Election Reflection

I haven’t met many people who are not by now exasperated, confounded and dismayed by the ongoing presidential election campaign. Ordinarily in an election year I would be looking forward to the day after the election; at least the war of words would be (pretty much) behind us. This time, however, I expect that I will feel no better about the national situation than I do right now, a few weeks away from November 8. In fact, I may feel worse. I say that in a completely nonpartisan spirit. As an FYI, I have been an independent (undeclared is the official word, I guess) voter for over four decades. Over those many years, I have sometimes voted for Democrats, sometimes for Republicans. This year, as with just about every election, neither of the major presidential candidates completely aligns with all of our key Catholic principles.

The Church teaches that all citizens have three obligations: to pay taxes, to defend their country, and to vote (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2240). When we vote, we exercise the privilege of promoting the common good by bringing the truth of our faith and moral convictions to bear upon the issues confronting our society. After all, hopefully at least, all citizens cast their votes on the basis of their most deeply held values. For Catholics, those values are shaped by natural reason and by what God has revealed to us in Scripture and Church doctrine.

The Church cannot and does not tell anyone for whom to vote. It never endorses candidates or political parties. It does, though, ask us to learn what the key issues are, and to evaluate them through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of our Church. This sacred duty requires us to form our consciences. “Conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil” (USCCB, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship [FC], 17).

Sometimes our positions on issues will be a matter of prudential judgment where people of good will may well differ in opinion. At the same time, we must always reject and oppose intrinsic evils, those actions that violate human dignity and destroy life. Abortion, embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia (physician-assisted suicide) are among the major intrinsic evils of our time. Others include genocide, torture, targeting of noncombatants in war, terrorism, and racism. As important as all the issues are, they are not morally equivalent. As the US Bishops firmly declare, “The direct and intentional destruction of human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed” (FC, 28).

In forming our consciences to vote, we should not confine our attention only to evils to be avoided. We are also called to care for creation, our common home, and to stand with immigrants and refugees as well as reach out to victims of human trafficking. The preferential option for the poor and economic justice are always touchstones of our Catholic moral vision.

In the November issue of WNY Catholic, I will offer further reflections that I hope might help to guide us (myself included) in what is for many of us a particularly challenging election season.

Study the issues at www.FaithfulCitizenship.org. Learn the candidates’ positions. Look at it all in light of our Catholic moral principles. And pray.