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**Title:**

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Bill, a committed practicing Catholic, has been prayerfully discerning his vote for candidates in the upcoming 2020 election. Blessed with a loving family and 16 years of Catholic education, Bill developed a strong passion for social justice and a deep respect for human life at all stages of development. In articulating his own position, he relies on the consistent ethos of life popularized by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, which includes opposition to abortion and euthanasia as well as war and capital punishment, and, more positively calls for efforts to help the oppressed and marginalized to flourish.

Politically, Bill does not feel at home with either party and refers to himself as an “independent.” He likes the policies of the Democrats designed to secure the rights of minorities and to provide a safety net for those not able to support themselves. He faults the leaders of the Democratic party for their uncritical support for a women’s right to choose and for marginalizing pro-life members of the party. He was especially upset when Vice-President Biden dropped his long standing support of the 1976 Hyde Amendment prohibiting the use of Federal funds for abortion. Bill finds his own views represented in an August 2020 letter sent by 100 former elected Democrats to the Platform Committee, pointing out that 79% of Americans oppose allowing abortions at anytime and that 60% oppose using taxpayer dollars to pay for abortions. Bill wishes that Joe Biden would publicly say that that over 800,000 abortions a year is a bad thing and we should adopt policies to reduce that number.

Bill is also ambivalent about the Republican party. He thinks their pro-life position is morally right and that overturning Roe v Wade would open up serious discussion in all the states on how to craft laws that reflect the actual position of the American public. He is not happy with Republicans continuing to try and overturn the Affordable Care Act; of segregating children from their parents as a way of controlling immigration. He is must upset however with Republicans failure to accept the scientific consensus that global warming is a serious problem He does applaud the Republicans for their bi-partisan support of the First Step Act that reforms federal sentencing guidelines.

As to his 2020 vote, Bill reads as much as he can to form his conscience according to Catholic teaching. In the 2020 version of the American bishops voting guide, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” he felt affirmed by the statement: “Catholic often face difficult choices about how to vote.” He spent a lot of time digesting key sections of the document. “A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to sub-human living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, if the voter’s intent is to support that position. In such cases, a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate’s opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life an dignity.

There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.

When all candidates hold a position that promotes an intrinsically evil act, the conscientious voter faces a dilemma. The voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods.

In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose policies promoting intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. These decisions should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching” (37).

In his effort to make sense of the nuanced guidance of “Faithful Citizenship,” Bill talked to some of his friends about the upcoming election. Most of them had already made their choice without paying much attention to what the bishops had to say. His impression was that their decisions depended more on partisan politics than Church teaching, which disappointed him. He also looked for guidance to his pastor who made it clear in his homilies that faithful Catholics could not vote for any candidate who is pro-choice, which Bill recognized was not in total accord with the nuanced position of “Faithful Citizenship.” Searching the internet, he found a number of statements by individual bishops, quoting the Introductory Letter added this year to “Faithful Citizenship,” where the bishop states: “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority,” usually without including the next sentence: “At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty.” A bishop in Texas went out of his way to support a priest in Wisconsin who released a video claiming Catholics who vote for Democrats will be damned. From his own study, Bill knew that this extreme position was not in accord with “Faithful Citizenship” and was not surprised when the priest’s own bishops condemned the video, which was financed by an affluent Republican donor.

Continuing his discernment process, Bill read an article by Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso Texas, who recognizes “the stumbling block abortion for religious voters by the Democratic Party” even strened commitment to promoting abortion without any sensible restrictions.” On the other hand, the bishop points out that many Christians pursuing “single issue” strategy to end abortion, have turned a blind eye to “dehumanizing policies” on various issues, including worker’s rights, voting rights, social support for the poor, racism, immigration and the environment, which has “widened the polarization in our society, harmed the credibility of the Christians to the common good and compromised the integrity of our Christian witness. Bishop Seitz cites Pope Francis who said “Our defense of the innocent unborn” must be clear, firm and passionate,” and cages “equally sacred” and the lives of the poor, the destitute, the underprivileged, the infirm and the elderly, and the victims of human trafficking. Bishop Seitz urges us to repudiate “single-issue” political strategies disconnected from an integral ethic of human life.” He recognizes that: ”Neither party and nor their presidential candidate reflects in a consistent way the ethic of love and light expressed by Jesus in the Gospels.” This means voters must make prayerful and pivdent choices, keeping in mind the “sacredness and equal dignity of all human life as well as our duty to steward God’s creation.” Bill found a similar line of argument in an article by San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy, who warned against prioritizing any one of the “core life issues” because “it will inevitably be hijacked by partisan forces to propose that Catholics have an over-riding duty to vote for candidates that espouse that position.” Given the growing culture of exclusion in our country, McElroy insists that “the drive to label a single issue preeminent distorts the call to authentic discipleship in voting rather than advancing it.”

In making his presidential choice, Bill heard conflicting voices from the official teaching of his Church. Some bishops emphasize that abortion is the preeminent issue and make it sound like Catholics must vote against pro-choice candidates. Other bishops want voters to consider a range of life issues, including those that include intrinsically evil acts such as abortion and racism. To him the crucial point in this election is “Faithful Citizenship,” the American bishops agreed upon document, clearly teaches that racism is a “life issue” and involves intrinsically evil acts. The Church teaching is “consistent ethic of lie” protecting and supporting life at all stages of development and in all situations makes sense to him and responds to his instinctive passion for justice and his respect for human life. He does not want to vote for candidates because they support intrinsically evil policies, but despite that fact. He wants to vote for candidates that will best assist the vulnerable and serve the common good. For him the crucial point in “Faithful Citizenship” is that faced with two candidates supporting intrinsically evil policies a voter should choose the one who will do less evil and more good.

This teaching frees him to bring into his discernment process the character and competency of the candidate. It becomes clear to him that he is not voting for a policy but for individual persons, who will be faced with complex and developing challenges. He wants elected officials who are committed to telling the truth and acting in principle and not political expedience, who have the intelligence and skills to actually get good things done; and who will effectively attend to the important life issues, including greater justice for minorities and climate change. 1578 words