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Faithful Citizenship, Pope Francis, and the Consistent Ethic of Life in 2020

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The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has been publishing its Faithful Citizenship documents every four years since the 1976 presidential election, the first election after the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision. The present edition of Faithful Citizenship provoked some controversy last November when the bishops published it--the reason was that it was the same edition as the 2016 election. And, substantively the same as the 2012 election. And, more or less the same as the 2008 election. The document is an updated version of a document written in 2007, when George W. Bush was the president and Benedict XVI was pope. By itself, that was controversial: it seemed odd that the bishops would not produce something new, considering how different our world is from the world of 2007 and especially considering the important role that Catholic voters have played in the advent of the Trump era.¹ With families separated, children in cages, burgeoning racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia,

¹ "The core 'Faithful Citizenship' document was drafted in 2007. Pope Benedict XVI was in his second year as pope and George W. Bush was in his second term as president. We had not yet elected our first black president, nor discovered the resurgence of racism that election occasioned. The Affordable Care Act had not been adopted. The acute danger of climate change was only coming into focus for most people. Donald Trump was a reality TV star. Congress was close to delivering comprehensive immigration reform, and the current horror at the border was unimaginable. Yet, the bishops will be debating a few videos and a short letter. It is to weep." See: Michael Sean Winters, "Fall meeting agenda sees bishops making plans to plan priorities," National Catholic Reporter (30 October 2018), published online at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/distinctly-catholic/fall-meeting-agenda-sees-us-bishops-making-plans-plan-priorities>.

and nationalist impulses seemingly indulged too often by too many Catholics, now would seem to be an opportune moment for our bishops to say something new and current about American politics.

They did say *something* new. They published an introductory letter over the re-issued 2016 edition of the 2007 Faithful Citizenship document. This also provided some opportunity for controversy because despite anything else happening in our world today, the bishops named abortion as their “preeminent priority” in a world where, in the words of their own introductory letter, the challenges of “migration, xenophobia, racism,...global conflict, and care for creation” all have become “more pronounced.” Despite all that, the now nearly-five-decade focus on abortion remains the document’s signal characteristic. We hear it in the debate all around us: a Catholic cannot vote for Joe Biden because of abortion. Or, so we are told.

And, this is yet stranger still. Long ago, at least officially, the U.S. bishops accepted Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s consistent ethic of life as the foundation of the Faithful Citizenship documents. Pope John Paul II incorporated the consistent ethic into the papal magisterium with 1995’s *Evangelium Vitae*, where he wrote that--

Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. We need then to "show care" for all life and for the life of everyone.²

Pope John Paul’s meaning was unambiguous: life is “an indivisible good,” and so every life in every situation makes an equal demand on our “consistent” attention. Without naming Cardinal Bernardin, *Evangelium Vitae* makes the argument of the consistent ethic of life.

² Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 87.

The consistent ethic was affirmed again by the U.S. bishops in 1998, when they wrote in “Living the Gospel of Life,”

Adopting a consistent ethic of life, the Catholic Church promotes a broad spectrum of issues "seeking to protect human life and promote human dignity from the inception of life to its final moment." Opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas.

Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life.³

So there can be no mistaking that the consistent ethic is the accepted teaching of the church, both because of these documents and because of what the associate general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Bishops wrote to me in 2016--"the Consistent Ethic of Life approach has been present, and actively advanced, all along."⁴ It is difficult from all this to see where the ‘preeminence’ of abortion comes from.

If we are fair, reading the Faithful Citizenship document, it is difficult to argue the consistent ethic is not actively advanced. It is there in the document, everywhere. Yet somehow, the ‘preeminence’ of abortion succeeds over and over to make us a single-issue church in election year after election year. And, that is where we want to take our beginning. We must unravel this conundrum--Why do we still remain a single-issue church, despite the authority of

³ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics,” 22.

⁴ Anthony R. Picarello, Jr. to Steven P. Millies (28 December 2016).

the consistent ethic?--which, in turn, will lead us into a deeper reflection on how we are to live our faithful citizenship in the challenges that the practical world sets in front of us. And, finally, we will turn to Pope Francis for some guidance about how we can find a new way to approach these perennial problems.

But let's begin with the Faithful Citizenship document, itself. The .pdf version on the bishops' website runs to 53 pages--about 15,000 words or the length of the Book of Job. While these documents have been the U.S. bishops' most public and purposeful effort for "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" over the last nearly-five-decades, I would be willing to bet that fewer than ten percent of American Catholics ever have read one. I think this is an important point. The average American, according to the Pew Research Center, reads twelve books per year. But that average includes both the most voracious readers you know and the people who never read a word. (And, if you know any voracious readers, dragging the average down to a book per month means that non-readers heavily outnumber readers.)

For the first time this year, the bishops have added a two-minute supplemental video to the Faithful Citizenship document. But two minutes hardly scratches the surface of the complexity we are facing, and the video does not really deal with issues at all beyond mentioning them. So in the first place, we have to deal with a fundamental problem the bishops face when they want to form consciences for citizenship--there is an incredible complexity that will be absent if they don't treat it, but if they do address the complexity in print very few people are going to read it. So addressing that complexity in print is not all that much easier or more effective.

To illustrate that, let's take some excerpts from Faithful Citizenship. Begin with paragraph 55--

These four principles [the dignity of the human person, subsidiarity, the common good, solidarity] and related themes from Catholic social teaching provide a moral framework that does not easily fit ideologies of "right" or "left," "liberal" or "conservative," or the platform of any political party. They are not partisan or sectarian, but reflect fundamental ethical principles that are common to all people.

True enough. Now try paragraph 60--

We cannot compromise basic principles or moral teaching. We are committed to clarity about our moral teaching and to civility. In public life, it is important to practice the virtues of charity and justice that are at the core of our Tradition. We should work with others in a variety of ways to advance our moral principles.

Now we have abandoned frustrating the easy choice between left and right, and there is a clear moral choice we have to make.

Let's go on and compare paragraph 7, which says--"we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote"--with paragraph 30 which quotes the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as saying, "a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals."

There is little wonder why people give up and give in to the familiar (and, frankly easier) left-right construction of American politics, giving weight to partisan preferences instead of engaging in the rather challenging moral exercise called for in Faithful Citizenship. The Catholic faith is neither left nor right, and we are only called to practice justice and charity when

we choose between Republicans and Democrats. The bishops don't want to tell anyone how to vote, but no one may vote for something both political parties do--contradict "the fundamental contents of faith and morals."

Facing this baffling set of almost contradictory instructions, too often for too many Catholics (and, Catholic bishops), the answer has been simply to identify one issue as a "preeminent priority" and cut through the confusion by focusing squarely on something simpler. The very worst example of this I can imagine came to us from our neighbor here in Illinois, Bishop Thomas Paprocki from downstate Springfield, who told his flock in 2012 that--

My job is not to tell you for whom you should vote, but I do have a duty to speak out on moral issues....People of faith object to these [Democratic] platform positions that promote serious sins. So what about the Republicans? I have read the Republican platform, and there is nothing in it that supports or promotes an intrinsic evil or a serious sin.⁵

I want to come to the particulars of the party platforms in a moment, and we need to examine those claims to bring our conversation forward. But let's deal with these categories first-- "intrinsic evil" and "serious sin."

I'd want to point everyone to a very good treatment Boston College Professor Cathleen Kaveny gave to this sort of moral analysis back in 2008 for America Magazine. Prof. Kaveny gave definitions to these terms that can help us.⁶ Intrinsic evil is an act that never can be justified. So, intrinsic evil certainly includes abortion. Intrinsic evil also includes racism, which

⁵ Bishop Thomas Paprocki, "Think and Pray about Your Vote," accessed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82tKu2bhBLU>.

⁶ See: M. Cathleen Kaveny, "Intrinsic Evil and Political Responsibility: Is the Category of Intrinsic Evil Helpful to the Catholic Voter?" America (27 October 2008), accessed online at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/673/article/intrinsic-evil-and-political-responsibility>.

never can be justified. But much less serious sins also are intrinsically evil. Slander never can have a justification in the same way that theft or even killing sometimes *can* have justifications. Stealing can feed a hungry person, and killing can save an innocent life. Both are serious sins, but both can be justified in the presence of serious reasons. An intrinsically evil act like slandering someone's good reputation cannot ever be justified: what other good ever can be achieved by destroying someone's reputation? Pope Francis recently said that gossip is a greater plague than COVID-19, and gossip certainly is as virulent and as persistent as a deadly disease. He says this to tell us that gossip also it is intrinsically evil. Gossip never does anyone any good. Yet neither gossip nor slander is a serious sin. For that reason, we need to say that intrinsic evil is not the same as serious sin, and in some cases a sin is not very serious at all even if it is intrinsically evil.

Prof. Kaveny draws this argument directly from John Paul II and St. Thomas Aquinas, I should say. And, she goes on to rather interesting places. She observed that, "Preventing intrinsically evil acts is not always our top moral priority."⁷ For example: which presents the greater moral demand? Seeking a public policy solution to a pandemic that would spare thousands of lives or preventing two LGBT people from marrying one another? The Church teaches that the marriage of two men or two women is intrinsically evil: certainly that is true. A plague is not an intrinsic evil at all because no one does it: it is categorized as a "natural evil." However, the moral duty to prevent harm to others must override other goods. No one will die from a same-sex marriage, and so an intrinsic evil is not always our greatest moral concern.

This is where we come to the 2012 party platforms Bishop Paprocki examined. It is true that abortion combines intrinsic evil and serious sin (or, to correct Bishop Paprocki slightly, the

⁷ Ibid.

category is “grave sin”). But we also can see that intrinsic evils do not automatically claim our most urgent moral attention only because they are intrinsic. Even grave sins (such as lying, or fraud, or failure to love) do not necessarily make the most urgent claim on us because, for as categorically grave as the sin is, there is no possibility of mortal danger. That is why, when we look back to the 2012 Republican platform through the lens of Prof. Kaveny’s analysis, we can notice some interesting things that Bishop Paprocki overlooked when he read the Republican platform in 2012.

The Republican platform called for an “all-of-the-above” energy strategy that included extending the Keystone pipeline, “opening the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) for energy exploration and development and...opening the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) for exploration and production of oil and natural gas,” transforming ecosystems and natural beauties that never can be replaced in order to consume more fossil fuels whose use threatens all life on earth.⁸ Which makes the greater claim on our moral attention? The marriage of two men or two women? Or, the permanent loss of an ecosystem and the rising sea levels that threaten life?

The Republican platform in 2012 also tells us that, “Our country and its way of life have enemies both abroad and within our shores. We affirm the need for our military to protect the nation by finding and capturing our enemies and the necessity for the President to have the tools to deal with these threats.”⁹ In sum, this refers to a military policy that had caused thousands of civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq at the time when this platform was published (and, more

⁸ Republican National Committee, “2012 Republican Party Platform,” accessed online at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2012-republican-party-platform#america>.

⁹ Ibid.

since).¹⁰ The implications of a foreign policy that would lead to ongoing innocent civilian casualties (where, at least certainly in Iraq, there can be no claiming that the rigorous demands for justification in warfare were satisfied) must make at least as great a claim on our moral attention as abortion. After all, civilian deaths are the deaths of innocents--like abortions. And, if that is not persuasive enough, recall that statistically 3% of the population is pregnant at any given time. Certainly that must include civilian victims of U.S. drone strikes.

I offer these thoughts because it is necessary to bring some moral complexity to the rather simple story we are told very often about how we should be voting. I am aware of a few moral theologians who are making arguments like the one I've made: I named one, Cathleen Kaveny, and there are others. But I never have heard a Catholic bishop say things like this, nor have I heard a homily preached like this. I doubt many of you have, either. And this is why I think we need to do some work to unravel the reasons why abortion so much dominates our thinking. Outside some very rarefied academic precincts, Catholics are unlikely to hear about the moral complexity of what they are doing when they vote.

I have heard one Catholic bishop talk about that complexity, and of course that was Cardinal Bernardin. The consistent ethic of life was his effort to draw that complexity into our popular conversation, into the discussions that are had in our pews and over our dinner tables. But we know today that, while Cardinal Bernardin did succeed to make the consistent ethic of life a part of official church teaching, he was less successful bringing the consistent ethic into the

¹⁰ See: Susan G. Chesser, "Afghanistan Casualties: Military Forces and Civilians, Congressional Research Service (December 6, 2012), available online at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R41084.pdf>. See also: Neta C. Crawford, "Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and the Need for Transparency," a publication of the Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, Brown University (November 2018), available online at: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Human%20Costs%2C%20Nov%208%202018%20CoW.pdf>

imaginings of most Catholics or even most bishops. And, I want to suggest that there were three important reasons why he was not successful.

The first reason is that the damage was already done by the time he introduced the consistent ethic in 1983. Our debate already was poisoned by a growing political preoccupation with abortion. When it was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1973, in retrospect *Roe* attracted what seems like very little attention. It was not mentioned during a presidential press conference eight days after the decision was announced, and neither did it come up the morning after that press conference when President Nixon spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast. The controversy only began to explode during the first presidential election after *Roe* in 1976, when then-Archbishop Joseph Bernardin led the executive committee of the bishops' conference in meetings with Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, the Democratic and Republican nominees for president. Carter declined to support a constitutional amendment that would reverse *Roe*, and Archbishop Bernardin told the waiting reporters that the bishops were "disappointed" by their meeting with Governor Carter. Sensing opportunity, President Ford called the bishops in and gave them his support for a human life amendment. Archbishop Bernardin told the waiting press that the bishops had been "encouraged" by their meeting with Ford, and the die was cast. Abortion became an *idée fixe* among Catholics and especially among Catholic leaders. Their political commitment to abortion became overriding. By the time Bernardin came along with a consistent ethic in 1983, it simply was too late. The division between Democrats and Republicans--and, the Catholic commitment to that division--simply had gotten too deep. It would get deeper, of course. But the consistent ethic was defeated by controversy almost as quickly as it was introduced.

This relates to the second reason why Bernardin was unsuccessful. Church historians in the United States talk about the differences between Jadot bishops and Laghi bishops. The difference refers to the different sorts of bishops named to the United States when Archbishop Jean Jadot was the apostolic delegate, and later when Archbishop Pio Laghi was delegate. The apostolic delegate was not only the Holy See's diplomatic representative to the United States. He also played a role in the selection of bishops. Jadot was Paul VI's final delegate, and Pope John Paul II inherited him in 1978 when he was elected. In 1980, John Paul named Pio Laghi as the apostolic delegate. And, there was a difference in the men who were named bishops that became more noticeable as the 1980's drew on. Jadot was a man of the Second Vatican Council and the enthusiastic first years after it ended. The bishops brought forth by Jadot tended to be men who wanted to engage the world, reach out to the world, and embrace the world. The Laghi bishops tended to reflect a different sort of emphasis, one derived from a next wave in the reception of Vatican II. Laghi bishops tended to be preoccupied by the encroachments of secularism and the loss of the church's status in social and cultural life. Where Jadot bishops embraced the world, Laghi bishops tended to be men who wanted to confront a secular world for its tolerance of (among other things) abortion. No one really knew it in 1983 when Cardinal Bernardin introduced the consistent ethic, but the tone already had changed. Rome was beginning to take a more directly confrontational line with the world outside the church, and confrontation requires the drawing of lines. Abortion was the clearest line that could be drawn, and becoming distracted by other issues (such as nuclear war, poverty, or capital punishment) tended to distract from the confrontation.

But finally, in this environment where confrontation was the goal, complexity had to be a casualty. Confrontation is simple: *we* oppose *you*. Complexity defies a simple binary like that.

Complexity demands subtlety, and very rarely is there room for subtlety in political arguments. The fact that Catholics had become enmeshed in a political argument about abortion meant that there was no place for the complexity of moral argument to fit in. The complexity that the consistent ethic of life must put at the center of attention, finally, was the third reason the consistent ethic of life was dead on arrival. And for that reason, all of the U.S. bishops' Faithful Citizenship efforts tend to boil down simply and merely, only to abortion.

We have been hearing a simple message for a long time, and more recently that simple message has been repeated by Catherine P. O'Neill, the head of Catholics for Trump and, more controversially, by LaCrosse, Wisconsin priest, Father James Altman. That simple message is, "You cannot be a Catholic and be a Democrat." (Interestingly, the head of Catholics for Trump and Father Altman used the same phrasing.) But here is where some simplicity perhaps begins to help us.

If we want to reflect on how to live our faithful citizenship as Catholic citizens, maybe Father Altman and Ms. O'Neill are prompting us to ask the right question: What is a Catholic? Speaking as a political scientist, I can say that defining a Democrat is easy. A Democrat is anyone who runs for office as a Democrat, anyone who holds office as a Democrat, and anyone in the moment when they vote for a Democrat. "Democrat" isn't an ontological status, it is not something imprinted on us like sacramental grace. It is something political science teaches that we put on in situations. For most of us, we only are a member of a party in the act of voting for the party. Even in that act, we know that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Hillary Rodham Clinton are different sorts of Democrats and they believe different things. There is considerable diversity among Democrats.

Being Catholic is an ontological mark imprinted on us by our baptism, and in this sense being Catholic is quite different. But perhaps it is worth recalling that Catholics also are permitted to believe a wide diversity of different things. Let us begin by remembering something that most Catholics never think about: there are many different liturgical calendars and different liturgical rites in our church because the Roman Rite is one of twenty-three rites in communion with the papacy. The Syro-Malabar Rite or the Syriac Rite would be unrecognizable to most Catholics we know, and yet the members of those Eastern churches undeniably are as Catholic as the pope.

But there is a deeper, and at least equally unfamiliar sense in which I want to make being Catholic seem very, very simple, and it is this: there are very few things, as Catholics, that we are definitively required to believe. What Catholics must accept without question is contained in the dogmas of the church, and summarized more or less by the Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed, or the promises made at baptism and renewed during the Easter season. We believe in the three persons of the Trinity; we believe in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus; the virginity of Mary, the resurrection of the body, the holy, Catholic, and apostolic church, and life everlasting. Amen. This is our faith: this is the faith of the church (and, we are proud to proclaim it). Father James Martin and others have pointed out that saying someone is not a Catholic because of some political position overlooks entirely these most central elements of Catholic faith, and treats them like they are irrelevant--which is strange.

To be Catholic also is to owe religious submission of mind and will to the doctrines of the church. But without getting too technical about it here where I only am making a point about how simple it really is to be a Catholic, I only want to observe that the doctrines of the church have a range of authorities--some are more definitive than others--and, of course, we know that

doctrine develops. As doctrine can develop, that means that there can be some legitimate room for disagreement *even about doctrine*. That is an inevitable, necessary corollary of doctrinal development. For example, if I survey the long history of the church through twenty centuries and that experience leaves me wondering whether, really, the church only can ordain unmarried men, having that question does not remove the mark of my baptism. In fact, I have not even committed a sin when I do that.

Now, coming to understand how simple it is to be a Catholic certainly demands that we need to step away from the tumult of political argument and think for a moment. When we come to a clearer understanding of our faith, we see that we Americans have adopted a rather strange way of understanding what being Catholic means. Most of us, when we think about being Catholic, we think of it like the loyalty that I feel toward the Chicago White Sox or the loyalty I am meant to feel toward brands like Cheerios, Charmin, or Cheez-Its than it is like a rather simple and profound attachment to the Gospel and the person of Jesus. But if it is some sort of help that we are searching for when we embark on the task of bringing our faith to bear as citizens, I want to suggest that this simple and profound attachment is what it means to be a Catholic in political life because it is what it means to be Catholic. We respond in love to the world, and especially to the vulnerable.

Now that does seem simple. And, of course it is not simple. Politics is about making imperfect choices between imperfect alternatives. We all know from experience that we never are given simple choices between good and evil, and we know that sometimes we need to weigh the care we can show to one group of vulnerable people against the care we can show to another group of vulnerable people because, for any of a variety of reasons, our available choices do not permit us to help everyone. Sometimes it is the inadequacy of resources--money or time.

Sometimes it is because the reach of our action does not stretch far enough to help everyone. Sometimes it is because we have two major political parties, each of which only reflects partially the care for the vulnerable that we want to express. So, how shall we vote?

I want to dwell here for a moment on the nature of what politics is, and ultimately to do that in the light of what Pope Francis has been saying rather consistently about politics since his election. Here is an important thought from Pope Francis to help us get started--

We have politicians – and even religious leaders – who wonder why people do not understand and follow them, since their proposals are so clear and logical. Perhaps it is because they are stuck in the realm of pure ideas and end up reducing politics or faith to rhetoric.¹¹

There is a lot of truth in those two sentences for us to notice and appreciate.

First, notice that Francis has not hesitated to group politicians and religious leaders together (and by religious leaders, he certainly must mean to include Catholic bishops): Pope Francis sees that religious leaders and politicians are behaving the same way a little too often, and he does not appear to be impressed by how they are behaving. They offer such “clear and logical” ideas as though everything has been figured out. There is no work for us to do. Just listen and do as told. Isn’t it simple that way? .

But in particular, I want to call attention to how Francis pays preferential attention to what is concrete, not what is abstract. As he has said elsewhere, “Realities are more important than ideas.”¹² And that is an important political idea. Politics is concrete. Politics is practical: it demands practical wisdom, and it poses us with practical decisions like those we face when we

¹¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 232.

¹² *Ibid.*, 231.

vote or otherwise participate in political life. Our political decisions always are concrete. We make them in moments when some things are possible and other things are not. Over time, what is possible changes. Opportunities come, then they pass. Circumstances and contexts shift. And, in each moment we need to be asking--What is the most effective good I can do now, today, reading the signs of these times? And of course, we have to *guess*. We have imperfect knowledge about the future and even the present. We *don't know* what the effects of our actions will be. We do our best to anticipate and draw from our experience and what knowledge we do have. But everyone who has voted so far to end abortions has been wrong. So has everyone who voted to end war or poverty. Political decisionmaking doesn't work like that.

That is why Cardinal Bernardin's consistent ethic of life is important. We often hear it said that the consistent ethic blurred the distinctions between different threats to human life, somehow diminishing the seriousness of abortion. But what Bernardin said was that we need to cultivate an "attitude" that always puts protecting human life first. With that as the center of our concern, then we need to ask how in this moment we can *most effectively* protect human life. Which candidate or party stands the chance to do the *most good* in *these* circumstances? The candidate or party that seems best may change from election to election because perhaps, at one time, something concrete might really be done to reduce the number of abortions while, in a later election, circumstances may say that the chances are better to do something concrete that will reduce poverty. Perhaps you might calculate that focusing your attention on alleviating poverty might not only help the poor but also might reduce abortions. Perhaps you have decided that the president of the United States really cannot affect abortions much, but he might take effective steps to end a pandemic.

These are just a few examples. But, notice that all of these judgments begin from a desire to promote and protect human life effectively. Notice that all of them proceed from that desire to weigh the possibilities of the moment and calculate the best way to act based on a reflection on the concrete details of what the law says, or how the branches of government operate, or what particular candidates say, or how candidates are constrained by political considerations, or whether economic considerations might frustrate particular sorts of actions, or any of countless other, concrete details. Simply to say that something is morally evil so you “have to” vote against it is, as Pope Francis said, “stuck in the realm of pure ideas.” And, as Pope Francis, says, that “reduces politics or faith to rhetoric.” It becomes angry noise that distracts us from being effective, believing citizens in any meaningful sense. It is bad political advice and, worse, because rhetoric like that excuses us from the difficult moral reflection that we are supposed to be doing as citizens, we actually fail to do any practical good. We dream of ending a moral evil for five decades. After eleven presidential elections have failed to end it, we act as though as twelfth election will. And what good do we fail to do while we abandon concrete action for abstract rhetoric? How divided do we become? How much toxicity do we welcome into the atmosphere of our community in exchange for the fleeting pleasure of feeling like we are more right than someone else? How much do we let such rhetoric lull us into what Francis has called “a semi-Pelagian mindset,” the belief that we are in charge and--as the president of the United States even has said out loud recently--God somehow needs our help to bring salvation to the world by defeating someone in an election?¹³

¹³ Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 49.

What I like about the Faithful Citizenship document is that it will not tell us how to vote, and it does take seriously the full range of threats to human life. Yet we never fail to fall into the abortion trap, and we have to stop doing that. We just have to. And the best way to do that is to take Pope Francis's advice. We have to notice that everything we have been doing has not worked. Not only have we failed to get the policy outcomes we say we want, but we also have managed to marginalize the Catholic voice everywhere in politics. Appearing as partisan as any politician, religious leaders have made themselves little different from politicians. Even their good arguments, it seems to me, are greeted with wary cynicism. And, that's not where we should be.

To think concretely, rather than abstractly, means that we have to be educated about the issues, educated about the political system, and educated about the possibilities of a particular moment. It also means that we have to be willing to get it wrong. Perhaps we will miscalculate, and our vote will not yield the good result we hoped it would. But that's okay. Elections almost never settle things, and next time we will get a chance to do it again. The political system always is in an ongoing process of reinventing itself--old problems disappear, new problems emerge, sometimes new opportunities surprise us. The whole moral universe does not collapse because of one election, one vote.

Listen to Pope Francis one more time. Last January he told a group of American bishops on their *ad limina* visit to Rome--

in an election, "you sometimes seem to be caught, you know, are you going to vote in one sense for a snake or you going to vote for a dragon...?" The pope's advice to the bishops was "teach your people discernment by ... stepping back from the sheer politics of it" and

focus[ing] on the values at stake...."If you try to step back and say, 'but here are the major moral issues that we face,' that's what is most important."¹⁴

That word, discernment, is where I want to end. It is a Jesuit word drawn from Ignatian spirituality, and it means to suggest to us that we need to sit with problems, search for wisdom and guidance, and so carefully come to understand what comes from God and what doesn't. What is good and what isn't. The assumption is that discernment is not about finding what already is obvious. Discernment is about sifting through a problem, and listening for the whisper of a still, small voice.

Notice what Pope Francis did not talk about: he did not name any issues. He did not provide a clear roadmap, no voter's guide or ready-made answer that tells you which candidate or party is the one that makes you a Catholic. No "preeminent priority" Instead, observe the signs of the times; listen; learn; reflect; discern. That is the antidote, it is the way that we stop falling into the trap of single-issue voting and we escape from this abortion trap we are in. It also escapes the temptation that has ensnared every iteration of Faithful Citizenship we ever have seen: all of them fall into this very Catholic--in fact, comically Catholic--pattern of issuing a long document with numbered paragraphs that turns what we believe into a homework assignment nobody wants to do. When did Jesus ever distribute a syllabus? But we do love our documents.

The virtue that we find in this much simpler way Pope Francis suggests--thinking concretely and discerning carefully, with humility--is that it is not, finally, an intellectual exercise. Francis challenges us to do something else entirely, to deepen our love for God and one another and then to respond and to act from that. Anyone can do it. It does not require

¹⁴ Catholic News Service, "Pope Francis urges bishops to teach Catholics discernment on voting and politics," published online at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/01/20/pope-francis-urges-bishops-teach-catholics-discernment-voting-and-politics>.

advanced study of theology or philosophy, nor is it a grade on a test about the Catechism. Our political activity must simply be spiritual activity. It must grow from our spiritual lives, and so we must nourish our spiritual lives in order to be faithful citizens. The Catholic way to vote is to be good Catholics, and that has nothing to do with party affiliation or a public policy outcome. As a spiritual matter, we may trust St. John of the Cross--"In the evening of life, we will be judged on love alone."

I like to put it this way. A good Catholic can vote for Donald Trump. A good Catholic can vote for Joe Biden. The vote does not tell me much. But tell me *why* you voted for one or the other. How much have you thought about the implications of your vote? How concerned are you for promoting and protecting every life in every situation in concretely effective ways, not sacrificing your vote to an abstraction that helps no one? How committed are you to overcoming division and building up this world we have been given? When you are judged on love alone, what will your vote say about you?

One day we all will be asked those questions. We'd better have good answers.

Thank you.