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How does a Catholic choose who to vote for in November?

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The *Los Angeles Times* has an excellent article detailing Paul Ryan's Catholic faith as it relates to social issues such as abortion and social justice issues such as poverty. Catholics will no doubt be grappling with these issues as the November election draws near. The article specifically contrasts the Catholicism of Paul Ryan with that of Vice President Joe Biden. In so doing, the article also contrasts the divide between conservative and liberal Catholics. Fundamentally, the question becomes whether one should vote on the basis of social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage or social justice issues such as poverty and providing a safety net for the poor.

It is important to note that both Ryan and Biden are Catholic. This is true despite the fact that sometimes conservative and liberal Catholics act as if they are the only real Catholics. Often it is felt, again by both sides, that the hierarchy agrees with the Paul Ryan perspective and supports the idea that we need to be single-issue voters. In this view, abortion is the only issue that really matters. The nuns have served as a counter-balance to that thrust, focusing on social justice issues, and as a result have come under fire from the Vatican. Yet the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has itself questioned Paul Ryan's commitment to the poor in a statement issued last spring, when Congress was voting on Ryan's budget.

There can be no doubt, then, that both abortion and a preference for the poor are core elements of Catholic teaching. How does one resolve this "quandary" as a practicing Catholic? I think it's pretty clear that individual Catholics are going to resolve it in different ways. This is why Catholics do not vote as a bloc. Fortunately or unfortunately, the split will fall roughly along conservative and liberal lines. Those who believe that nothing but abortion matters will side with Paul Ryan's vision of Catholicism, and those who care about safeguards for the poor will side with the Joe Biden argument.

If you've been reading my blog in the past few weeks, you have little doubt which side of the divide I stand on. But I think of couple of points are important here. The only real danger for Catholics in this election is that one side of the argument demonizes the other. I believe the statement from our own bishops highlights the concerns that exist over Ryan's budget and his vision for the country. The church's position on abortion is well-known. As was mentioned in my last blog entry, we are all searching for the direction the Spirit chooses to take us.

The next few months hold many opportunities to argue about the merits of various policies. Paul Ryan's connection to Ayn Rand and the contrast with the Jesus of the Gospels comes to mind. Other issues -- such as the direction of our foreign policy, an energy policy and our approach to the environment -- also need to be considered. Most important, however, this debate needs to unfold without coercion or intimidation. Each Catholic as well as every other voter deserves the religious liberty to choose the candidate they believe holds the best promise for the future of America.

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