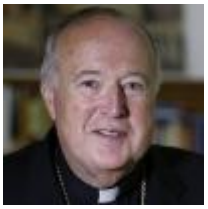
Opinion

News



Volunteers in Fort Wayne, Indiana, set up voting machines Oct. 5 for early voting. (CNS/Today's Catholic/Jodi Marlin)



by Robert McElroy

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Editor's note: *Bishop Robert McElroy delivered an address, "Voting in Faith, Rebuilding in Hope," Oct. 13 during a public Zoom-based webinar hosted by St. Mary's College, "Voting as an Authentic Disciple with Bishop McElroy," followed by a question-and-answer session. Below is the text of his speech.*

We stand poised upon the most important national election of the past 50 years. Our country is consumed by a threatening pandemic that has killed more than 200,000 people, infected our highest levels of government and wreaked havoc upon our economic life. Racial, ethnic and cultural divisions challenge our nation to reimagine and restructure the most fundamental elements of our identity as a people. The fires raging in the West are a visible sign of the fact that we are destroying our planet. The Supreme Court is engulfed in a bitterly partisan conflict that will influence the future of abortion law, health care, voting rights and protections for workers. And for the first time since the Civil War, there are widespread fears about our ability to hold fair national elections and carry out a peaceful transition of power.

How are we, as members of the Catholic community in the United States, called to discern our electoral choices in this turbulent year, so as to advance the common good and the dignity of the human person? The current party structures of the United States bifurcate Catholic social teaching, with each party embracing some essential elements of Catholic teaching while rejecting many others. Thus the faithful Catholic voter is automatically homeless in our political world, never feeling at peace with the specific constellations that her party has chosen to accept, and certainly never feeling at peace with the partisan tribalism in both Democratic and Republican cultures that deforms our politics and our nation. For every voter, political choice is a mixture of satisfaction and regret. For the faith-filled Catholic voter the regret is greatly magnified.

But given that we live in a real world that confronts us with limited choices in this political season, how should a Catholic voter discern the candidates that will most powerfully advance the dignity of the human person and the common good? This discernment must begin with an evaluation of the principles of Catholic social teaching applied to the current historical moment.

"Angels Unawares" by Timothy Schmalz seen on the campus of Catholic University of America

"Angels Unawares" by Timothy Schmalz seen on the campus of Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Sept. 27. The life-size sculpture, which depicts a group of migrants and refugees crowded on a boat, is a replica of the one Pope Francis unveiled in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican during the 2019 World Day of Migrants and Refugees. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Salient issues of Catholic social teaching

Catholic social teaching calls us to protect both the life of unborn children and the sustainability of our planet that is the prerequisite for all human life. It calls us to embrace immigrants and refugees as our sisters and brothers and to protect the elderly from the false lure of assisted suicide. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls for an utter rejection of racism and the death penalty. It calls for shelter, jobs and health care for the poor and the strengthening of marriage and family life. It calls us to reject war and foster peace.

Frequently in discussions of the application of Catholic social teaching to voting, the question is raised whether one specific issue is singularly determinative for voting in the current election cycle. Some have categorized abortion in that way. Others, climate change. Still other Americans see the central issue in the 2020 election as the ability to heal our culture of exclusion and racism so that we can truly become a unified nation with a coherent political community.

Each of these issues has a powerful moral claim upon the conscience of a faith-filled Catholic voter.

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, and many Catholics conclude that a comprehensive dedication to

protecting life in the womb is a pre-requisite for supporting any candidate for public office.

Simultaneously, 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, droughts and massive dislocations of peoples that will cause untold deaths, human suffering and violent conflict. This year's devastating fires are a prophetic 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 10 years are critical to staunching the threat to our planet. The United States, which was once a leader in this effort, has now become the leader in resisting efforts to combat climate change and in denying its existence. And the survival of the planet, which is the prerequisite for all human life, is at risk. For this reason, many Catholics are concluding that in fidelity to future generations they cannot support a candidate for national office who does not vigorously fight climate change.

A third central issue of Catholic social teaching in the current political moment lies in 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. The systemic victimization of African Americans and Hispanics by our criminal justice system has been crystalized in the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. 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. 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 injustice, moral paralysis and division in our nation.

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The difficult task of conscience for the faith-filled voter is to assess how these three issues should enter into the concrete decision to elect public officials in 2020. Each of these issues finds compelling roots in Catholic social teaching. Abortion constitutes the massive direct taking of human life and is rampant in our society. Decisions on climate change in the next four years will either irrevocably amplify or arrest our world's trajectory toward climate annihilation and the possible ending of all human life on this planet. A failure to address our historic national legacies of racism and ethnic prejudice will further destroy the unity that is necessary for our social, cultural and political systems to function effectively and justly.

How should a Catholic voter evaluate the claims put forth by many Catholic leaders that Church teaching demands that abortion, **or** climate change **or** rejecting racism is singularly determinative for faithful voting in the election of 2020?

It is important for members of the Catholic community to recognize that any such claim is as much a political assertion as a doctrinal one. For this type of claim inevitably rests upon a specific assessment of the entire range of realistic political opportunities to advance the common good in its totality at this moment in our history. And it is precisely in the contingent nature of such an assessment that the conclusions of bishops and the conclusions of faith-filled and well-informed laity are on equal footing in informing personal electoral choice.

Pope Francis has called us to frame the defense of human life and dignity in expansive terms and on many issues:

> Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, 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.

It falls to faith-filled Catholics in their own conscience to bring Catholic social teaching in its entirety to bear on their voting choices, to ask deeply and without partisanship or self-interest what opportunities to advance the common good are available in 2020, and which candidate will best advance the common good through her actions. There is no single issue which in Catholic teaching constitutes a magic bullet that determines a unitary option for faith-filled voting in 2020.

Residents of the Oakmont Gardens retirement community in Santa Rosa, California, use whee

Residents of the Oakmont Gardens retirement community in Santa Rosa, California, use wheeled walkers to carry some belongings as they are evacuated by bus during the fast-moving Shady Fire Sept. 28. (CNS/Reuters/Stephen Lam)

Leadership, competence and character

In America today, a faith-filled voter is 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, leadership, competence and character all come into play.

Particularly in the election of a president, leadership is a critical criterion for voting. Good leadership comes in many forms. It can be vigorous and rousing, moving forward in a clear direction. It can be inspiring and motivational. It can be healing and unifying. What form of leadership does the United States need at this moment of crisis in our national history?

Competence is also a central metric for faith-filled voters to consider. 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. Today we are enmeshed in a series of quagmires which will require competent leadership and the ability to discern competence in others.

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. 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.

For all these reasons, the personal qualities of the candidates we elect constitute a particularly central 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. The pandemic will be wrenching for every dimension of our national life for a long time to come, and the personal qualities of our president and congressional leadership will greatly impact whether the coming years are a time of increased suffering and division, or one of healing and unity.

In speaking about the personal qualities of candidates that are central to decision making for faithful voters, I feel compelled to address one very sad dimension of the election cycle we are witnessing — the public denial of candidates' identity as Catholics because of a specific policy position they have taken. Such denials are injurious because they reduce Catholic social teaching to a single issue. But they are offensive because they constitute an assault on the meaning of what it is to be Catholic. Being Catholic means having a grace-filled relationship with God. Being Catholic means loving the Church. Being Catholic means participating in the sacramental life of the Church. Being a Catholic means trying to transform the world by the light of the Gospel. To reduce that magnificent, multi-dimensional gift of God's love to a single question of public policy is repugnant and should have no place in public discourse.

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? What pressures will the candidate have to face in achieving his goals? How does the makeup of the legislative body affect what she can accomplish? What avenues of pursuing the common good will the political climate actually allow? Such questions embrace the planes of principle and character, competence and leadership. 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.

A woman in a mask carries a child in a mask on her back while toting a bag of groceries in Lo

A woman in a mask carries a child in a mask on her back while toting a bag of groceries in Los Angeles May 9. (CNS/Reuters/Patrick T. Fallon)

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 pre-determined 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 artificial contraception, 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.

One 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 absurd 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.

A second problem with the argument from intrinsic evil is that the framing of legislation is inescapably the realm of prudential judgment, not intrinsic evil. Thus, while a specific act of abortion is intrinsically evil, the formulation of individual laws regarding abortion is not. It is an imperative of conscience for Catholic disciples to seek legal protections for the unborn. But whether these protections take the form of sanctioning the doctor or the pregnant mother, whether those sanctions should be civil or criminal penalties, and the volatile issues pertaining to outlawing abortions arising from rape, incest and danger to the mother are all questions of deep

disagreement among advocates wholeheartedly devoted to the protection of unborn children. Like the issues of fighting poverty and addressing climate change, the issue of abortion in law and public policy is a realm where prudential judgment is essential and determinative. Thus the assertion so frequently heard in many Catholic political conversations that the public policy dimensions of poverty and climate change are questions of prudential judgment, while the public policy dimensions of abortion and marriage are not, is simply false.

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

By understanding the depth, beauty and wisdom of 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.

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.

It is morally legitimate for a Catholic, having integrated into her decision the teaching of the Church in its integrity and made her decision prayerfully out of a desire to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to conclude in conscience that she should vote to reelect President Trump. It is also morally legitimate for a Catholic, having integrated into his decision the teaching of the Church in its integrity and made his decision prayerfully out of a desire to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to conclude in conscience that he should vote to elect Vice President Biden. This is a decision which falls rightfully and fully to the individual and informed conscience of believers, and if exercised in this manner will be a moment of grace for the voter and for our nation.

Rebuilding our political culture: The call of *Fratelli Tutti*

In most presidential election years, the primary responsibility of faithful citizens is to exercise their right to vote, having discerned in their conscience the choices presented to them in the light of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church. But this year, there will be an additional and similarly paramount responsibility of faithful citizens which will occur after the election, in the imperative to transform and rebuild our broken political culture. It is impossible to imagine that the United States will emerge from this election not deeply scarred by the divisions of 2020. It is vital that we not simply lurch forward along the series of partisan, cultural and racial gulfs that surround us, attuned to media outlets that reinforce our prejudices, and submerging the Gospel of Jesus Christ to our self-interests and partisan delusions.

Earlier this month, on the feast of St. Francis, the pope issued an encyclical on social friendship, which can be the counterpoint to our current national trajectory that could rescue our society from its divisions along party and cultural lines. Pope Francis seizes upon the pandemic that consumes us and finds in the very isolation and suffering of these days a societal call to renewal and transformation:

> Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about appearances, has fallen away, revealing once more the ineluctable and blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another.

It is this blessed awareness which we as disciples of Jesus Christ must seek to recapture in our own life and bring into the public square, replacing the divisiveness that reigns at this present moment.

In his vision of social friendship Pope Francis proposes that we must bring a series of specific virtues into the heart of our culture. Three of these virtues constitute a pathway for the healing our nation's broken political culture.

Catholic Charities staff and volunteers in the Archdiocese of Washington distribute 500 groce

Catholic Charities staff and volunteers in the Archdiocese of Washington distribute 500 grocery boxes and 500 family meals in the parking lot of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception July 10, during the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

The virtue of compassion

The Parable of the Good Samaritan emphasizes the Samaritan's profound willingness to notice the suffering of the man beaten by the robbers, to enter into that suffering and to sacrifice greatly on his behalf. "The parable eloquently presents," the pope says, "the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild our wounded world. … The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others."

Our current political culture prevents us as a people from building such a community. It calls us to build walls around our compassion that correspond to our class and party, identifying with the suffering of the unborn child **or** the child separated at the border, with the suffering of those victimized by systemic racism **or** those victimized by street violence, with those suffering from Covid **or** small business owners who need reopening.

We as people of faith must demonstrate how our nation can be rebuilt by citizens who identify with the vulnerability of others precisely by refusing to channel our compassion and compassionate action along the lines of party and class. We must follow the example of the Good Samaritan who had no connection of faith or blood to the beaten man by the side of the road, who risked his own life by ministering to him when the robbers might still be near, who saw only human suffering, and that was enough.

Twelve years ago the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops undertook a study to identify how the gulf between "pro-life Catholics" and "justice-and-peace Catholics" could be bridged. The study, which reached deeply and broadly into the Catholic community, concluded that this bridge lay in the compassion for the vulnerable that united these two elements of Catholic teaching. We must bring this bridge piercingly into the political culture of our nation, refusing to tolerate or reinforce on any level the walls that seek to channel our compassion into competing political categories. For us as Americans, just as for the Good Samaritan, seeing human suffering in any form should be enough.

Bishop Jeffrey Monforton of Steubenville, Ohio, carries a monstrance during a "Unite Our Natio

Bishop Jeffrey Monforton of Steubenville, Ohio, carries a monstrance during a "Unite Our Nation" event to pray for healing and peace in the U.S. at Franciscan University of Steubenville Oct. 3. He was joined in the procession by over 175 students and

staff, local residents and other religious leaders. (CNS/Courtesy of Franciscan University of Steubenville)

The virtue of solidarity

If a comprehensive sense of compassion is the first foundation for the transformation of our political culture, solidarity is its complement. In the words of the *Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church*, "The principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become a part." What does it mean for us as Americans to become more deeply aware that we are debtors to the society of which we are a part?

It means a continual willingness to place the common good before our own "self-interest." It means recognizing the bonds which tie us to every man and woman and child in our own society and to the world as a whole. It means that exclusion and marginalization must be banished. It means empowering every sector of society and culture. It means that aside from every contribution we have made to the well-being of our nation, we have first been fundamentally graced by God and all of the sacrifices of prior generations.

Patriotism for an American does not arise from ties of blood. At its best, American patriotism is aspirational, not celebrational. It calls upon every generation to labor in solidarity to achieve, improve upon and broaden the principles set forth at the founding of our nation. It is a goal, not a possession.

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. This is the notion of greatness our nation should be pursuing. This is the vision of solidarity that we must bring to a political culture that has lost its way.

The virtue of dialogue

"Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another and to find common ground: All these things are summed up in the one word 'dialogue.' If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue." The starkness and the obvious truth of these words from *Fratelli Tutti*

remind us how impoverished and destructive our national political conversation has become. Instead of dialogue, we have parallel monologues, seeking not understanding and encounter, but merely to defend our opinions, reinforce our prejudices and convince ourselves that we have been right all along.

The redemption of our political culture cannot begin until a genuine toleration of and thirst for dialogue enters back into the public square. The depth of our current national crisis will not be addressed on a substantive level unless we as a society engage more deeply, honestly and openly with those with whom we disagree on important questions of culture, economics, partisanship and religious belief.

The pope has it right. "Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns." The Catholic witness in the public square during the coming months must nurture such dialogue by adopting a new tone of encounter in our statements, our priorities and our disagreements, especially in our disagreements. It is vital that we be less magisterial and more dialogical even on those issues on which our convictions are most profound.

We are called to be missionary disciples in a political culture that has lost its way in a moment of profound societal crisis. That discipleship lies in voting to advance the common good and the life and dignity of the human person. Even more important, it lies in recasting our politics with a vision of compassion, solidarity and dialogue. Our responsibility is clear. In the words of Martin Luther King, "there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but he must take it because his conscience tells him it is right." This is such a time. We must vote in faith and rebuild in hope to serve the nation that we love and the Gospel by which we are redeemed.

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

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