A well formed conscience

The US Bishops teach, “In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.” Using the vote conscientiously and responsibly is not an option, it is an obligation. But how does one vote conscientiously and responsibly?

The Bishops have written, “The Church’s obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith, a part of the mission given to us by Jesus Christ. Faith helps us see more clearly the truth about human life and dignity that we also understand through human reason. As people of both faith and reason, Catholics are called to bring truth to political life and to practice Christ’s commandment to “love one another” (Jn 13:34). According to Pope Benedict XVI, “charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as ‘social charity’” (Deus Caritas Est, no. 29).”

In order to fulfill this mission, it is necessary to have a well formed conscience. When making a political choice, it is not enough to rely on one’s own interests, or even to make moral distinctions based on subjective opinions (what the individual might think is right or wrong). A well formed conscience is one that is informed and formed by reason, the Natural Law (the moral written in the nature of persons) and is enlightened by faith.

This may seem abstract and complex. But the core of this idea is a central theme of the Pope’s teaching: Charity, or disinterested love. Love is not a fuzzy feeling – nor is it indiscriminate sympathy – it is a theological virtue that reflects the very nature and personality of God. Some people
will object that religious faith should not be brought to bear on the vote, but the Bishops teach that “Civil law should recognize and protect the Church’s right and responsibility to participate in society without abandoning our central moral convictions. Our nation’s tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions into public life.”

In a doctrinal note published in 2005, Pope Benedict (Cardinal Josef Ratzinger) wrote:

> By fulfilling their civic duties, “guided by a Christian conscience”, in conformity with its values, the lay faithful exercise their proper task of infusing the temporal order with Christian values, all the while respecting the nature and rightful autonomy of that order, and cooperating with other citizens according to their particular competence and responsibility. The consequence of this fundamental teaching of the Second Vatican Council is that “the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in ‘public life’, that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good”. This would include the promotion and defense of goods such as public order and peace, freedom and equality, respect for human life and for the environment, justice and solidarity. (emphasis mine)

In short, Catholics should make their decisions on the basis of what they know to be right and good for all, particularly the weak and vulnerable. The Church teaches that the responsibility to vote is a moral obligation, and should be fulfilled conscientiously and faithfully, guided by a well formed conscience and assisted by the moral teachings of the Church.

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