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It may surprise many Catholic voters to know that church teaching does not prohibit a Catholic from voting for a pro-choice candidate.

In fact, the teaching of Pope Francis, Pope Benedict XVI, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops all permit a Catholic to do so.

Of course, Catholic moral teaching holds that abortion is the unjust taking of an innocent life. On that basis, the leadership of the church opposes the legalization of abortion and supports laws that protect the class of unborn persons. But Catholic teaching also provides ways for voters to evaluate candidates on the basis of abortion — and of other serious issues like the pandemic or racism. No Catholic is bound to vote on the basis of abortion alone.

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It's important to point this out because of a fever pitch of false statements on the part of many claiming to speak for Catholicism. So, for instance, former University of Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz, in his recent speech for the Republican National Convention, stated his own pro-life convictions and said that Joe Biden was a "Catholic in name only." Holtz appeared to have in mind here the Catholic Biden's stance of being personally opposed to abortion but pro-choice. Holtz also incorrectly appeared to assume that one's position on the legality of abortion is the singular measure of being a Catholic or not. Actually, in the tradition of the church, baptism is.

In addition to a popular figure like Holtz, some Catholic media have also made incorrect statements on abortion. For instance, a "catechism" (emphasis added because this false catechism does not accurately reflect Catholic teaching, as a catechism should) on the website of the popular Eternal Word Television Network states things in absolute if incorrect terms: "You do not have to vote for a person because he is pro-life. But you may not vote for any candidate who supports abortion rights."

Pope Francis has long signaled his disagreement with a selective Catholic emphasis on abortion, same-sex marriage and contraception. "It is not necessary to talk about these things all the time," he said in a noted 2013 interview shortly after his election

to the papacy. More recently, he re-affirmed the church's opposition to abortion while noting other issues of similar significance.

The "defense of the innocent unborn … needs to be clear, firm and passionate," he said in his 2018 apostolic exhortation, *Gaudate et Exsultate*. But after noting the sacredness of the lives at stake in abortion, he pointedly noted, "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."

The U.S. bishops' conference said in its key 2019 election-related document called "Faithful Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," that abortion was a "preeminent" issue. (In doing so, they departed from Francis' emphasis on the equality of issues, with abortion not being more important than other important issues.)

> Catholics should take abortion seriously but also consider the full range of serious issues at stake.
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But the U.S. bishops' conference also said that that voters should be guided by a method developed in 2004 by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI). In this way of thinking about voting, abortion is indeed of singular significance. But Ratzinger noted additional steps to take in deciding how to vote. One step is cautionary: A Catholic may not vote for a pro-choice politician if the intention of the voter is explicitly to support abortion.

A second step is more expansive: A Catholic should ask if there are serious reasons that could justify voting for a candidate who supports the legal right to abortion. Ratzinger used the term "proportionate" reasons. The U.S. bishops' conference uses the term "truly grave moral reasons." The idea here is that Catholics should take abortion seriously but also consider the full range of serious issues at stake. (In other words, for the sake of the common good, it's generally better not to vote on the basis of a single issue.) In this election, these issues certainly include the character of the candidates, the management of the pandemic, racism, the economy, climate change, immigration, domestic and international peace and more. For the sake of

what is thoughtfully considered in conscience to be such "proportionate" or "truly grave moral" reasons, a Catholic may vote for a candidate who is pro-choice.

Of course, Catholics will decide in their own consciences how they will vote (and the bishops say they are not telling Catholics how to vote). But it is important to note that Catholic teaching does not prohibit voting for a pro-choice candidate. Those who say otherwise are incorrect.

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