abortion “undermines the foundations of the construction of justice, compromising the proper solution of *any other* human and social issue.”²

Thus, any attempt to curb abortion through social or economic policies—or through education to change hearts and minds—will be undermined if we don’t also work

for laws that defend the right to life. Given a choice, then, no Catholic should support a candidate or policy that claims to reduce abortion’s root causes against one that promotes legal protection for the unborn.

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Elections matter! When we step into a voting booth in November (or drop an envelope in the mail), we engage in an important moral act. We make ourselves agents of social justice, cooperators in the governing decisions of our elected officials. To ensure that our cooperation is morally good and in keeping with Catholic teaching, **here are four rules for Catholic voters:**

Rule 1: We may never directly vote for, or even publicly promote, laws or propositions whose goal is to maintain or increase access to abortion. This is called *formal cooperation with evil*, and it is a serious sin.

Rule 2: We may never vote for a candidate *because* that candidate supports legal abortion. This, too, amounts to formal cooperation with, and a shared responsibility for, all the things that politician does to further the grave evil of abortion.

Rule 3: Given the choice of a viable pro-life candidate, we may never vote for a candidate who supports legal abortion just because we agree with him on a less-important issue or because we like his personality better. This fails to give abortion that pre-

eminent status that the Church says it deserves.

Rule 4: If all the viable candidates for an office promote legal abortion, we may vote for the candidate whose views, as a whole, represent the “lesser of two evils.” This does not formally cooperate with the evil of abortion but seeks to lessen it as much as realistically possible.

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From the first moment of his existence,” says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “a human being must be recognized as having the

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rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life” (2270). For Catholics involved in political life, from the holders of highest office to every ordinary citizen casting a ballot, there is a serious duty to make legal protection of that right the very highest priority.

We take up this duty in obedience to and out of love for Jesus Christ, who promised us that whatever we do for the least of our fellow human beings, we do for Him (Matt. 25:40).

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

² Address to Italian pro-life leaders, February 2, 2019.

