



Diocese of Pittsburgh

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Office of the Bishop

September 22, 2020

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Each day over the course of the last several weeks, I have been receiving anguished messages from so many of you who want me to endorse one or another of candidates for public office, including the office of president. While I urge all the faithful of our diocese, both the laity and the clergy, to help build a better society by exercising your right to vote, it is not my role nor can it ever be for me to tell anyone for whom to vote. As Church, we must be about addressing issues grounded on our faith and tradition.

At the same time, I recognize that many of you feel such deep distress about this election, perhaps the most contentious in the course of our lifetime. From the perspective of Catholic social teaching, there are problems with each of the major parties' platforms and their endorsed candidates. So many of you are sharing with me that you want to do the right thing for our country, especially for our most vulnerable people. Quite honestly, the concerns that matter most to Jesus and to us, His Church, have been taken captive across a political divide.

On the back wall of my office hangs the Papal Bull that I received from Pope Benedict confirming his appointment of me as Bishop of Pittsburgh. In that important document, he highlighted that one of the most important responsibilities I have as Pastor of the Church of Pittsburgh is to teach what Jesus teaches and to teach that which is the tradition of our Church.

It is within that context that I write to you. And while I risk that some people will be tempted to mistake, misstate or misrepresent my thoughts, I must take this opportunity to speak to our voting rights as more than simply pulling a lever, pressing a button or sending a ballot in the mail. Our vote is one that must be viewed as a moral decision.

Among the major issues on our country's landscape during this election season are "life issues." Those include the serious threats to human life and dignity, some of which are racism, the environmental crisis, human trafficking, unemployment, underemployment, appropriate medical coverage, the death penalty, religious freedom, the plight of immigrants, and poverty among others. In each and all of these, the Gospel calls for our attention.

And while this list is but a partial litany of "life issues," it is imperative that I turn your attention to the issues of abortion and infanticide. When we take a look at the important litany of "life issues," one of the realities that sometimes escapes notice is the hierarchy of these issues that needs to be recognized.

At the forefront of "life issues" is the right to be born as the right upon which all other "life issues" rest. Pope Saint John Paul II makes this point in his encyclical "The Gospel of Life" where he writes:

"The human person is to be respected and treated as a person from the first moment of conception; and therefore, from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every human being to life." (#60)

That sentiment is reaffirmed by our current Holy Father, Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation “The Gospel of Joy” in which he writes:

“Reason alone is sufficient to recognize the inviolable value of each single human life, but if we also look at the issue from the standpoint of faith, ‘every violation of the personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offense against the creator of the individual.’” (#213)

And again he writes:

“Because this involves the internal consistency of our message about the value of the human person, the Church cannot be expected to change her position on this question. I want to be completely honest in this regard. This is not something subject to alleged reforms or ‘modernizations.’ It is not ‘progressive’ to try to resolve problems by eliminating human life.” (#214)

Following consistent Catholic teaching, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in its introductory letter to the 2020 edition of “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” highlights that abortion is the “preeminent priority” of the “life issues.” In that letter, we bishops write, “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed. At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity, such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty, and the death penalty.”

Moreover, some might argue for or against the matter at hand as being a “single issue.” Both are correct. Respect for life IS the issue. But it is a continuum of other issues, many issues, that flow from the beginning of life at the moment of conception. Again, every other iteration of life flows from the preeminent moment of conception.

As you prepare for election day, November 3, I urge you to study the issues carefully so as to arrive at a decision made by a well-formed conscience.

- ❖ Pray over how best to support the common good and the life and dignity of all people;
- ❖ Seek guidance through prayerful reading of Jesus in the New Testament;
- ❖ Honestly inform yourself about the moral teaching of the Catholic Church.

To follow one’s conscience does not mean following one’s feelings. It means praying over, studying about and looking at the big picture of “life issues” beginning with conception. When we vote, we must vote with the most vulnerable in mind, from children—born and unborn—to the elderly, racial minorities, those with disabilities, immigrants, the unemployed, and so many others who have been marginalized.

As a word of caution, please also note. From our Catholic perspective it is morally unacceptable to vote for a candidate with the specific intent in support of something which is evil, i.e. abortion, racism, etc.

Over the course of the past thirteen years since becoming your Bishop, during each one of the presidential election years I have written to you about who we are as Catholics. I have provided opportunities for you to be informed so as to have a well-informed conscience.

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Once again, and in an effort to help you make a good “conscience” decision about the 2020 elections, we as a diocese have posted political guidelines and resources on our diocesan website (<https://diopitt.org/catholic-voter-guide>).

On that website, you will find a video with a message from myself, guidelines for political activity at parishes and schools in our diocese and a variety of parish resources on voting and on civility. These guidelines and resources are intended to help you vote with a view to the principles that reflect us as the Church, the Body of Christ.

As we are all being bombarded with messages regarding the elections, I want to point out that **the only guidelines approved by the diocese are located on the diocesan website**. You will note that information speaks to the issues and not for or against any of the political contenders. Not all material from other organizations delivered to your mailbox, left under the windshield wiper of your car, sent as text messages or in your email inbox claiming to be Catholic reflects the fullness of Catholic teaching. Some of these may distort and misstate Catholic teaching or advocate for the election of one candidate over another. I have already received many angry complaints from our priests and parishioners that such materials are being distributed. **I want to remind everyone that it is diocesan policy that no political materials may be distributed at or posted on church or parish property.**

In addition, read and reflect upon the document “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” (2020 Edition) prepared by us bishops to help you as you prepare to vote.

You should also be aware that I am reminding and encouraging our priests and deacons not to speak for or against any candidate, particularly from the pulpit. In a separate letter to them I have written: “While it is not for the Church to endorse specific candidates or political parties, it is part of our role as ordained clergy to carry out the teaching mission of the Church, which involves educating people about issues relating to Church teaching and the importance of voting with an informed and well-formed conscience.”

As we face the next weeks preparing to vote, I thank you for taking into consideration the thoughts that I have shared with you in this letter. Please vote! Please vote with an informed conscience! Please vote with the whole truth in mind.

And finally, this election season will most surely continue to heat up. When things seem especially confusing or overwhelming, as we make conscientious decisions about voting, you and I must continue to love each other despite our differences. As we approach this election, if we do not act with love toward each other, then we will all have lost.

Grateful for our continued efforts together in being *On Mission for The Church Alive!*, and for our belief that “Nothing is Impossible with God,” I am

Your brother in Christ,

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Most Reverend David A. Zubik
Bishop of Pittsburgh

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