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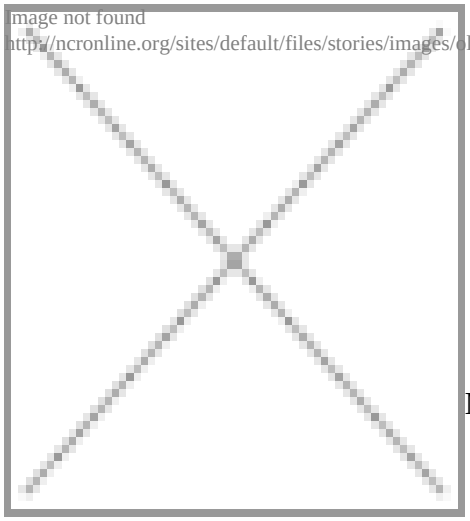
Memphis Bishop calls upon Catholics to avoid 'one issue' votes

Thomas C. Fox NCR Staff | Oct. 21, 2008



Memphis Bishop J. Terry Steib this week called upon Catholics to avoid being one-issue voters. He asked them to follow their consciences and weigh all the moral issues they face before casting their ballots.

?We must recognize,? he wrote, ?that God through the church, is calling us to be prophetic in our own day. If our conscience is well formed, then we will make the right choices about candidates who may not support the church's position in every case.?

Citing words from a statement, ?Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,? a voting guide issued last November by the bishops of the United States, Steib wrote that "there may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil."

(Read the full text of Bishop Steib's remarks.) [1].

?A person might choose not to vote, but voting is a necessary part of our witness to Jesus Christ and a witness to our baptism. So, sometimes hard choices will have to be made.?

Steib wrote that within the past few weeks some denominations have taken on the task of challenging the policy of the Internal Revenue Service concerning the church and politics and that they were deliberately endorsing candidates and urging people in their congregations to vote for those persons in order to force the IRS to determine if the current policy of forbidding such endorsements is proper.

He said he disagreed with the approach because of his ?deep respect? for the nonestablishment clause in the First Amendment to the Constitution.

He wrote that some Catholics have been asking their bishops to endorse candidates.

Continuing, he wrote that he has been among those bishops who have received letters from ?well-meaning people? telling him for whom he should vote and how he should inform parishioners regarding the candidates for whom they should or should not cast their ballots.

He wrote, ?It is not my duty nor is it my role to tell the members of the community of faith in the Diocese of Memphis how to vote.?

Rather he felt the need, he wrote, "to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ as announced in scripture and articulated by the church.?

?Politics,? Steib wrote, ?is not just a game; it is instead a part of the commonwealth of our lives. Just as we cannot avoid drinking water in order to live, so also, as faithful Christians we cannot avoid being involved in the political process and remain good Christians. But if we are to be involved in the political process by voting, then we must have formed our consciences well.?

He called upon Catholics to be prudent when they form their consciences. ?Prudence is not easy to define, but according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, prudence helps us to ?discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.?"

He posed the question facing many Catholics, asking what is a voter to do when presented with candidates whose views do not reflect the full teachings of the church.

To help answer the question he quoted the spiritual writer Fr. Ronald Rolheiser who wrote the following in his book *Secularity and the Gospel*:

?In an age of increasing violence, fundamentalism, and the myth that God wishes to cleanse the planet of its sin and immorality by force, perhaps the first witness we must give to our world is a witness to God's nonviolence, a witness to the God revealed by Jesus Christ who opposes violence of all kinds, from war, to revenge, to capital punishment, to abortion, to euthanasia, to the attempt to use force to bring about justice and God's will in any way."

Steib wrote that he understood Rolheiser to be saying Catholics cannot be one-issue people.

In a similar light, in an interview this week with E.J.Dionne, which appeared in his column printed in the *Washington Post* Oct. 21, Gabino Zavala, an auxiliary bishop in the Los Angeles archdiocese, said his fellow bishops have long insisted that "we're not a one-issue church," a view reflected in their 2007 document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."

"But that's not always what comes out," said Zavala who is bishop-president of the Catholic peace group Pax Christi USA. "What I believe, and what the church teaches, is that one abortion is too many. That's why I believe abortion is so important. But in light of this, there are many other issues we need to bring up, other issues we should consider, other issues that touch the reality of our lives."

Steib and Zavala?s remarks come in the wake of a number of U.S. Catholic bishops who in one manner or another have called upon Catholics to vote to oppose any candidate that does not support an effort to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion in the United States.

The most recent in a string of such bishops are Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput and Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn.

Chaput recently labeled Barack Obama as ?the most committed? abortion-rights candidate from a major party in 35 years. Chaput emphasized he was speaking as a private citizen and not as a representative of the Denver archdiocese. He made the case it is immoral to vote for Obama.

Chaput had already said that Obama running mate Joe Biden, a Catholic, should not present himself for Communion because of his abortion rights position.

Similarly, Finn wrote last week in his diocesan paper that pro-choice candidates are "inviting Catholics to put aside their conscience on this life and death issue." He added: ?They want us to deny our conscience and ignore their callous disregard for the most vulnerable human life."

And earlier this month, Bishop Joseph Martino of the Scranton (Pa.) diocese issued a letter warning that "being 'right' on taxes, education, health care, immigration, and the economy fails to make up for the error of disregarding the value of a human life." He added: "It is a tragic irony that 'pro-choice' candidates have come to support homicide ? the gravest injustice a society can tolerate ? in the name of 'social justice.' "

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