

Can Catholics Vote for Pro-choice Politicians? **by Philip St. Romain, M.S., D. Min.**

Top U.S. Catholic pro-life priests: “No Catholic Can Vote for Joe Biden.”

This was the headline of an article promoted on Facebook by a Catholic priest I know, with quotes from several priests associated with the group, Priests for Life. Their main point was that Presidential candidate Biden’s support for abortion rights and several other issues were at such significant odds with Catholic teaching as to rule him out for moral reasons as a candidate to oppose President Trump in the 2020 election. Later, we learned that one of these priests, Fr. Frank Pavone, was closely aligned with the Trump campaign, and had been asked to resign from that role by Church authorities, but that’s another kind of topic for another day.

I decided to post a comment, responding to this article, noting that I disagreed with Biden on abortion, but Catholics were not one-issue voters. We were free to vote for Biden and other pro-choice politicians after due deliberation, but not *because* they were pro-choice. Furthermore, Democrats are in line with Catholic teachings on many issues, so “please let’s not perpetuate this idea that abortion alone should determine how Catholics vote,” I concluded.

What happened next surprised me: extremely nasty comments to the effect that I was pro-abortion, uncaring about life, and “not a real Catholic.” When I explained that my point was based on teachings by the Catholic bishops, it did not matter. Counter-points quoting documents from bishops and popes were lobbed at me, some of them clipping their quotes to exclude parts of sentences and paragraphs that carefully explicated a nuanced case for making a wider evaluation of candidates, and voting according to one’s conscience.

I also noted that I had served as the Family Life Director for the Wichita Diocese from 1991-97, and had engaged in debates against pro-choice ministers and proponents in person and online for many years. *It didn’t matter!* For the priests in question and participants in the discussion, “real,” true-blue Catholics were obliged to vote against Biden. Essentially, they said we are to be one-issue voters, except in cases where there was no distinction in positions regarding abortion. President Trump is considered the pro-life, anti-abortion option; VP Biden is pro-choice, pro-abortion who must be opposed..

Another Clarifying Encounter

This one happened shortly before the 2016 election. I was discussing the election with a Catholic friend (“John”) who is successful in business, and he seemed to have a good grasp on the strengths and weaknesses of both candidates, Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton. While out on a drive together, I asked him if he had a favorite, and our conversation went something like this.

“I think Clinton is more qualified and would make a better President all-round,” he said, “but I can’t vote for her because of abortion.”

“Really?” I responded. “Who told you that?”

“I already talked to my priest about it and he told me that when there was a choice between a pro-life and pro-choice candidate, Catholics had to vote for the one that is pro-life?”

“Had to?”

“That’s what he said,” John noted, becoming quiet, as though hoping the subject would change.

I wanted to learn more, however, as this man was a salt-of-the-earth Catholic, and if this is how he thought about things, many others must feel the same way.

“So, would you hire Trump to work anywhere in your business?” I asked. “He’s supposedly a successful business man.”

“No way!” John said.

“Because?”

After pausing a short while, he noted that Trump displayed a number of serious character defects that would have disqualified him from employment.

Flabbergasted, I inquired: “But it’s OK for him to hold down the most powerful position in the world, with enormous influence on how the country is run and how we get along with other nations?”

John didn’t reply, and I hesitated, but pushed ahead.

“All those reasons you just gave for not hiring him are good reasons to not vote for him, either, John. The bishops teach that we can weigh those kinds of reasons against the evil of abortion and make up our own minds about who to vote for. I can send you the document they wrote about that for you to show your priest if you want, or . . .”

“Can we just talk about something else?” he snapped.

So we did.

I’m fairly sure he voted for Trump, which is fine — his perfect right! What I’m not sure of, however, is how much he was persuaded to do so because of the distorted guidance given by his parish priest.

But why would his priest and the ones I mentioned at the beginning of this work be so adamant about voting against candidates who favor abortion rights? Our next section reflects on this question.

Catholic Teaching on Abortion

Ask anyone who pays attention to what Catholics care about most when it comes to choosing political candidates and their first response will likely be “abortion.” It’s been that way for so many years that I wonder if even faithful Catholics know that we have a broad range of teachings on social issues, ranging from immigration, capital punishment, the economy, and even climate change (a priority for Pope Francis). These are all issues that affect the common good; they are “life” topics. But abortion is given priority over all of these, and there’s a reason why.

Catholic teaching is that human life is a gift from God, to be valued and safeguarded from conception to death. *Abortion pertains to the willful destruction of unborn human life*, so it is in direct violation of that basic life principle. By the time a woman usually realizes she is pregnant, the life growing in her womb is most likely three weeks or more into its development. It is a new human male or female organism, and if given the proper developmental environment, it will have an opportunity to realize its potential. In this sense, even the three-week-old embryo is the same as any of us who are already born: *we are all human organisms with a future before us*. Abortion robs that unborn individual of its future, and in this sense, it’s comparable to murder, which is also the intentional destruction of life. In the case of the unborn, however, they are innocent of any wrongdoing, while people who are murdered have often given serious offense to those who kill them (which is no justification for their act, of course).

Abortion isn’t a completely random act, however, with no context to account for it. Often, the women who seek to abort are feeling desperate, even hopeless. The pregnancy they seek to terminate was “unplanned” and is “unwanted,” perhaps an unwelcome “surprise” from an episode of irresponsible sexual activity, or, worse, a consequence of pressure or even coercion. For example, thousands of abortions in the U.S. each year are terminating pregnancies from rape or incest.

Ideally, the new life growing in a woman is welcomed by her and her lover, by her family, and by the human community, but such an ideal is seldom present when abortion is chosen. The woman often feels that even acknowledging the existence of her unborn child would bring devastating rejections that she could not cope with, sometimes with financial hardship as an added burden. So the central, pivotal issue with regard to abortion is simply that, for whatever reason, *the pregnancy is unwanted*. The reality of unwanted pregnancies will not go away if abortion is ever outlawed.

Abortion opponents rightly note that the unborn are completely innocent of whatever circumstances brought about the conception in the first place. This new life has a right to its future, and this supersedes whatever difficulties the mother might face in bringing it to term. Its right to live also takes priority over any rights a woman might claim to do as she wishes with her own body. A fetus is a new individual organism, not an organ or appendage belonging to the mother.

In Catholic teaching, there are never extenuating circumstances that justify abortion. There are cases called “double-effect” where a medical procedure undergone by the mother might result in the loss of her unborn child, and these are considered morally acceptable, for the intent is to help the mother. That’s not the same as an abortion, however.

The challenge to the human community thus becomes one of engaging women who are considering abortion to encourage them to carry their unborn child to term while exploring options for the ongoing care of this child after birth — including keeping the child with continuing support (especially from the father), or adoption. These are issues that pro-life and pro-choice proponents can agree on, only the latter also believe abortion should be available as an option for women as well. Catholic teaching does not recognize any moral legitimacy to a right to abortion, however, and opposes any movement to broaden such a right in society.

What Does It Mean to be Pro-Choice?

As clear as the Catholic judgment against abortion articulated above might seem to be, it is not shared by the majority of Americans (nor among the people of many other countries). A 2019 NPR/Marist poll indicated the 75% of Americans want to keep abortion legal, but with restrictions. Even among Republicans, only 31% indicated that *Roe v. Wade* (the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion) should be overturned, their assumption being that this would put an end to abortion (we will talk about this more later). The main point here is that we Catholics participate in a pluralistic society, where people hold a variety of beliefs and opinions about topics that are at odds with some of ours. We are often a minority position in a society, and this reality has implications for politicians, including Catholic ones.

It’s significant that pretty much everyone agrees that deliberately killing an infant is wrong, and that anyone who does so should be held legally accountable. When it comes to the unborn, public opinion has been inclined to leave the decision to the mother, although many states do ban abortions on fetuses 24 weeks or older, when viability outside the womb is possible. This might seem an arbitrary principle, for even then, an infant will die without care shortly after birth. Viability is a relative term, but it seems that *being-born* and the ability to survive *if-born* constitute an ethical boundary in the public mind.

The pro-choice position, then, advocates for the availability of abortion for women who make the choice to do so up to the legally permissible age in the state where she lives. Generally, pro-choice advocates also oppose restrictions that complicate this availability — waiting periods, for example, or viewing a sonogram of the fetus and discussing it with a doctor. What does not follow from this position is that pro-choicers want women to have abortions. They generally do not. Even strong advocates for abortion rights like Presidents Clinton and Obama stated that they wanted abortions to be safe, legal and rare. Abortions did go down during their Presidencies, a trend that has continued for years. *So it’s wrong to say*

that those who are pro-choice are pro-abortion, as their critics often state. They are not. What they are is pro-abortion-rights, which is different.

This nuance is granted by many pro-lifers, who nonetheless state that advocating for the availability of abortion is itself a great evil. The Catholic bishops are one such group. As point #34 in their voting guide, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (henceforth: *FCFC*) notes:

A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, *if the voter's intent is to support that position* (emphasis added). In such cases, a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil.

As we shall see, the bishops do go on to nuance this very strong statement, but there it is, challenging the legitimacy of the pro-choice position as one acceptable for Catholics to embrace. Politicians who favor abortion rights are thus considered by many to be in clear violation of Church teaching, which is why priests and other Catholic teachers tell Catholics that it is not permissible to cast a vote for a candidate like Joe Biden. Indeed, many advocate that Biden, a Catholic, be denied the Sacraments, which is precisely what happened at a Catholic parish in South Carolina in October 2019.

A Few Practical Considerations

As firm and uncompromising as Catholic teaching opposing abortion rights really is, the bishops in their *FCFC* voter's guide never come right out and say that abortion should be the *only issue* that Catholics care about in elections. Quite the contrary! For example, point #2 notes that:

... we are a country pledged to pursue "liberty and justice for all," but we are too often divided across lines of race, ethnicity, and economic inequality. We are a nation of immigrants, struggling to address the challenges of many new immigrants in our midst. We are a society built on the strength of our families, called to defend marriage and offer moral and economic supports for family life. We are a powerful nation in a violent world, confronting terror and trying to build a safer, more just, more peaceful world. We are an affluent society where too many live in poverty and lack health care and other necessities of life. We are part of a global community charged with being good stewards of the earth's environment, what Pope Francis calls "our common home," which is being threatened.

That's just a summary statement. One could point to a number of social teachings that reflect in-depth on all of the topics mentioned here, and many more. A problem, however, is that the emphasis has been so intensely focused on abortion and other sexuality issues that most Catholics don't know much about the broad concern of Catholic bishops and other teachers for a broader spectrum of life issues, which is most unfortunate.

Here, a dilemma naturally presents itself: *what if a politician clearly opposed abortion, but was in direct opposition to Church teaching on all these other life issues?* One could readily find quotes from various documents by the bishops pointing out that abortion should take priority, but how far should that principle be pushed? Abortion isn't the only "intrinsically evil act" going on in the world. Lying and kidnapping children, for example, are also labeled such, as are many other misdeeds perpetuated by governments and their leaders.

Then there are legal issues, like the fact that *Roe v. Wade* has been around almost 50 years, and *abortion rights cannot be denied by the states*. What can a politician really do to change that? At the local level, he or she might be able to help enact zoning laws to discourage the building of an abortion clinic, but it will likely go up somewhere else. A U.S. President or Senator has something to say about who gets appointed to the U. S. Supreme Court, but then has no influence on how she or he will rule on life issues. The hope all these years has been that Republican politicians will either curb abortion rights, or reverse *Roe v. Wade* altogether through their appointment of SCOTUS judges, but abortion is still legal, and its availability is still favored by a majority of Americans. A politician can push against that sentiment only so far without guaranteeing an election loss and thus forfeiting the opportunity to do other good.

But, for the sake of argument, let us say the strategy of electing pro-life Presidents who appoint SCOTUS judges finally does succeed in reversing *Roe v. Wade*? Would that be the end of abortion?

Depending on how the ruling is stated, probably not. What would most likely happen would be that abortion policy would revert to the states. Some would probably prohibit it altogether, others would allow it with restrictions, and a good number that would allow for even more permissive abortion rights than currently exists nationwide. *Abortion would not go away if Roe v. Wade were abolished*, so even the grand, national strategy of working for its reversal would not completely succeed in eradicating abortion. It's possible that the U. S. Congress could settle the matter through the passage of a law or a Constitutional Amendment, but neither of these is likely. As noted before, public support for a drastic change in the status quo doesn't seem to be there to back up a legislative push.

But, granting again, for the sake of argument, that somehow a legal intervention putting an end to abortion does succeed, this would still not address the issue of unwanted pregnancies, which is why women seek abortions in the first place. One can assume that the number of abortions would go down, adoptions would go up, and people would be more careful to avoid pregnancy — all very good! There would still be thousands of cases where women would be seeking to abort, however. This is where the stories of illegal "back-alley" abortion providers move from scare tactic to probability. Unsafe, do-it-yourself approaches are also likely to increase. One of the reasons why pro-choice politicians advocate for legal abortion is to safeguard against those kinds of desperate options.

Practically speaking, then, there's really not much any politician can do to completely rid the land of abortion. Also, there's only the most tenuous causal connection between a pro-

choice politician's position and a woman's choice to actually have an abortion. He or she is no more responsible for her act than a gun-rights advocate is for the murders committed by citizens using guns. Of course, the fewer the guns, and the fewer the opportunities to purchase them, then the fewer gun-related killings there would be. Political positions count for something; they can effect real change, but only within the constraints of existing laws. The right to own certain types of guns is settled law, for now, as is *Roe v. Wade*, and politicians advocating one way or another are not directly responsible for the acts of citizens. In the cases of abortion or a gun-related murder, politicians are one or more steps causally removed from the act. Voters who back pro-choice candidates are an additional step removed from the act.

Pro-Choice Candidate as “Lesser to Two Evils” and Other Nuances

It might seem like splitting hairs, here, but we should note that not all pro-choice candidates are alike (this goes for anti-abortion ones, too). What if, for example, a pro-choice candidate agreed that abortion was evil, but also thought that abortion rights should not be overturned because that would open the door to unsafe abortions? What if, in addition, he or she strongly and personally spoke out against abortion, encouraging alternatives like adoption, for example? This is not merely a theoretical example; there are such people out there. Such a candidate would not be “favoring a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act,” but would be encouraging the opposite. This person would no doubt be considered “pro-choice” by anti-abortionists, but would also share much in common with them as well. Is the consideration of such a candidate completely out-of-bounds because they favor abortion rights?

Another example: suppose a moderate pro-choice candidate was running against someone who promised to do everything possible to end abortion, but who was also a person of questionable moral character, lying incessantly to the public, engaging in acts of corruption, and at odds with Catholic teachings on immigration, health care, environmental protection, concern for the poor, and other issues? Is a Catholic voter free to choose the pro-choice candidate as a “lesser of two evils?”

As we might expect, there is also a common sense, pastorally-inclined dimension to the bishops' teaching on abortion and voting that nuances the kind of inflexible, absolutist statements that are more often publicized. Here, for example, is #35 from FCFC:

There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.

In other words, a Catholic could reasonably decide that the negative baggage and policy priorities that came with the anti-abortion candidate outweighed the wrong of the pro-choice candidate's position on abortion rights. This was the situation I tried to explore with

John in the story I shared earlier, only his priest had apparently never read point #35 and so had assured John that a Catholic could not vote for Clinton under any circumstances.

The bishops, here, are probably taking their cues from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now retired Pope, Benedict XVI), who headed up the Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2004, when the following ruling was given concerning politicians receiving Holy Communion:

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 favour of abortion and/or euthanasia, *but votes for that candidate for other reasons* (emphasis added), it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons. (*Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion: General Principles*. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 2004.)

“Proportionate reasons” is a term signifying an approach to moral decision-making that navigates between an objective, act-oriented approach (deontological) and a pragmatic, utilitarian approach. It acknowledges that an act like voting for a pro-choice candidate need not be determined by the objective evil of an act like abortion alone, but by also evaluating the overall possibilities for good or evil ensuing from such a vote. It also allows for considering the kinds of pragmatic concerns about remote causality mentioned above.

Another possibility mentioned by the bishops is found #36 of *FCFC*.

When all candidates hold a position that promotes an intrinsically evil act, the conscientious voter faces a dilemma. The voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods. In the end, *this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching* (emphasis added).

It follows, then, that Catholics are not really supposed to be one-issue voters. Abortion is an exceptionally important consideration, but it is not the only one to pay attention to.

Conscience

What bothered me most about the two incidents I shared at the beginning of this work was the way the strong stand taken by the priests mentioned seemed to have a binding influence on the consciences of those I was trying to dialogue with. My friend, John, definitely did not feel free to vote for Clinton, and those defending the Priests for Life position thought that they were clearly articulating the duty of all Catholics, everywhere.

It is my opinion that statements by priests that so strongly endorse or condemn a political candidate in such a manner similar to the examples I shared are guilty of misusing their authority — even a kind of spiritual abuse! Granted, they can make their case using Catholic teachings, but what they neglect to mention is the duty of Catholics to form their

own consciences regarding the issues at stake and decide for themselves who they will vote for. These priests and other Catholic teachers are in a position of spiritual power in relation to lay people, so they need to be careful about how they use this influence. When they willingly or even ignorantly use their influence to bind the consciences of others to suit their own convictions, they are in the wrong!

The authority of the Catholic bishops supersedes that of any priest or national pro-life organization. What they say about voting in conscience goes against what the priests mentioned above are doing. In *FCFC #7*, they note:

. . . we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.

What, then, do we mean by conscience, anyway? And how can one properly form one's conscience?

Let's look again to official Church teaching. No. 1778 of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that:

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right,

Conscience prompts us to do one thing, or avoid another, with the moral implications of the act in mind — what good or evil might be its consequences. Voting is an act, and so if we are attentive to our conscience, we can be moved to vote one way or another, depending on what good we hope to advance and/or what evil avert. Conscience must be properly formed, however. We can't just go along with what we hear going on in the culture; for important decisions, we need to do much more than that.

Again, it is *FCFC* that shows us the way in #18.

The formation of conscience includes several elements. First, there is a desire to embrace goodness and truth. For Catholics, this begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is also important to examine the facts and background information about various choices. Finally, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. Catholics must also understand that if they fail to form their consciences in the light of the truths of the faith and the moral teachings of the Church, they can make erroneous judgments.

Prayer and study; I also think dialogue with other Christians is helpful as well. In going through this process, one gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to influence one's judgment through the inner faculty of conscience. In the case of possibly voting for a pro-choice

candidate, we note what the Church teaches about abortion, and we consider other positions held by this candidate and his or her opposition. We study Church teachings on immigration, health care, the economy, climate change and so forth. Where do the candidates stand? What might be the consequences in these areas if one candidate wins versus another? This all takes time, but responsible Catholic citizenship requires it of us.

As a consequence, we might come to a sense of the rightness of voting for one particular candidate, perhaps even the one who is pro-choice. This sense of rightness and even peace is a sign of a good conscience. As #1790 of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes, "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself." That's a very strong statement, but it recognizes that following one's conscience is how we are moved to do the will of God. That's why it's especially wrong, too, for any priest or Catholic teacher to tell someone how to vote, especially if that person has done the hard work of forming his or her conscience.

Summary

There is no question that the Catholic hierarchy teaches that abortion is gravely wrong, and that there are no circumstances that justify deliberately terminating an unborn human life. Neither is there any doubt that the bishops consider any kind of encouragement or willing collusion with abortion to be wrong as well.

It's much too simplistic, however, for Catholics to simply inquire of the position on abortion held by political candidates and then let that be the only basis of their voting preferences. Granted, this position may well predict other values and policies the voter would favor (or not), but it also somewhat excuses one from the hard work of inquiring more into the character and positions of our leaders. Responsible citizenship is no trivial matter; democratic forms of government cannot thrive when citizens neglect their civic duty to carefully evaluate their political leaders.

As this reflection has demonstrated, Catholic citizenship entails weighing the evil of abortion and its support by pro-choice candidates against the possible good this candidate can accomplish in other areas over-and-against the possible good and evil outcomes ensuing from the positions of other candidates. The moral character and competency of politicians needs to be considered as well.

It is possible and even likely, then, that there will be times when, after a period of prayer and study, a Catholic will be persuaded in his or her conscience to vote for a pro-choice candidate. This possibility is affirmed by the bishops, provided the Catholic is not voting for this candidate *because they are pro-choice*, but for reasons that the voter considers sufficient to counter any evil that might ensue from the pro-choice candidate's support for abortion rights. Practical considerations such as we reviewed in this work are part of this evaluation.

It is my hope that this work can be of assistance in conscience formation regarding the possibility of Catholics voting for pro-choice candidates. Unto this end, I am also providing an additional spreadsheet to help you evaluate a broader spectrum of issues. It will not be comprehensive, and parts might not even be relevant to the election under consideration. But once you see how I set it up, you can make your own set of issues and use this approach to help you become more aware of the candidates' positions and your evaluations of them.

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- see <http://philstromain.com> for more information.
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Awareness Guide for Voters

For each candidate, give a grade for each of the criteria listed, then add up points for each section, for the total work. This will help you to evaluate the issues at stake. Add/revise issues, as needed.

+3 very strongly approve; +2 strongly approve; +1 approve

0 = unsure, or neither approve or disapprove

- 3 very strongly disapprove; -2 strongly disapprove; - 1 disapprove

Issue	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
A. Personal Character Honesty, truthfulness, respect for others, etc.			
B. Competence Sanity, intelligence, experience			
C. Healthcare Affordable, pre-existing conditions, for all			
D. Pandemic preparedness Research, maintain PPE stockpile, policies			
E. Abortion and related issues Roe v. Wade, euthanasia; stem cells; birth control			
F. LGBT rights Issues of discrimination, marriage, inclusion			
G. Immigration Border regulation, DACA, citizenship			
H. Environment and ecology Climate change; regulations; drilling, parks			
I. Budget and Deficit Fair taxation, deficit spending			
J. Foreign Policy Support allies, promote peace, healthy State Dept			
K. Military Refocus for need, cyber warfare, deployments			
L. Gun rights Assault weapons, background checks, safety			
M. Free speech Hate speech issues, maintain free press			
N. Race relations Minorities in admin., discrimination issues			
TOTAL NET POINTS: subtract negative from positive and record for each candidate			

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