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National Catholic Reporter
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://ncronline.org)

Bishops step into election fray with focus on abortion, same-sex marriage

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 5, 2012

With national, state and local elections weeks away, several bishops have become unabashedly vocal in highlighting the issues they think should determine Catholics' votes.

As has become expected in national elections, several have focused on abortion, all but naming President Barack Obama while alleging that Catholics cannot vote for candidates who do not seek its criminalization.

Also topping the list this year for particular attention is same-sex marriage and, with the first Catholic face-off for the vice presidency in U.S. history, how Catholics should consider the church's social teaching when deciding which political party would better help those facing economic hardship.

While the bishops have said they aren't telling anyone for whom to vote, some seemingly have given Catholics few, if any, options.

Citing the Democratic Party platform plank supporting "safe and legal" abortion, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., told Catholics in his diocese that their salvation was in "serious jeopardy" should they vote for that plank.

"I am not telling you which party or which candidates to vote for or against, but I am saying that you need to think and pray very carefully about your vote," Paprocki wrote Sept. 23 in his diocesan paper, *Catholic Times* [1] , "because a vote for a candidate who promotes actions or behaviors that are intrinsically evil and gravely sinful makes you morally complicit and places the eternal salvation of your own soul in serious jeopardy."

Archbishop John Myers of Newark, N.J., warned Catholics that disagreement with the church's official teaching on same-sex marriage "seriously harm[s] their communion with Christ and His Church."

"I urge those not in communion with the Church regarding her teaching on marriage and family ... sincerely to re-examine their consciences," Myers wrote in a 16-page pastoral statement Sept. 25 [2]. "If they continue to be unable to assent to or live the Church's teaching in these matters, they must in all honesty and humility refrain from receiving Holy Communion until they can do so with integrity."

The bishops' statements came as a new poll suggested that support for Obama among Catholics had surged since June, despite a well-publicized dispute between the U.S. bishops and the presidential administration over a mandate requiring coverage of birth control in health care plans.

Obama led among Catholics 54-39 percent according to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center Sept. 16 and released Sept. 27.

Speaking with *NCR*, two prominent theologians questioned the validity and wisdom of some of the bishops' statements.

M. Cathleen Kaveny, a professor of law and theology at the University of Notre Dame, said that a potential

problem with bishops' statements on same-sex unions is that they address the issue in the abstract -- not taking into consideration a number of other questions about how candidates would act while in office, or if the issue would even come up.

"I don't know if they can say this has to be the priority that you're voting on ... without any consideration of what the alternatives are and how likely electing someone is to actually make those things happen," Kaveny said.

"Treating issues in an abstract way and just tying a candidate to a position on an abstract issue doesn't go far enough in considering who's going to be the best leader of the country," she said.

Jesuit Fr. James Bretzke, a professor of moral theology at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry, questioned the perennial arguments that a candidate's reluctance to criminalize abortion should necessarily mean he or she loses Catholics' votes.

Even though a candidate may be unwilling to push for the overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade*, the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, Bretzke said, she or he may support policies that would reduce the number of abortions "in the composite."

To support that assertion, Bretzke cited a 2004 letter from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, to Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, then the archbishop of Washington and head of a U.S. bishops' task force on Catholic politicians.

"When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons ... [it] can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons," Ratzinger wrote in that letter.

Same-sex marriage will be on the ballot in Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington in November.

Bishop Alexander Sample of Marquette, Mich., argued against same-sex marriage as well as abortion in all cases in the second article of a four-part series [3] on the election published in his diocesan paper, *The U.P. Catholic*, Sept. 21.

"Any threats to human life or any efforts to force the Church, her institutions or individuals to violate the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the sexual intimacy in marriage must be opposed," Sample wrote.

"This is absolutely 'non-negotiable' when it comes to weighing the issues before us in any election cycle," he concluded.

The church's teachings on social and economic policy, known collectively as Catholic social teaching, has come into the limelight at numerous points this election cycle.

A number of prominent Catholic advocates, including some 90 scholars at the Jesuit-run Georgetown University [4] and the Catholic lobbying group NETWORK, have charged that Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan stands opposed to those teachings.

Ryan, who is a U.S. Congressman from Wisconsin, put together the Republican's failed 2012 federal budget proposal, which, according to the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, would have cut federal programs to benefit low-income earners by some $3.3 trillion.

A series of letters to Congress this spring from the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development said Ryan's budget "fails to meet ... moral criteria." An April letter, for example, decried a proposal to slash funding for the Child Tax Credit, which the bishops called "one of the most effective anti-

poverty programs in our nation."

Earlier in September, Paprocki defended Ryan's application of Catholic social teaching in a homily in Green Bay, Wis., during a Mass dedicated to judges and other public officials, arguing Ryan made "prudential judgments" in line with Catholic morality.

Paprocki said that the bishops on the domestic justice committee were "simply making a prudential judgment that this program is a necessary practical means to feed the hungry."

"Reasonable minds can come to different conclusions about more effective ways to alleviate hunger," Paprocki continued in the Sept. 20 homily [5].

When questioning the bishops' election statements, Kaveny also noted that Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has changed his views over the years on whether abortion should be legal.

In previous elections, including his successful 2002 race for governor in Massachusetts, Romney had said he believed abortion should not be legislated by the federal government, but left to state governments.

"Suppose maybe some of these bishops believe Romney has flopped his last flip, but suppose somebody voting doesn't," Kaveny said. "The Catholic church can't say there's a teaching of faith that you have to believe Mitt Romney is what he says."

Breaking from a nearly 35-year practice, the U.S. bishops' conference did not issue a new guiding document for Catholic voters this election cycle, choosing instead to reissue the statement [6] they formulated in 2007, titled "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States."

The document focuses on four policy areas the bishops say Catholics should pay particular attention to when voting: issues of war and pro-life concerns, family matters, social justice, and international aid and development.

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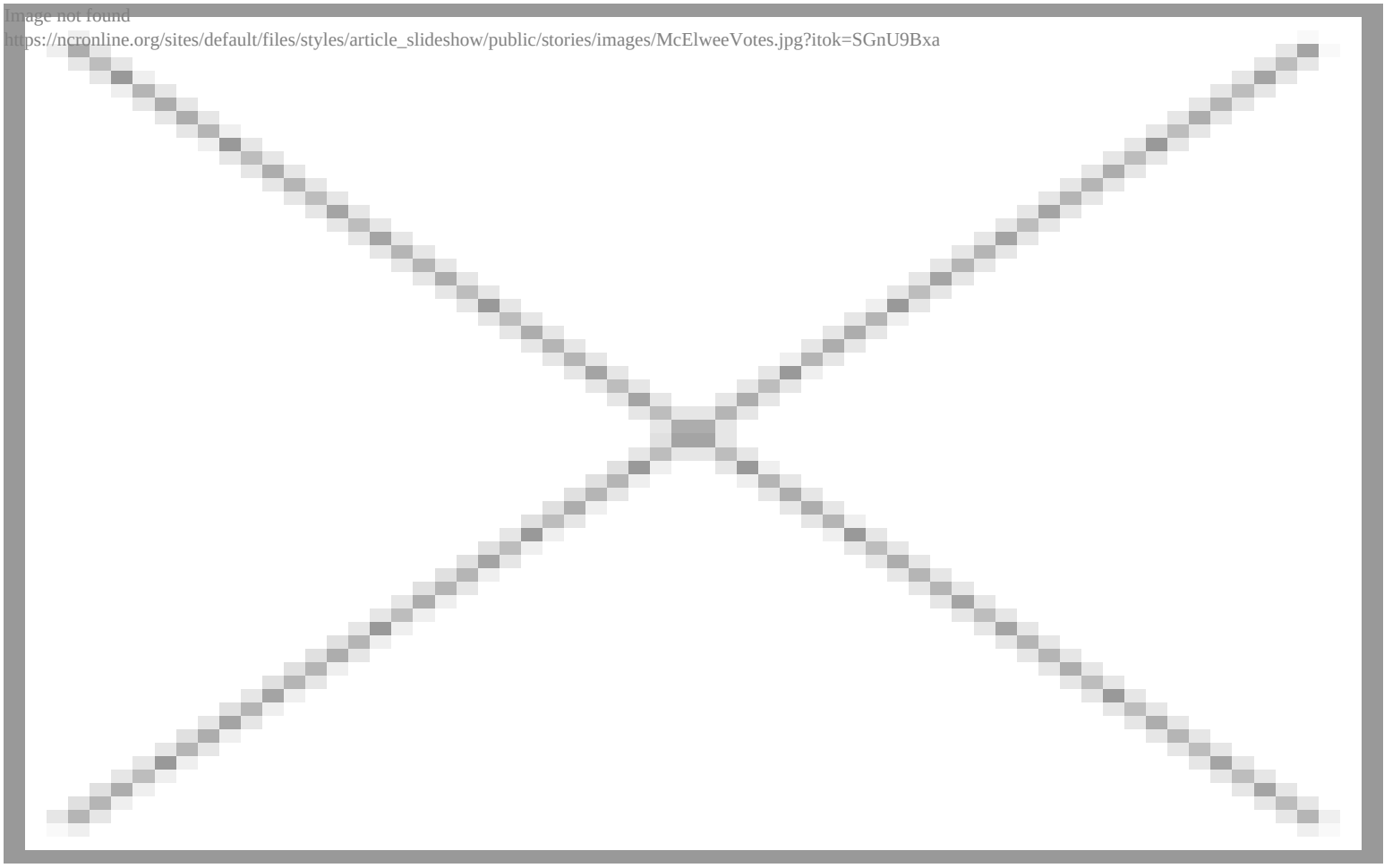

Iowans wait for their ballots on day one of early voting for the November presidential election in Des Moines Sept. 27. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

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Bishop Thomas Paprocki (CNS/Karen Callaway)

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Archbishop John Myers of Newark, N.J. (CNS/Greg Shemitz)

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