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Can a conscientious Catholic vote for McCain?

Joe Feuerherd | Oct. 27, 2008

No less than former Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Rick Santorum, a conservative Catholic leader, said as much earlier this year. “It’s amazing to hear what John McCain is trying to convince the voters he is all about,” Santorum explained during the Republican primaries. “The bottom line is I served 12 years with him, six years in the Senate as one of the leaders of the Senate, trying to put together the conservative agenda, and almost at every turn, on domestic policy, John McCain was not only against us, but leading the charge on the other side.”

Santorum, who now supports the Arizona senator, once worried that McCain would appoint moderate-to-liberal judges, that his support for the intrinsic evil of embryonic stem-cell research revealed a moral blind spot, and that McCain, who previously opposed overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*, would neglect the abortion issue. Even today McCain opposes a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, another intrinsic evil. Santorum’s concerns seem justified. McCain-the-maverick may really be a closet moderate, though the necessity of shoring up the Republican base in this election has obscured that record.

Given McCain’s well-deserved reputation as an anti-spending hawk (he opposed, for example, increasing government-sponsored health insurance to children living in poverty) and his desire to expand the Bush tax cuts, it’s difficult to see how he would use government to promote the common good. He’s clearly out of step with mainstream Catholic teaching here, though, of course, such concerns are matters of prudential judgment, not intrinsic evil. Still, the conscientious Catholic must consider these issues, even if they do not merit equal weight with other matters.

Further, as the United States finds itself fighting two wars and an elusive terrorist threat, McCain seems inclined to use military force before all other avenues to resolve a conflict have been exhausted. He has endorsed the Bush Doctrine, which, in direct conflict with Catholic just war teaching, holds that the United States may launch a preemptive war to counter a perceived enemy. This should be a cause for concern to the conscientious Catholic voter -- though perhaps not a deal-breaker.

McCain, meanwhile, backed down under pressure from the White House from his opposition to the Bush administration’s torture policy. Torture, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is an intrinsic evil.

Can a conscientious Catholic support McCain? Some might see this as a close call.

McCain’s opponent, Sen. Barack Obama, promises programs that will reduce the nation’s abortion rate -- a rational alternative to simply returning the issue to the states to consider (as McCain now supports). Obama, like McCain, opposes a constitutional amendment on gay marriage and embraces federal funding for embryonic

stem-cell research. They share similar views on immigration policy and agree that climate change is caused by people and should be addressed. And Obama, on the range of important-if-not-essential issues -- such as universal health care, diplomacy over confrontation, equal pay for equal work, the minimum wage, the right of unions to organize -- is clearly more in step with the church.

Still, to those Catholics who believe that rhetorical support for overturning *Roe* v. *Wade* is essential, that the Iranian and North Korean threats should be addressed without negotiation, that the war in Iraq must result in an unambiguous U.S. victory, and that tax cuts to those at the top 1 percent of the nation's income strata will promote the common good, a vote for John McCain is not only acceptable. It is a matter of individual conscience.

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