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Editorial: 'Intrinsically evil' canard is a deception

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Editorial

"Intrinsically evil" -- that perennial election year canard that is meant to tell us Catholics how to vote and whom to avoid -- has gotten much play this cycle. But it is truly a deception. So-called Catholic voter's guides that use intrinsic evil as the measuring stick to choose among a half-dozen issues as "nonnegotiables" are partisan distractions and should be ignored.

Catholics who bring with them a conservative political agenda -- and who have garnered the support of not a few bishops and other Catholic opinion leaders -- generally select these as nonnegotiable issues: abortion, embryonic stem cell research, cloning, gay marriage, and euthanasia. While this makes a tidy list, convenient for pamphlets stuck under car windshield wipers in church parking lots, we will dispute that they are "nonnegotiables," because they are in fact cherry-picked from long lists of actions that are intrinsically evil by church teaching.

Let's borrow a list from Pope John Paul II. Quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, he says that intrinsically evil acts are "any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat laborers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace ? and they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 80).

We might even add climate change to the list. After all, if the right to life is the most basic human right, then human-caused global warming threatening the entire life of the planet must be the ultimate evil.

"Wait, wait," the perpetrators of the intrinsically-evil canard will protest. "These are evil, but they can't be treated as all the same. For some of these we must exercise prudential judgment." Therein lies the deception, because dealing with any evil -- and especially determining the best solutions in a plural democracy -- will always require prudential judgment. Further complicating matters is that we must make these judgments within the context of specific electoral and legislative processes.

Just as we can and must exercise prudential judgment to determine what electoral and legislative alternatives before us today will best combat the evil of human-caused climate change, we can and must exercise the same judgment on how any moral issue can be translated into civil law and electoral politics.

In a short series of articles that appeared on our website [1] in the winter of 2010-2011, Fr. Charles Curran wrote that questions of "possibility and feasibility" are necessary aspects in all questions of law and public policy. He wrote: "The feasibility and possibility of passing a law is without doubt a prudential judgment, and as the bishops themselves have recognized, Catholics can and do differ over such prudential judgments. There is no certitude or even agreement about where to draw the line about what is feasible and possible."

Thus, which action is more moral? Voting for a candidate of a party that has a clear anti-abortion plank but has never effectively acted on that plank, or voting for a candidate whose party's social policies have a proven track record of reducing abortions? Answering that question will take prudential judgment.

While it is essential for the church to witness to a reverence for life from the earliest moments, what approach it should take in the public square and what manner of legal remedies it should seek would benefit from civil discussion. The current strategy has proven far better at dividing than persuading. For the moment, no political home is a perfect fit.

Professor Vincent Miller is correct when he cites [2] the Letter to the Hebrews: The word of God is "sharper than any two-edged sword," and it "cuts both ways, it cuts both parties," he says. "It challenges both parties."

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