

Moral principles unite Catholic voters

Based on my recent mail, church teaching on the protection of human life and dignity are uppermost in the minds of many Catholic voters. Over the course of the current election campaign I have received numerous letters suggesting that it is my duty as archbishop to instruct Catholics on why they should support or oppose certain candidates.

As we approach the election of 2008, I offer a reminder, as I did four years ago, that the Catholic Church does not align itself with political parties or endorse candidates. As I wrote then, "Our attention is properly focused on the universal moral principles that unite all Catholics, not the issues that divide partisan factions."

This year, as in 2004, a growing controversy over church teachings (primarily those on the sanctity of life and the application of this teaching in the public square) challenge our unity as the body of Christ. In my pastoral letter four years ago, "Sign of Faith...Bread of Life," I clarified the role of the church in public affairs, the moral principles that should guide the actions of all Catholics involved in political life and the need for dialogue to promote and preserve Catholic unity.

I am especially concerned that Catholic people do not lose sight of our unity in Christ to the extent that we are unable to effectively confront the significant and growing challenges to the practice of our faith. We are being robbed of our religious liberty daily by requirements that force Catholic institutions to buy insurance covering abortion, potential mandates to cooperate in assisted suicide and requirements to sell contraceptive drugs contrary to the teaching of the church. I will cover this issue in greater detail in my next column because I believe it represents the greatest immediate threat to

our religious freedom.

With regard to the current presidential election, bishops and clergy must avoid endorsing candidates or telling people how to vote, but I appreciate the comments by those who have written to me because they raise important issues for all Catholic voters. The letters generally make one



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of two points. They either insist that a candidate who supports abortion must be opposed, or contend that candidates who are indifferent to an unjust war, social justice and the needs of the poor cannot be considered pro-life.

Even though the positions of both groups refer to the protection of human life and dignity, they arrive at very different political conclusions. These sharply divided positions are indications of the difficult choices that confront Catholic voters who wish to apply moral principles to complex decisions in the public square.

In the context of electoral politics, my primary responsibility as archbishop is to convey the church's moral and social teaching. Together with priests and deacons, assisted by religious and lay leaders of the church, I am responsible for teaching Catholics the fundamental

moral principles that help Catholics approach public policy issues with a well formed conscience.

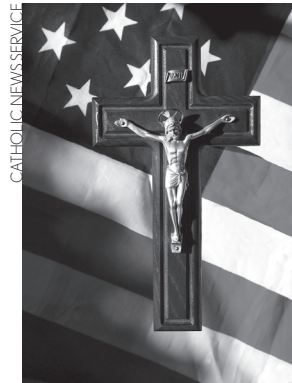
Oppose evil, do good

However, I have not remained passive or silent on issues related to the protection of human life and dignity, as some letter writers suggest. In this regard, I have attempted to follow the example of Jesus in Chapter 6 of John's Gospel through listening, teaching and dialogue.

With respect to Catholics who arrive at differing conclusions regarding the protection of human life and dignity, it is important to remember that each of us has a responsibility to discern which public policies are morally sound. As the 2007 U.S. bishops' statement on faithful citizenship states:

"As we all seek to advance the common good — by defending the inviolable sanctity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death, by defending marriage, by feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, by welcoming the immigrant and protecting the environment — it is important to recognize that not all possible courses of action are morally acceptable. Catholics may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems, but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to help build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended."

When we vote or participate in public life in any way, "Both opposing evil and doing good are essential obligations." We must be especially careful to avoid the temptations of moral equivalence,



which sees no ethical distinction between issues involving human life and dignity, or ignoring serious threats to human life and dignity except the intentional destruction of innocent human life.

Well formed conscience

Although choices about how to protect human life and dignity are matters for principled debate and decision, all are serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act. Under no circumstance is the church's defense of human life an optional concern that may be dismissed.

In preparation for exercising the privilege and obligation to vote, I encourage all Catholics to prayerfully read and reflect on the teaching I offered in my 2004 pastoral letter, with particular attention to the need for dialogue when ethical or moral questions are raised in public debate.

I encourage you to celebrate the Eucharist and to follow the Lord's example by putting the dignity of all human life, the needs of the poor and vulnerable and the pursuit of the common good ahead of private, personal gain, political partisanship or the narrowly defined goals of any special interest group.

I also urge you to consider the teachings of the church in their totality, to analyze issues for their full social and moral dimension and to measure all public policy and political candidate choices against Gospel values.

The only reliable "voters guide" to faithful citizenship is a well formed conscience. For help in forming your conscience in keeping with Catholic teaching, visit the archdiocesan Web Site at www.seattlearch.org where you will find my pastoral letter ("Bread of Life...Sign of Faith") and the 2007 U.S. bishops' statement on faithful citizenship.