

ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL

Four years ago, on the eve of the last presidential election, I wrote a letter to you in which I talked about the challenges that Catholics were facing in that election. Recently, when I went back to look at that letter, I couldn't help but be aware that very little has changed over those four years. We are still faced with deciding between two candidates, neither one of whom embraces the full range of issues that comprise Catholic Social Teaching. So, allow me to share that letter with you again. I have made some minor changes, but only a few. Here it is.

October 13, 2024

Dear Friends,

I want to address head-on a misperception that is very much out there in Catholic circles, and it's this: the notion that Catholics really have no choice when it comes to voting in this presidential election. I understand the claim and where it's coming from, but it is simply not true. What is true – and what needs to be acknowledged right up front – is that, when it comes to all of the serious moral issues that make up the body of what is called Catholic Social Teaching – and there are many – neither of the two major party candidates for President is completely in step with the Catholic Church. For that reason, every Catholic voter has to do some serious study and some serious soul-searching – study that involves learning about Catholic Social Teaching in all its breadth, depth, and complexity; soul-searching that involves the delicate work of conscience which, in the end, is the only path to making an enlightened choice.

And trust me, there is a choice and anyone who says otherwise either misunderstands Catholic teaching, is misrepresenting it, or both.

Let me clarify something else. Despite impressions given – sometimes intentionally, sometimes not – the Catholic Church does not endorse candidates for public office. It must not. The Church respects the right and the duty of each of its members to study the issues and to make an informed, conscience-driven decision about which candidate to vote for. This becomes difficult when, as is the case with the upcoming election, neither candidate nor political party can make the claim to be “pro-life” in the full, rich sense in which the Church understands that term. To be “pro-life” means to care about the life of the unborn in the womb, the newly born, the elderly, the poor, the homeless, the refugee, the person on death row, and every other human being. To be pro-life includes a commitment to uprooting the terrible scourge of racism which is tearing our nation apart. It also means a commitment to abolishing weapons of mass destruction, as well as a commitment to caring for the earth, our common home. Some people – many of them Catholic – are convinced that to be “pro-life” means one thing and one thing only: to be opposed to abortion. They are mistaken. Abortion is indeed important but some words of Pope Francis are instructive here:

Our defense of the innocent unborn...needs to be clear, firm, and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life which is always sacred and demands love for each person regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 2018)

Pope Francis makes the point clear. And in a recent interview he strongly advocated for one other 'life' issue: the plight of migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, many of them fleeing for their lives from war, various forms of oppression, and dire economic situations.

The point is clear: a conscientious Catholic cannot be a 'single issue voter.'

We are preparing to vote during a dark and difficult time in our nation's history. It seems that so many of the things we hold dear — our sense of being one nation under God, our seeking of the common good together, our sense of common purpose, our commitment to common decency, the value we put on truth over falsehood, love over hatred, service over selfishness, tolerance over bigotry, patriotism over nationalism — these and so many things that have always been at the heart of what makes America truly great — have been gravely compromised.

Along with civility, dialogue, and a willingness to meet halfway, respect has all but disappeared from the public square and from public discourse. As a nation, we seem to have forgotten the very meaning of the word 'respect.' In the cacophony of partisan political name-calling, in the too-often rancorous and acrimonious debate over who we want to be as a people and a nation — who we want to invite to the table, and what we want our place in the world to be — we who call ourselves Catholic need to return to the basics of Catholic Social Teaching, to an abiding respect for each and every human life without exception.

I sometimes find myself wondering what Jesus would say to us if he were to take the pulpit some Sunday, but it's actually a question I'm able to answer rather easily. He would speak the same words to us that he spoke to his contemporaries. That's because societies change and so do political challenges and situations, but the message of Jesus doesn't change. Jesus would challenge us today in the same way he did the people he preached to in the synagogue of Nazareth and along the shores of the Lake of Galilee. And what is that challenge? It's to put the little ones first: the poor, the poor in spirit, the meek, the lowly, the persecuted, the ones who hunger for justice and righteousness. It's to let the poor lead us out of ourselves and lead us to God. That's the challenge of Jesus, the upside-down logic of the gospel, and we believers ignore it at our peril.

So, my friends, if we want to know how to begin to heal our nation, how to treat one another, how to re-set our priorities — how even to vote — we need to go no farther than the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the very backbone of Catholic moral

and social teaching in all its rich complexity. And I know, the separation of Church and State is written into the fabric of our Constitution, but Christian believers don't need to blur the line between Church and State in order to bring about societal change. All that needs to happen is for us to change: for us to let the gospel of Jesus Christ wake us up to the world around us, recharge our moral batteries, and inform our way of thinking.

As Christians formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have an unbeatable recipe for the healing of our nation and a clear direction for how to vote. It's not one issue, it's many issues, and it's not what's good for me, it's the common good. For well over a century now, this has been the Church's teaching. It's a teaching that has grown and expanded in response to changing societal realities and it will continue to, and it's also a teaching that refuses to let itself be hijacked by one political party or another. Our Christian faith must come first and shape our political engagements – not the other way around. Deep reflection on Catholic Social Teaching will make us clear-sighted as to the strengths as well as the shortcomings of whatever political party we may espouse, and give us courage to challenge our leaders – including the ones we vote for.

Politics have their place and so do political parties, but the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – with its broad embrace of 'the least, the last, and the lost' – will always be the decisive factor when it comes to how a Christian forms his or her conscience, and how a Christian exercises the sacred duty of voting responsibly.

May Jesus Christ and his Gospel inspire and challenge each of us as we prepare to cast our vote in this election that holds such importance for the future of our democracy.



Father Michael G. Ryan

Resources for further reading

- Visit <https://www.stjames-cathedral.org/Outreach/cst.aspx> for a compendium of resources about Catholic Social Teaching and Faithful Citizenship
- The Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching. <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>
- Faithful Citizenship. This statement represents the US Bishops' guidance for Catholics in the exercise of their rights and duties as participants in our democracy. <https://www.usccb.org/offices/justice-peace-human-development/forming-consciences-faithful-citizenship>