

How a Catholic Votes

No, in this column I am not going to tell you for whom to vote; rather, I intend to offer a few thoughts about how a conscientious Catholic mind works when making decisions about voting.

When a Father looks upon his son or daughter, or when a Mother gazes upon her child in the crib, a spontaneous hope in their heart rises. And immediately following, a small but real fear. The hope is rooted in the promise of a child growing strong in spirit, mind and body; of a child when grown to maturity able to do much good to help build a more just, peaceable and happy future. The fear that spontaneously makes itself felt in the experience of a parent is rooted in the awareness that the world is not a very hospitable place sometimes; indeed, many obstacles and trials and dangers lie in the path of any person trying to be good and live justly.

A parent instinctively knows that it is not easy to raise a family; if it were easy to be good, everyone would be that way. Unfortunately, as both newspapers and neighborhood conversations attest, not everyone is. A parent commits him or herself to fending off the dangers, and putting in place the human and material resources needed to make the promise triumph over the fear.

Every parent realizes that you must first combat the immediate dangers, in order to establish the conditions to be able also to build up the good. They are simultaneous efforts, but each has a priority and order. For example, a child may need to eat vegetables to grow healthy and strong, but today, she is playing near a place where rattlesnakes gather. Get her away from the snake pit before you reach for the broccoli. Or, a child may have a developing case of diabetes, and at the same time need practice to learn his times-tables. First things first. The child must first be taking his medicine and eating right so that, along the way he can profit from the exercise of his mind. But if the child is in a world where all three things are real, rattlesnakes, diabetes and the need to learn more mathematics, every parent knows that you work first to remove the immediate danger to life and health, so that the long term goals of health and education can be patiently dealt with.

A Father or Mother senses in their heart that not all dangers are far off, and not all opportunities to do good are at once at hand. Parents make decisions every day about what needs to be done first, and what needs to be done second. These judgments flow from an accurate sense of the real situation faced by the family and the child, and an accurate and practical sense of what is in the parents' power to do both to fend off the evils that threaten, and to promote the good that must be done.

I would like to propose this analogy as one that might be helpful as Catholics prepare to make decisions about how to vote in the coming elections. Think in terms of immediate dangers and hoped for goods. A Catholic seeks first to vote in such a way that present and grave dangers to persons in particular and society in general are overcome. A Catholic seeks to vote in such a way that the good of a more humane and just society is actively promoted in public policy.

As Catholics and human beings we know that the most grave threat to persons and to society is the deliberate taking of innocent human life. Publically sanctioned abortion, and public funding for abortion is the rattlesnake pit around which we and our children and our society are playing. First priority as a Catholic: protect innocent life. This includes protecting human embryos from scientific experimentation and manipulation.

But, even as we recognize the grave threats to innocent life, and steadfastly work to remove these evils from our midst, we have also to work patiently and perseveringly to promote a society where the just treatment of immigrants and refugees is advanced; we work to defend the very identity of marriage and family; we work to end the death penalty. And we vote also to uphold the conscientious concern for the poor and disabled, the elderly and the wounded in our society. What we cannot do is make our voting decisions without seriously forming our consciences according to the standards of human dignity taught to us by the Gospels, and handed on to us by the Church. We must make our judgments in a spirit of calm and thoughtful reflection upon what the candidates themselves indicate they will do.

But, as we all know, very often candidates support some things a Catholic holds dear concerning human dignity and the good of society, and not others. It is often not easy to decide what is best. What are we to do when we are given the responsibility of choosing our elected leaders, and when they themselves do not share all of our concerns? I say we do what a parent would do: vote first to get out of the environs of the serpent's lair. Vote first to remove the most immediate and heinous dangers to innocent human life; for as Pope John Paul II reminded us: "it is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop" (Gospel of Life, no. 101). After this, do as much as possible to promote through your voting all the other goods we hold as essential for the growth of our communities in a spirit of justice and fairness, and of shared responsibility for the most vulnerable.