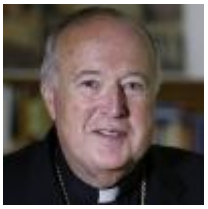
Opinion

News



San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy and other bishops from California, Hawaii and Nevada leave in procession after concelebrating Mass at the Basilica of St. Mary Major while making their "ad limina" visits in Rome Jan. 30. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Robert McElroy

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Editor's note: San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy delivered the following talk Feb. 6 at the Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture at the University of San Diego. Entitled, "Conscience, Candidates and Discipleship in Voting," McElroy's talk looks at the moral act of voting in original and incisive ways and lays the groundwork for development of "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," the U.S. bishops' quadrennial document on voting.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis points powerfully to the vocation of faith-filled citizenship:

> *An authentic faith … always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all of its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. If indeed 'the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics,' the Church 'cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.*"

It is primarily through the votes of Catholic women and men, rooted in conscience and in faith that the Church enters into the just ordering of society and the state. And it is primarily in voting for specific candidates for office that believers as citizens have the greatest opportunity to leave the earth better than we found it.

Yet comparatively little attention has been paid in Catholic moral theology to the moral nature and structure of the act of voting for specific candidates. Much focus is placed on individual policy issues and their moral implications in Catholic social teaching. If the primary role of citizens were to vote on specific issues, this might be sufficient. But a vote for individual candidates inevitably encapsulates a wide range of policy options reaching out into the future, as well as varying capacities and intentions among the candidates. Where does Catholic theology begin in assisting believers to carry out their role of ennobling the world?

Pope Francis answers this question by proposing starkly that our political lives must be seen as an essential element of our personal call to holiness. This certainly means that our political actions must reflect and flow from our Catholic faith. But Francis is demanding much more. He proposes that we can only fulfill our vocation as faithful citizens if we come to see in the very toxicity of our political culture at the current moment a call for deeper conversion to Jesus Christ. It is not enough for us to ignore the corrosive elements of political life in the United States, nor even to navigate our role as citizens and voters without succumbing to the tribalism that bisects our society. We are called in our lives as citizens and believers to be missionaries of dialogue and civility in a moment that values neither. And this requires deep spiritual reflection, courage and judgment. It demands a Christlike dedication to seeking the truth no matter where it may lie, and defining our politics and voting in the light of the Gospel.

Salient issues of Catholic social teaching

In this task, the principles of Catholic social teaching as they are applied to the core political issues of American society today provide a rich and sacred source of guidance in weighing the policy proposals of competing candidates.

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The comprehensiveness of Catholic social teaching points toward an understanding of justice, life and peace that refuses to be confined to narrow boxes or relegated to partisan categories. At the same time, this very comprehensiveness makes the prioritization of Catholic teachings difficult for voters. As the 2020 election cycle begins, at least ten salient goals emerge from the Gospel and the long tradition of Catholic faith:

- The promotion of a culture and legal structures that protect the life of unborn children.
- The reversal of the climate change that threatens the future of humanity and particularly devastates the poor and the marginalized.
- Policies that safeguard the rights of immigrants and refugees in a moment of great intolerance.
- Laws that protect the aged, the ill, and the disabled from the lure and the scourge of euthanasia and assisted suicide.

- Vigorous opposition to racism in every form, both through cultural transformation and legal structures.
- The provision of work and the protection of workers' rights across America.
- Systematic efforts to fight poverty and egregious inequalities of wealth.
- Policies that promote marriage and family, which are so essential for society.
- Substantial movement toward universal nuclear disarmament.
- The protection of religious liberty.

Frequently in discussions of the application of Catholic social teaching to voting, the question is raised whether one issue has a unique priority among all of the other issues in its claim upon believers in the current election cycle. Some have categorized abortion in that way. Others, climate change. This question deserves deeper scrutiny.

More than 750,000 unborn children are directly killed in the United States every year. At one time there was bipartisan support for erecting policies that made abortion rare. Now that commitment has been eviscerated in the Democratic Party in a capitulation to notions of privacy that simply block out the human identity and rights of unborn children. Even in an age when sonograms testify with the eloquence of truth and life itself that children in the womb are genuinely our brothers and sisters, our daughters and sons, the annihilation of their humanity in perception and in fact continues. Catholic social teaching has consistently demanded that there be legal protections for the unborn, as they are the most vulnerable and victimized of humanity. But we are rapidly moving toward becoming a nation split in two: with half of our country moving toward laws safeguarding the unborn and the other half of our country adopting ever more extreme laws that allow the killing of children on the verge of birth. The passage of the New York abortion law this past year was a marker of America's repudiation of the most basic principles of human life. It is for all of these reasons that so many in the Church consider abortion to be the preeminent political imperative at stake in 2020.



Young women hold signs while participating in the Global Climate Strike in New York City Sept. 20, 2019. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

At the same time there is a clear international scientific consensus that climate change caused by the use of fossil fuels and other human activities poses an existential threat to the very future of humanity and that air pollution resulting from fossil fuels is already a major cause of premature death on our planet. Existing trajectories of pollutants being placed in the atmosphere by human activity, if unchecked, will raise the temperature of the earth in the coming decades, generating catastrophic rises in human exposure to deadly heat, devastating rises in water levels and massive exposure to a series of perilous viruses. In addition, there will be severe widespread famines, draughts and massive dislocations of peoples that will cause untold deaths, human suffering and violent conflict. The devastating fires in Australia are a sign of what lies before us, and a testimony that, on so many levels, our current pollution of the earth is stealing the future from coming generations. Because the trajectory of danger unleashed by fossil fuels is increasing so rapidly, the next ten years are critical to staunching the threat to our planet. The

United States, which was once a leader in this effort, has in the current Administration become the leader in resisting efforts to combat climate change and in denying its existence. As a consequence, the survival of the planet, which is the prerequisite for all human life, is at risk.

Against the backdrop of these two monumental threats to human life, how can one evaluate the competing claims that either abortion or climate change should be uniquely preeminent in Catholic social teaching regarding the formation of Americans as citizens and believers? Four points should be considered.

1. There is no mandate in universal Catholic social teaching that gives a categorical priority to either of these issues as uniquely determinative of the common good.
2. The death toll from abortion is more immediate, but the long-term death toll from unchecked climate change is larger and threatens the very future of humanity.
3. Both abortion and the environment are core life issues in Catholic teaching.
4. The designation of either of these issues as the preeminent question in Catholic social teaching at this time in the United States will inevitably be hijacked by partisan forces to propose that Catholics have an overriding duty to vote for candidates that espouse that position. Recent electoral history shows this to be a certainty.

Racial injustice is on the rise, buttressed by a new language and symbolism that seeks to advance the evil of white nationalism and create structures of racial prejudice for a new generation.

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The question of preeminence is further clouded by a third compelling issue our country faces in this election cycle — the culture of exclusion that has grown so dramatically in our nation during the last three years. Racial injustice is on the rise, buttressed by a new language and symbolism that seeks to advance the evil of white nationalism and create structures of racial prejudice for a new generation.

Immigrants and refugees, who have been at the core of America's history as a source of vitality and richness, are portrayed as a cause for fear and suspicion in our

society rather than of solidarity. Members of the Muslim community are widely characterized as aliens whose religion automatically means they cannot be trusted, while incidents of vile and pervasive anti-Semitism are on the rise.

This growing culture of exclusion does not emerge as a specific policy question in our contemporary national politics; rather, it seeps into all of the most salient questions of life and dignity that our society faces and corrodes each one in turn.

The culture of exclusion has unleashed a poison of animosity against immigrants that paralyzes our politics so deeply that we cannot even find a pathway to protect young men and women who came to this nation as children and now thirst to be citizens of the only land they have ever known. The deadly imprint of racist structures and legacies on our criminal justice system magnifies fears and resentments among African American and Hispanic families and further imperils the men and women who give their lives to law enforcement. Racial and ethnic disparities in education, health, job availability and housing which are rooted in our nation's historic culture of exclusion dramatically propel the breakdown of marriage and family life. And inequalities of wealth and income make it all but impossible to overcome the enduring challenges of work and poverty in our nation.

On virtually every question of human life and dignity the growing culture of exclusion in our nation reinforces and propels cleavages that are highly destructive to all of the goals that lie at the center of Catholic social teaching. For this reason, many faith-filled Catholics believe that in this election cycle the most compelling issue that arises from Catholic social teaching for American voters is the need to repudiate radically this culture of exclusion before it spreads further and leads to new levels of moral paralysis and division.

Seen against this background of abortion, climate change and the culture of exclusion, it is clear that the faith-filled voter who seeks to be guided by Catholic social teaching is confronted by compelling moral claims that cut across the partisan and cultural divides of our nation. The pathway from these cross-cutting moral claims to decisions on particular candidates is not a direct and singular one in Catholic teaching, rooted in one issue. For this reason, the drive to label a single issue preeminent distorts the call to authentic discipleship in voting rather than advancing it.



Pro-life advocates stand outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington Jan. 22, the anniversary of the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion across the nation. (CNS/Reuters/Sarah Silbiger)

Opportunity, competence and character

In America today a faith-filled voter is called to approach voting from a stance of bridge-building and healing for our nation. Such a voter is also called to integrate into his voting decisions the major salient elements of Catholic teaching that touch upon the political issues of our day, understanding that these teachings vary in priority and claim, but are united in their orientation to the common good.

But voting for candidates ultimately involves choosing a *candidate* for public office, not a stance, nor a specific teaching of the Church. And for this reason, faithful voting involves careful consideration of the specific ability of a particular candidate to actually advance the common good. In making this assessment, opportunity, competence and character all come into play.

The question of opportunity is pivotal in voting discipleship. What are the elements of human life and dignity that a specific candidate will actually be able to advance given the scope of the office she is seeking, the crucial issues that are likely to face her during her term, and the policy positions she embraces? What coalitions will she be likely to join and advance? In short, what capacity will she have, in the specific political context she will face, to transform law and public policy in key sectors in order to promote the common good?

Competence is also a central metric for faith-filled voters to consider. It does little good to elect a saint who echoes Catholic social teaching on every issue if that candidate does not have the competence to carry out his duties effectively and thereby enhance the common good. Faith-filled voters must assess the intelligence, human relations skills, mastery of policy and intuitive insights that each candidate brings to bear, for voting discipleship seeks results, not merely aspirations.

Finally, because our nation is in a moment of political division and degradation in its public life, character represents a particularly compelling criterion for faithful voting in 2020. In the United States, political leaders, especially at the highest levels, imprint their character in pivotal ways upon the entire political culture, and thus on society itself. Today, leaders in government embrace corrosive tactics and language, fostering division rather than unity. The notion of truth itself has lost its footing in our public debate. Collegiality has been discarded. Principles are merely justifications for partisan actions, to be abandoned when those principles no longer favor a partisan advantage. There is a fundamental lack of political courage in the land.

> In the end, it is the candidate who is on the ballot, not a specific issue.
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For all these reasons, character is an even more essential element in effective faith-filled voting at the present moment, and another reason why faith-filled voting cannot be simply reduced to a series of competing social justice teachings.

In the end, it is the candidate who is on the ballot, not a specific issue. The faith-filled voter is asked to make the complex judgment: which candidate will be likely to best advance the common good through his office in the particular political context

he will face? Such a decision embraces the planes of principle and character, competence and capacity. And for the faithful voter, the very complexity of this moral judgment demands a recourse to the voice of God which lies deep within each of us — our conscience.

Conscience and prudence

For the disciple of Jesus Christ, voting is a sacred action. In the words of *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, it touches "the crossroads where Christian life and conscience come into contact with the real world." For this reason, it cannot be reduced to a logical set of propositions that yield a predetermined result in the selection of candidates.

Some theologians have sought to find such a logic of deduction in the concept of intrinsic evil. Catholic theology holds that some actions, such as abortion or research on human embryos, are intrinsically evil; that is they are always and everywhere wrong. Because of this some Catholic leaders have asserted that candidates who seek laws opposing intrinsically evil actions automatically have a primary claim to political support in the Catholic conscience.



Pope Francis greets San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy during a meeting with bishops from California, Hawaii and Nevada on their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican Jan. 27. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The problem with this approach is that while the criterion of intrinsic evil identifies specific human acts that can never be justified, this criterion is not a measure of the relative gravity of the evil in particular human or political actions. Telling a lie is intrinsically evil, while escalating a nuclear arms race is not. But it is wrongheaded to propose that telling a lie to constituents should count more in the calculus of faithful voting than a candidate's plans to initiate a destabilizing nuclear weapons program. Similarly, contraception is intrinsically evil in Catholic moral theology, while actions which destroy the environment generally are not. But it is a far greater moral evil for our country to abandon the Paris Climate Accord than to provide contraceptives in federal health centers. What these examples point out is that Catholic social teaching cannot be reduced to a deductivist model when it comes to voting to safeguard the life and dignity of the human person.

How, then does the faith-filled voter choose candidates in a way that integrates the tenets of Catholic social teaching, recognizes the role that competence, character and capacity play in the real world of governing, and preserves a stance of building unity within society?

The Church locates this pathway in the virtue of prudence. In the words of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it. … It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience." In Catholic social teaching, prudence is called "the charioteer of the virtues"; it brings into balance all of the virtues of the Christian moral life to provide a singularly incisive moral perspective for the disciple confronting ethically complex problems. It is at the heart of the workings of conscience.

> Prudential judgment is not a secondary or deficient mode of discernment in the Christian conscience. It is the primary mode.
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Some Catholic commentators on voting have in recent years portrayed prudential judgment as having a deficient dignity and grasp of the truth. They say that there is a categorical claim to support candidates who legislatively oppose intrinsic evils, but only a secondary claim for candidates whose proposals rest on prudential judgment for their moral discernment.

To say this is to miss the central element of Catholic teaching about conscience and prudence. As the Catechism notes, "With the help (prudence), we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to be avoided."

Prudential judgment is not a secondary or deficient mode of discernment in the Christian conscience. It is the primary mode.

This is certainly true in voting for candidates for public office. The constellation of substantial moral elements that are relevant to deciding which candidate is most likely to advance the common good during her time in office can only be morally comprehended through the virtue of prudence. There cannot be faith-filled Catholic voting without the virtue of prudence, exercised within the sanctity of well-formed conscience.

In the closing remarks of his address to Congress in 2015, Pope Francis said a nation is great when it defends liberty as Abraham Lincoln did, when it seeks equality as Martin Luther King did, and when it strives for justice for the oppressed as Dorothy Day did. Let us pray that our nation moves toward such greatness in this election year, and that faith-filled prudent disciples are leading the way.

[Robert McElroy is the sixth bishop of San Diego, installed in 2015.]

This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.