

Catholic

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ONE LIGUORI DRIVE
LIGUORI, MO
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GOSPEL VALUES IN AN ELECTION YEAR...AND BEYOND

THE CHALLENGE OF DISCIPLESHIP

BY KENNETH R. OVERBERG, SJ

Each opportunity to vote, especially in a presidential election, raises vital questions: *For whom will I vote? What values do and should inform my political choices?*

This year, part of the religious context for these questions is the Church's celebration of the Year of Mercy and the 125th anniversary of The Condition of Labor (*Rerum Novarum*), the papal encyclical generally recognized as the first of Catholic Social Teaching. This election also follows Pope Francis' stirring visit to the United States in September 2015. This *Update* will use these three events to offer guidance for our reflection and action.

Basic Values

Many of us may already be weary of the political campaigns. Yet we recognize that electing a president and other leaders has profound implications for our lives and the very life of the world.

Let's return to that question about the values that inform our political choices since they're key to our voting decisions. Before we vote, we need to consider our values and commitments—and unexamined assumptions. What *really* forms the basis of our voting? Perhaps it's our longstanding commitment to a particular party. Perhaps it's our ethnicity or gender or economic class. Could it also be the gospel?

The gospel?! Indeed, for as disciples of Jesus, we want the good news to be the very center of our lives, enlightening all our choices. Sober realism leads us to acknowledge, however, that some other influences often carry more weight—messages from media, politics, business, and families. Our vision of life





and responses to world events often are based on these values rather than on faith, Scripture, and the Christian tradition.

For this election, then, an essential question to ask is *Will I take seriously my gospel commitment when I vote?* The gospels themselves reveal the heart of Jesus' experience and vision (see, for example, Matthew 5:1—7:29 and

Luke 4:14—30, 6:17—49). The long tradition of Catholic Social Teaching has applied Jesus' vision to social, economic, and political issues. Forming and examining our consciences in light of the gospel values helps us to evaluate candidates and platforms.

Before every presidential election in the last forty years, the Catholic bishops of the United States have issued a statement on political responsibility and faithful citizenship (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship can be found at www.usccb.org). These documents are both challenging and realistic. The bishops stress that all issues must be considered, but all do not have the same weight. The bishops state that some actions ought never be done. They give a lengthy list of examples that starts with abortion and euthanasia. The bishops state that there can be principled debate about how to respond to other issues and offer another lengthy list that includes environmental degradation and the death penalty. See paragraphs 17–39 in the latest document for the bishops' careful nuancing of the possible dilemmas.

Catholic Social Teaching includes the statements of the popes, the Second Vatican Council, and conferences of bishops that have addressed critical national and international issues such as human dignity, work and economic development, the common good, justice, and war and peace. These five often-overlapping themes are rooted in Scripture and addressed in Pope Francis' recent speeches in the United States. They provide the structure for this *Update*.

Human Dignity

The value of all human life is the foundation and core of Catholic Social Teaching. We are created in God's image and so are both sacred and social. Our value is rooted fundamentally in who we are and not in what we do. In his address to the U.S. bishops, Pope Francis listed several situations that undermine or limit human life or dignity: "the innocent victim of abortion, children who die of hunger or

from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, wars, violence and drug trafficking, the environment devastated by man's predatory relationship with nature—at stake in all of this is the gift of God, of which we are noble stewards but not masters." Situations that truly promote human dignity need to be fostered.

In a year when migrants and refugees were headline news, Pope Francis emphasized human dignity in his address to Congress: "Our world is facing a refugee crisis of a magnitude not seen since the Second World War.... We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation,...in a way which is always humane, just and fraternal."

Work and Economic Development

Valuing labor and especially the laborer has been a constant theme of Catholic Social Teaching from its beginning. In 1891, social issues included exploitation of the worker, terrible working conditions, unjust wages (issues that remain just as pressing today). Through the years, Catholic Social Teaching has criticized both Marxism and capitalism. More recently, social issues have been globalization, the widening gap between rich and poor, and sinful social structures. Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, is a bold and complex example of the Church's concern.

In his address at the White House, Pope Francis stressed a concern for economic structures that harm people: "I would like all men and women of good will in this great nation to support the efforts of the international community to protect the vulnerable in our world and to stimulate integral and inclusive models of development, so that our brothers and sisters everywhere may know the blessings of peace and prosperity which God wills for all his children." And to Congress, he said: "In times of crisis and economic hardship a spirit of global solidarity must not be lost.... The fight against poverty and hunger must be fought constantly and on many fronts."

The Common Good

Closely related to concern for workers and international economics is the third major theme: the common good. In his encyclical *On Christianity and Social Progress*, Pope John XXIII explained that the common good embraces "all those social conditions which favor the full development of human personality." Such basic necessities as food, clothing, and shelter are included along with the rights to education, healthcare, taking an active part in public affairs, and worshipping God freely. Pope John stressed that the common good of one nation cannot be separated from the common good of the whole human family.

CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

An excellent way to observe this Year of Mercy is to practice the corporal works of mercy. They are: *feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead.*

Volunteering in a food pantry or homeless shelter will help those being served and may also help the volunteers, enlarging their experience and perspective. Doing so may also raise questions: *Why is there so much hunger in this city? Why are there so many veterans of U.S. wars among the homeless?* and other questions about structures of society that undermine human flourishing.

Direct service is necessary and good. Following Catholic Social Teaching to heal sinful social structures may lead to even more widespread good. And this experience may offer the volunteer insight into the kind of candidate to vote for.

Pope Francis is the first pope to devote an entire encyclical to the environment in *On Care for Our Common Home*. Issues he addressed include pollution, water, climate change, and global inequality. Protecting the existence and health of “our common home” is a perfect example of the common good!

Not surprisingly, references to his concern came up in his speeches in the U.S. At the White House, he said: “Climate change is a problem which can no longer be left to a future generation. When it comes to the care of ‘our common home,’ we are living at a critical moment of history.” To the Congress, he said: “Now is the time for courageous actions and strategies, aimed at implementing a ‘culture of care’ and an ‘integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature’” (quoting *On Care for Our Common Home*, 231, 139).

Justice

Justice—right relationships along with the structural recognition of human dignity and rights and responsibilities—is a major theme throughout Catholic Social Teaching.

In 1971, a worldwide synod of bishops met to follow Vatican II’s encouragement to “read the signs of the times.”



CNS PHOTO / TIM HUNT

The synod’s statement, *Justice in the World*, described massive divisions in the world between rich and poor that result in millions of people living marginal lives and being illiterate, ill-fed, and poorly housed. The bishops declared: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel” (6).

In the midst of disturbing social and political situations in the U.S. and around the world, including racism and terrorism, Pope Francis affirmed at the White House that “American Catholics are committed to building a society which is truly tolerant and inclusive, to safeguarding the rights of individuals and communities, and to rejecting every form of unjust discrimination.”

War and Peace

In a century marked by world wars and the use of atomic bombs, Catholic Social Teaching frequently turned to the topic of war and peace. Pope John XXIII’s *Peace on Earth* emphasized human dignity, rights, and duties as the only possible foundation for peace; he also called for a reformed and stronger United Nations. Vatican II’s *Church in the Modern World* declared: “The arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race and the harm it inflicts upon the poor is more than can be endured” (81). In an address to the Diplomatic Corps as the U.S. prepared for war against Iraq, Pope John Paul II stated: “War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity.”

Pope Francis repeats these themes and, in his address to the Hispanic community and other immigrants, adds: “It is imperative that the followers of various religions join their voices in calling for peace, tolerance and respect for the dignity and rights of others.... The religions thus have the right and the duty to make clear that it is possible to build a society where ‘a healthy pluralism which respects differences and

DIG DEEPER

Look: What values have informed my political choices in the past?

Judge: What weight will I give my gospel commitment when I vote this year?

Act: Which corporal work of mercy can I both practice and learn more about in this Holy Year of Mercy?

LINKING LIFE ISSUES

Addressing Congress, Pope Francis said: "The Golden Rule...reminds us of our responsibility to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development." This summarizes a statement he made in his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*: "Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us.... Yet this defense of unborn life is closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right. It involves the conviction that a human being is always sacred and inviolable, in any situation and at every stage of development" (213).

Pope Francis' statements echo that of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin about what he called the *consistent ethic of life*: "If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker. Such a quality of life posture translates into specific political and economic positions on tax policy, employment generation, welfare policy, nutrition and feeding programs, and health care" (*Consistent Ethic of Life*, Sheed & Ward).

Though the consistent ethic of life hasn't been emphasized recently, revitalizing this moral vision, both its content and spirit, may truly inspire faithful citizenship and creative following of Pope Francis' words and example.

values them as such' is a 'precious ally in the commitment to defending human dignity...and a path to peace in our world,' wounded as it is by wars" (quoting *The Joy of the Gospel*, 255, 257).

Conscience and Call

These five themes highlight key values and concerns for the faithful citizen to prayerfully consider before voting: *What candidates and what political platform offer best hope of embodying these values and ideals in political choices and actions?*

From Pope Francis' words and the other sources, a portrait of the ideal candidate emerges. In reality, the ideal candidate and party do not exist. The U.S. Catholic bishops have recognized this situation, acknowledging that their moral framework doesn't easily fit the categories of Republican or Democrat: "Some Catholics may feel politically homeless, sensing that no political party and too few candidates share a consistent concern for human life and dignity" (document for the 2004 election).

Still, the bishops urge people to vote with an informed conscience and to get involved, reminding us that participation in the political process is a moral obligation.

That remains our call and challenge in 2016...and beyond!

Kenneth R. Overberg, SJ, is professor emeritus of theology at Xavier University. Among his Catholic Updates are Finding the Heart of Jesus' Life and 100-plus Years of Catholic Social Teaching.



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