

A Brief Catechism for Catholic Voters

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Q. Isn't conscience the same as my own opinions and feelings? And doesn't everyone have the right to his or her own conscience?

A. Conscience is NOT the same as your opinions or feelings. Conscience cannot be identical with your feelings because conscience is the activity of your intellect in judging the rightness or wrongness of your actions or omissions, past, present, or future, while your feelings come from another part of your soul and should be governed by your intellect and will. Conscience is not identical with your opinions because your intellect bases its judgment upon the natural moral law, which is inherent in your human nature and is identical with the Ten Commandments. Unlike the civil laws made by legislators, or the opinions that you hold, the natural moral law is not anything that you invent, but rather discover within yourself and is the governing norm of your conscience. In short, Conscience is the voice of truth within you, and your opinions need to be in harmony with that truth. As a Catholic, you have the benefit of the Church's teaching authority or Magisterium endowed upon her by Christ. The Magisterium assists you and all people of good will in understanding the natural moral law as it relates to specific issues. As a Catholic, you have the obligation to be correctly informed and normed by the teaching of the Church's Magisterium. As for your feelings, they need to be educated by virtue so as to be in harmony with conscience's voice of truth. In this way, you will have a sound conscience, according to which you will feel guilty when you are guilty, and feel morally upright when you are morally upright. We should strive to avoid the two opposite extremes of a lax conscience and a scrupulous conscience. Meeting the obligation of continually attending to this formation of conscience will increase the likelihood that, in the actual operation or activity of conscience, you will act with a certain conscience, which clearly perceives that a given concrete action is a good action that was rightly done or should be done. Being correctly informed and certain in the actual operation of conscience is the goal of the continuing formation of conscience. Otherwise put, you should strive to avoid being incorrectly informed and doubtful in the actual judgment of conscience about a particular action or omission. You should never act on a doubtful conscience.

Q. Is it morally permissible to vote for all candidates of a single party?

A. This would depend on the positions held by the candidates of a single party. If any one or more of them held positions that were opposed to the natural moral law, then it would not be morally permissible to vote for all candidates of this one party. Your correctly informed conscience transcends the bounds of any one political party.

Q. If I think that a pro-abortion candidate will, on balance, do much more for the culture of life than a pro-life candidate, why may I not vote for the pro-abortion candidate?

A. If a political candidate supported abortion, or any other moral evil, such as assisted suicide and euthanasia, for that matter, it would not be morally permissible for you to vote for that person. This is because, in voting for such a person, you would become an accomplice in the moral evil at issue. For this reason, moral evils such as abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are examples of a "disqualifying issue." A disqualifying issue is one which is of such gravity and importance that it allows for no political maneuvering. It is an issue that strikes at the heart of the human person and is non-negotiable. A disqualifying issue is one of such enormity that by itself renders a candidate for office unacceptable regardless of his position on other matters. You must sacrifice your feelings on other issues because you know that you cannot participate in any way in an approval of a violent and evil violation of basic human rights. A candidate for office who supports abortion rights or any other moral evil has disqualified himself

as a person that you can vote for. You do not have to vote for a person because he is pro-life. But you may not vote for any candidate who supports abortion rights. Key to understanding the point above about “disqualifying issues” is the distinction between policy and moral principle. On the one hand, there can be a legitimate variety of approaches to accomplishing a morally acceptable goal. For example, in a society’s effort to distribute the goods of health care to its citizens, there can be legitimate disagreement among citizens and political candidates alike as to whether this or that health care plan would most effectively accomplish society’s goal. In the pursuit of the best possible policy or strategy, technical as distinct (although not separate) from moral reason is operative. Technical reason is the kind of reasoning involved in arriving at the most efficient or effective result. On the other hand, no policy or strategy that is opposed to the moral principles of the natural law is morally acceptable. Thus, technical reason should always be subordinate to and normed by moral reason, the kind of reasoning that is the activity of conscience and that is based on the natural moral law.

Q. If I have strong feelings or opinions in favor of a particular candidate, even if he is pro-abortion, why may I not vote for him?

A. As explained in question 1 above, neither your feelings nor your opinions are identical with your conscience. Neither your feelings nor your opinions can take the place of your conscience. Your feelings and opinions should be governed by your conscience. If the candidate about whom you have strong feelings or opinions is pro-abortion, then your feelings and opinions need to be corrected by your correctly informed conscience, which would tell you that it is wrong for you to allow your feelings and opinions to give lesser weight to the fact that the candidate supports a moral evil.

Q. If I may not vote for a pro-abortion candidate, then should it not also be true that I can’t vote for a pro-capital punishment candidate?

A. It is not correct to think of abortion and capital punishment as the very same kind of moral issue. On the one hand, direct abortion is an intrinsic evil, and cannot be justified for any purpose or in any circumstances. On the other hand, the Church has always taught that it is the right and responsibility of the legitimate temporal authority to defend and preserve the common good, and more specifically to defend citizens against the aggressor. This defense against the aggressor may resort to the death penalty if no other means of defense is sufficient. The point here is that the death penalty is understood as an act of self-defense on the part of civil society. In more recent times, in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II has taught that the need for such self-defense to resort to the death penalty is “rare, if not virtually nonexistent.” Thus, while the Pope is saying that the burden of proving the need for the death penalty in specific cases should rest on the shoulders of the legitimate temporal authority, it remains true that the legitimate temporal authority alone has the authority to determine if and when a “rare” case arises that warrants the death penalty. Moreover, if such a rare case does arise and requires resorting to capital punishment, this societal act of self-defense would be a *morally good action* even if it does have the unintended and unavoidable evil effect of the death of the aggressor. Thus, unlike the case of abortion, it would be morally irresponsible to rule out all such “rare” possibilities a priori, just as it would be morally irresponsible to apply the death penalty indiscriminately.

Q. If I think that a candidate who is pro-abortion has better ideas to serve the poor, and the pro-life candidate has bad ideas that will hurt the poor, why may I not vote for the candidate that has the better ideas for serving the poor?

A. Serving the poor is not only admirable, but also obligatory for Catholics as an exercise of solidarity. Solidarity has to do with the sharing of both spiritual and material goods, and with what the Church calls the preferential option for the poor. This preference means that we have the duty to give priority to helping those most needful, both materially and spiritually. Beginning in the family, solidarity extends to every human association, even to the international moral order. Based on the response to question 3 above, two important points must be made. First, when it comes to the matter of determining how social and economic policy can best serve the poor, there can be a legitimate variety of approaches proposed, and therefore legitimate disagreement among voters and candidates for office. Secondly, solidarity can never be at the price of embracing a “disqualifying issue.” Besides, when it comes to the unborn, abortion is a most grievous offense against solidarity, for the unborn are surely among society’s most needful. The right to life is a paramount issue because as Pope John Paul II says it is “the first right, on which all the others are based, and which cannot be recuperated once it is lost.” If a candidate for office refuses solidarity with the unborn, he has laid the ground for refusing solidarity with anyone.

Q. If a candidate says that he is personally opposed to abortion but feels the need to vote for it under the circumstances, doesn’t this candidate’s personal opposition to abortion make it morally permissible for me to vote for him, especially if I think that his other views are the best for people, especially the poor?

A. A candidate for office who says that he is personally opposed to abortion but actually votes in favor of it is either fooling himself or trying to fool you. Outside of the rare case in which a hostage is forced against his will to perform evil actions with his captors, a person who carries out an evil action such as voting for abortion performs an immoral act, and his statement of personal opposition to the moral evil of abortion is either self-delusion or a lie. If you vote for such a candidate, you would be an accomplice in advancing the moral evil of abortion. Therefore, it is not morally permissible to vote for such a candidate for office, even, as explained in questions 3 and 6 above, you think that the candidate’s other views are best for the poor.

Q. What if none of the candidates are completely pro-life?

A. As Pope John Paul II explains in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), “...when it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and morality. This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects.” Logically, it follows from these words of the Pope that a voter may likewise vote for that candidate who will most likely limit the evils of abortion or any other moral evil at issue.

Q. What if one leading candidate is anti-abortion except in the cases of rape or incest, another leading candidate is completely pro-abortion, and a trailing candidate, not likely to win, is completely anti-abortion. Would I be obliged to vote for the candidate not likely to win?

A. In such a case, the Catholic voter may clearly choose to vote for the candidate not likely to win. In addition, the Catholic voter may assess that voting for that candidate might only benefit the completely pro-abortion candidate, and, precisely for the purpose of curtailing the evil of abortion, decide to vote for the leading candidate that is anti-abortion but not perfectly so. This decision would be in keeping with the words of the Pope quoted in question 8 above.

Q. What if all the candidates from whom I have to choose are pro-abortion? Do I have to abstain from voting at all? What do I do?

A. Obviously, one of these candidates is going to win the election. Thus, in this dilemma, you should do your best to judge which candidate would do the least moral harm. However, as explained in question 5 above, you should not place a candidate who is pro-capital punishment (and anti-abortion) in the same moral category as a candidate who is pro-abortion. Faced with such a set of candidates, there would be no moral dilemma, and the clear moral obligation would be to vote for the candidate who is pro-capital punishment, not necessarily because he is pro-capital punishment, but because he is anti-abortion.

Q. Is not the Church's stand that abortion must be illegal a bit of an exception? Does not the Church generally hold that government should restrict its legislation of morality significantly?

A. The Church's teaching that abortion should be illegal is not an exception. St. Thomas Aquinas put it this way: "Wherefore human laws do not forbid all vices, from which the virtuous abstain, but only the more grievous vices, from which it is possible for the majority to abstain; and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others, without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained: thus human law prohibits murder, theft and such like." [emphasis added]. Abortion qualifies as a grievous vice that hurts others, and the lack of prohibition of this evil by society is something by which human society cannot be maintained. As Pope John Paul II has emphasized, the denial of the right to life, in principle, sets the stage, in principle, for the denial of all other rights.

Q. What about elected officials who happen to be of the same party affiliation? Are they committing a sin by being in the same party, even if they don't advocate pro-choice views? Are they guilty by association?

A. Being of the same political party as those who advocate pro-abortion is indeed a serious evil IF I belong to this political party IN ORDER TO ASSOCIATE MYSELF with that party's advocacy of pro-abortion policies. However, it can also be true that being of such a political party has as its purpose to change the policies of the party. Of course, if this is the purpose, one would have to consider whether it is reasonable to think the political party's policies can be changed. Assuming that it is reasonable to think so, then it would be morally justifiable to remain in that political party. Remaining in that political party cannot be instrumental in the advancing of pro-abortion policies (especially if I am busily striving to change the party's policies) as can my VOTING for candidates or for a political party with a pro-abortion policy.

Q. What about voting for a pro-abortion person for something like state treasurer, in which case the candidate would have no say on matters of life in the capacity of her duties, it just happens to be her personal position. This would not be a sin, right?

A. If someone were running for state treasurer and that candidate made it a point to state publicly that he was in favor of exterminating people over the age of 70, would you vote for him? The fact that the candidate has that evil in his mind tells you that there are easily other evils in his mind; and the fact that he would publicly state it is a danger signal. If personal character matters in a political candidate, and personal character involves the kind of thoughts a person harbors, then such a candidate who publicly states that he is in favor of the evil of exterminating people over the age of 70 - or children who are unborn - has also disqualified himself from receiving a Catholic's vote. I would go further and say that such a candidate, in principle - in the light of the natural law - disqualifies himself from public office.

Q. Is it a mortal sin to vote for a pro-abortion candidate?

A. Except in the case in which a voter is faced with all pro-abortion candidates (in which case, as explained in question 8 above, he or she strives to determine which of them would cause the least damage in this regard), a candidate that is pro-abortion disqualifies himself from receiving a Catholic's vote. This is because being pro-abortion cannot simply be placed alongside the candidate's other positions on Medicare and unemployment, for example; and this is because abortion is intrinsically evil and cannot be morally justified for any reason or set of circumstances. To vote for such a candidate even with the knowledge that the candidate is pro-abortion is to become an accomplice in the moral evil of abortion. If the voter also knows this, then the voter sins mortally.

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