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The conscience of a Catholic voter

by Dennis McDaniel

VOTING AND HOLINESS: CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
By Nicholas Cafardi
Published by Paulist Press, $24.95

Though President Barack Obama won the Catholic vote in 2008, 2012 will not be as easy, either for him or for the Catholics who had supported him.

Obama?s health care overhaul and ensuing birth control provisions, his unwillingness to enforce the Defense of Marriage Act, and his refusal to end legal abortion all conflict with church teaching.

Can a Catholic still vote for Obama and remain holy? Or must the faithful Catholic opt for a candidate like Rick Santorum, whose positions on life issues better align with the hierarchy?

Catholic scholars address these questions in a new anthology, *Voting and Holiness*, edited by Nicholas Cafardi. Though each essay addresses distinctive issues regarding Catholic political participation, all agree that the faithful Catholic voter?s best guide is an informed conscience. With ?Questions for Further Reflection? appended to each essay, this book may act as a thought-provoking source for both individuals and discussion groups that wrestle with their consciences in this election cycle.

Cafardi?s opening essay on ?Voting and Holiness? establishes some of the collection?s key issues. Cafardi finds no holiness in right-wing demonizations or denials of Communion. Nor does he find holiness in demanding that the faithful vote against their consciences for a candidate simply because he or she vows to appoint a Supreme Court justice who opposes *Roe* v. *Wade*. Rather, we vote with holiness when we support candidates who promise to create social and economic conditions in which abortions become unnecessary.

Voting to end abortions is also addressed by Lisa Sowle Cahill?s essay, ?Voting and Living the Common Good.? Cahill distinguishes the simplicity of condemning abortion from the complexity of developing a political strategy to end abortion or of judging morally those candidates who support abortion rights. Like Cafardi, Cahill favors social programs that show as much concern for mothers as for their unborn children.

Even though Obama hasn?t worked actively to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*, Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier, a Dominican, in his essay ?Politics, Morality, and Original Sin,? argues that the president finds an interdenominational common ground in his 2009 speeches at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. Obama understands that our moral weakness due to original sin demands that we listen with understanding. Though Obama has not ended the evil of abortion, he has tried to diminish its effects by building policy based on dialogue.

Pursuing common ground would benefit the Catholic bishops? efforts to affect the political process, argues William D?Antonio in ?Catholic Bishops and the Electoral Process in American Politics.? In his recounting of American bishops? recent involvement in the electoral process, D?Antonio notes that while direct action has proven effective, the bishops? effort to influence the political process through lobbying and campaigning has been largely counterproductive.

Richard Gaillardetz?s essay, ?Prudential Judgment and Catholic Teaching,? argues that one?s vote should be guided by a prudential judgment that is informed by Catholic social teaching, that respects the dignity of human life, and is committed to the common good. A Catholic can vote for a candidate who supports abortion, so long as that abortion position is not the reason for the vote, and so long as the policies of that pro-choice candidate would best further the common good.

John Gehring?s essay, ?Not a Single Issue Church: Resurrecting the Catholic Social Justice Tradition,? also highlights this need to exercise discernment. Gehring argues that the church has done the most good when it has sought engagement rather than confrontation. He looks toward a coalition between Catholic progressives and both Catholic and evangelical moderates to exercise faith and reason for the purpose of social justice.

Faith and reason play a key role in Jesuit Fr. Gregory Kalscheur?s ?Conscience and Citizenship: The Primacy of Conscience for Catholics in Public Life.? The complexity of applying church teaching to specific public policy issues demands that faithful Catholics form and exercise their consciences, knowing that their conscience may err. Adherence to church teaching combined with prayerful discernment should lead to support for legislation that will reduce the incidence of abortion.

In ?Intrinsic Evil and Political Responsibility,? M. Cathleen Kaveny addresses how Catholics navigate the status of abortion as an ?intrinsic evil.? She argues that intrinsically evil acts may not be gravely evil, and gravely evil acts may not be intrinsically evil.

Hence, we are not obligated to vote for candidates merely because they oppose abortion if, for example, those same candidates support an unjust war.

But if Catholics support a candidate who supports an intrinsic evil, does their vote make them complicit in the evil of that candidate? Gerard Magill, in ?A Moral Compass for Cooperation with Wrongdoing,? argues that the principle of cooperation suggests that so long as one supports the candidate for other policies that promote the common good, one cooperates in only a ?licit material? way that does bring fault upon that voter.

The pro-life movement?s persuasive strategy is the target of Fr. Bryan Massingale?s ?The Parallel That Limps: The Rhetoric of Slavery in the Pro-Life Discourse of U.S. Bishops.? Massingale deplores the use of anti-slavery rhetoric, because history indicates that the Catholic church supported slavery and owned slaves; that pro-slavery arguments were not about personhood, but citizenship; and that the church was itself opposed the ideas of slavery and segregation, but cautioned against opposing these evils in practice.

Conservative rhetoric also concerns Vincent Miller in his essay, ?The Disappearing Common Good as a Challenge to Catholic Participation in Public Life: The Need for Catholicity and Prudence.? Conservatives have misled Catholics by arguing that they abandon their faith when they exercise prudential judgment. Right-wing rhetoric has tarnished the notion of the common good. Most effectively, the right has co-opted ?values? to cover only its prized issues. To recover their sense of the common good, Catholics cannot fear cooperation with evil, but must engage in the pursuit of the common good, guided by prudential judgment.

Cooperation with evil reemerges as a key consideration in Maureen O?Connell?s ?Can You Sin When You Vote?? Her title reflects what O?Connell sees as an antiquated Catholic theology that stressed personal salvation, prohibitive admonition, and avoidance of evil. O?Connell asks, ?Can we love when we vote?? -- that is, can voting foster a constructive bridge between spiritual and political lives? This new question reflects how Catholic theology over the past century has shifted its emphasis to social justice and community-building. Understanding ourselves as ?social? rather than as personal sinners should lead us humbly to recommit ourselves to building community, and this humility should make us acknowledge the weaknesses of all political positions. A well-formed conscience, focused on building community, should lead us in our voting.

Humility is a key theme in Sulpician Fr. Anthony Pogorelc?s essay, ?Lesson from the U.S. Bishops? Economic Pastoral Letter: Modeling the Way of Holiness.? The 1986 U.S. Bishop?s pastoral letter, ?Economic Justice for All,? asks Catholics to bring about greater economic justice and accountability to the common good. More important is the controversial compositional process of this letter, in which the writers humbly opened the drafts to the questions and suggestions of the community. This process models the dialogue and collaboration that should characterize Catholic involvement in the political process.

The establishment of dialogue between religion and politics is the topic of Stephen Schneck?s essay, ?President Kennedy and Archbishop Chaput: Religion and Faith in American Political Life.? Schneck finds that though John F. Kennedy?s 1960 Houston speech on religion fails to acknowledge the influence of faith on one?s conscience, Charles Chaput?s criticism of Kennedy?s speech oversimplifies the framers? debate over the role of religion. Kennedy?s speech does follow the Jeffersonian separationist argument, but can?t be seen as a deist rejection of religion in public life. If not in his speech or his personal life, many of Kennedy?s policies ideally represent this convergence of religious and political realms joining forces in pursuing the common good.

Finally, in ?How Would Jesus Vote? or the Politics of God?s Reign,? Terrence Tilley argues that the hybridity of our communities, ourselves and even our religious practices preclude any notion of a ?countercultural Catholicism.? Hence, our engagement must not confront, but reconcile. We are sinners, and our votes inevitably go to other sinners, but our votes best reflect holiness when they support those who work toward reconciliation and peace, regardless of their position on other issues.

Tilley echoes several other writers who call for constructive dialogue, between the church and the laity, bishops and presidents, conservatives and progressives: This is certainly what Jesus would want. By stressing that voting in a holy way demands a conscience informed by faith, this anthology can resolve many doubts that thoughtful Catholics may have as November approaches.

Unfortunately, as many of this book?s contributors contend, the dramatic appeals of conservative Catholics, from Santorum?s ?vomit? to Newt Gingrich?s doomsday prediction, may have already closed progressive Catholics out of the public square.

The only Catholics that politicians acknowledge are conservatives, and so by appeasing that faction (one that will never be reconciled to the Obama presidency) Obama and other politicians fail to give a fair hearing to other policies that may better pursue the common good. Let us hope that conscientious, well-informed Catholic voters prevail over those who feel that they do not have a choice.

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