

# The Relationship between Prudential Judgment and Catholic Teaching in the Process of Electoral Discernment

[Chapter in *Voting and Holiness, A Catholic's Guide to the Political Process*, edited by Nick Cafardi. Mahwah: Paulist Press, forthcoming in 2011.]

Richard R. Gaillardetz, Ph.D.  
Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies  
University of Toledo

Over the last few decades, the quadrennial presidential election campaigns have been accompanied by a parallel drama enacted within the American Catholic community. The public has witnessed rancorous debates among Catholics regarding the relationship between their religious convictions and their civic obligations as voters. In order to help guide Catholics in their negotiation of this tension, in this essay I will offer some prudential “imperatives” that I think Catholics must attend to as they exercise their dual obligations as Catholics and American citizens. But first it might be helpful to explore in a little more detail what we mean by “the Catholic voter.”

## ***Appealing to Conscientious Catholics***

Clarke and David Carroll Cochran have divided the so called “Catholic vote” into three different groups. First are the “nominal Catholics,” that is, Catholics who self-identify as Catholics but “whose affiliations with the church and its Catholic social teaching are tenuous at best.”<sup>1</sup> Their political viewpoints are influenced far more by their social, cultural and ideological convictions than by their religious convictions and they seldom articulate their political views in the language of their religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Clarke E. Cochran and David Carroll Cochran, *The Catholic Vote: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 41.

tradition. A second group we might refer to as “ideological Catholics.” Their policy positions are primarily driven by ideology, whether from the political left or the right. These Catholics will appeal to church teaching but only as it has already been filtered through prior ideological commitments. They will cite church teaching, but selectively, appealing only to those teachings that support their prior ideological agenda.

Last are those whom Cochran and Cochran refer to as “faithful Catholics,” or whom I will refer to as “conscientious Catholics,” namely those Catholics “who strive to embrace Catholic social teaching as a whole and who work to have their Catholic faith shape their political attitudes and behavior, including voting.”<sup>2</sup> The American bishops have tried to nudge more American Catholics toward this third category. In their document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, which they approved in November, 2007, the bishops wrote:

As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation ought to transform the party to which we belong. We should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths.<sup>3</sup>

The great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr articulated much the same concern when he warned against the perennial American temptation of appealing to our God “as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire.”<sup>4</sup> Consideration of the obligations of Catholic voters will focus on this last group.

## ***Precepts for the Exercise of Prudence in Electoral Discernment***

There is an ethical tradition that goes back to Aristotle which grounds ethics in the practice of virtue. Building on this tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas gave particular attention to the virtue of prudence

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2007), 4 [#14]. This document can be accessed at <http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/FCStatement.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> The Niebuhr quotation is found in E.J. Dionne, “Religion’s Reach and the Tides of Change,” E.J. Dionne, “Religion’s Reach and the Tides of Change,” *Notre Dame Magazine* 37 (Summer, 2008): 44-8, at 48.

and its role in public life. Thomas, following Aristotle, held that prudence was an exercise of practical reason and was oriented toward the search for the good to be found in any practical circumstance.<sup>5</sup> Yet prudence is not only concerned with the *recognition* of the good for it also guides us toward the right means for accomplishing that good. From a Christian perspective, prudence is concerned with bringing our faith to bear on concrete moral situations. As such, no virtue may be more vital for navigating one's way through our contemporary political terrain. New York Times columnist, David Brooks offers his own definition of prudence:

What is prudence? It is the ability to grasp the unique pattern of a specific situation. It is the ability to absorb the vast flow of information and still discern the essential current of events — the things that go together and the things that will never go together. It is the ability to engage in complex deliberations and feel which arguments have the most weight.<sup>6</sup>

The American bishops wrote that “prudence shapes and forms our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively.”<sup>7</sup> I contend that the entire process of choosing a candidate for public office is governed by the exercise of prudence. And it is the inevitable complexity of this prudential judgment that prevents us from assuming that all well informed Catholics will make the same choices. In what follows I will propose four precepts intended to illuminate key features of a faithfully Catholic exercise of prudence in the electoral process.

### ***First Precept: Know Your Religious Tradition***

Catholic ethicist Stephen Pope contends that “the most distinctive and important feature of Catholic participation in civic life will be the quality of its moral engagement and the breadth of its moral

---

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q. 47, a. 2. For a detailed study of the virtue of prudence in Thomistic ethics see Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> David Brooks, “Why Experience Matters,” *New York Times* (September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> *Forming Consciences*, 7 [# 19].

vision.”<sup>8</sup> The cultivation of one’s moral vision presupposes, in turn, a fundamental precept: *know your religious tradition*.

The knowledge of a religious tradition certainly includes a firm grasp of the church’s formal teaching, particularly as regards Catholic social teaching. For many eager to bring their religious convictions into the public arena, there is an inclination to focus narrowly on a select few issues. Yet Catholicism has a broad and comprehensive body of social teaching that addresses issues of contemporary consequence from family life, immigration, to war, health care, abortion and the environment. A conscientious Catholic is morally obligated to take into account the full range of Catholic social teaching and not merely those teachings that pertain to a few pet issues. In *Faithful Citizenship* the bishops wrote that the “consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues.”<sup>9</sup> Here the bishops are making a strong case against single-issue voting.

However, the knowledge of one’s religious tradition is not limited to a grasp of formal church doctrine. Even more important is the need for a kind of participatory knowledge of the tradition. As helpful as catechisms and creeds are, in the end, knowing one’s tradition is not like a chemistry student knowing the periodic table. Genuine knowledge of one’s religious tradition can only come from a deep and sustained immersion within that tradition; it cannot be accessed simply by consulting a catechism. This participative knowledge comes by way of doctrine, yes, but perhaps even more by exposure to a tradition’s diverse exemplary figures (e.g., its saints and other moral leaders), its narratives, rituals and ethical practices.

---

<sup>8</sup> Stephen J. Pope, “Catholic Social Thought and the American Experience,” in *American Catholics and Civic Engagement: A Distinctive Voice* [Volume 1 of *American Catholics in the Public Square*], edited by Margaret O’Brien Steinfels (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 26-41, at 32.

<sup>9</sup> USCCB, *Forming Consciences*, 12 [# 40].

For example, Christians who regularly celebrate the Eucharist are shaped by a ritual practice that has the potential for communicating a deep solidarity with all humanity and particularly the marginalized among us. In the fourth century the bishop and theologian, St. John Chrysostom, reminded Christians of the connections between gathering at the Lord's Table and their obligations toward the poor and hungry. He wrote:

He who said: 'This is my body' is the same who said: 'You saw me hungry and you gave me no food', and 'Whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did also to me' ... What good is it if the Eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger. Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well.<sup>10</sup>

Faithful eucharistic participation ought to evoke a moral vision oriented toward the common good.

Pope Benedict XVI had this in mind when he called for a “eucharistic consistency” in his apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. According to Pope Benedict, authentic Christian worship has “consequences for our relationships with others.”<sup>11</sup> A eucharistic community blind to its obligations to the poor and hungry is a community that doesn't fully understand the Eucharist. Of course we are talking about an ideal situation. In practice there are many Christians who are regular church goers but who do not experience worship in this way for reasons too many to consider in our limited time this evening.<sup>12</sup> In spite of these impediments, it remains the case that those who are immersed in their tradition are best equipped to interpret adequately that tradition's teaching. This leads me to the second precept: *identify the fundamental principles that must be appealed to in applying Catholic social teaching to pertinent social issues.*

---

<sup>10</sup> John Chrysostom, *In Evangelium S. Matthaei*, hom. 50:3-4: PG 58, 508-509.

<sup>11</sup> # 83. Text may be accessed on-line at the Vatican website.

<sup>12</sup> Pope, 36-7.

**2. Second Precept: Identify the Fundamental Moral Principles that are to Guide Your Electoral Discernment**

For some time now a number of Catholic special interest groups have been subtly imposing their own idiosyncratic hierarchy of church teaching on the consciences of Catholic voters. For example, a Catholic organization known as Catholic Answers Action has been producing its own unofficial pamphlet for Catholic voters titled, *Voters' Guide for Serious Catholics*. Although this guide has no official standing, it has been very influential among conservative Catholics and therefore merits our consideration.<sup>13</sup> The guide begins by acknowledging the wide range of Catholic social teaching, but it quickly singles out five teachings which it characterizes as “nonnegotiable” teachings to be elevated above all others: abortion, euthanasia, cloning, stem cell research and same-sex marriage. But what sets these teachings apart from the others? According to the guide, they are principles that condemn intrinsically evil actions. Yet, as Cathleen Kaveny has observed in a very perceptive article in this collection, there is nothing in Catholic social teaching that declares that the condemnation of intrinsically evil actions are *ipso facto*, more authoritative than the condemnation of evils considered in virtue of moral intention and circumstance. She points out that to say that an action is intrinsically evil is simply to say that it is wrong in virtue of its object, regardless of either the motive of the actor or the circumstances. Consequently, intrinsically evil actions are always morally wrong. To declare an action intrinsically evil is to say nothing about the gravity of the evil. For example, it may be the case that according to Catholic just war teaching, war is not an intrinsic evil. However, once a moral judgment is made that an act of war does not fulfill the just war criteria, the evil of that act of war is not lessened by the fact that it was determined through an analysis of motive and circumstance. Moreover, if one is

---

<sup>13</sup> For a careful and balanced analysis of this guide ,along with another produced by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, see Harold E. Ernst, “How to ‘Vote Catholic’: Dueling Catholic Voter Guides in the 2006 Midterm Elections,” in *Faith in Public Life* [College Theology Society Annual, vol. 53 (2007)], edited by William J. Collinge (Orbis: Maryknoll, 2008), 179-201.

going to focus on the opposition of intrinsic evils as the indispensable moral core of a Catholic voters electoral discernment why not include torture, itself an intrinsic evil, in this moral core?

The above mentioned voters guide also suggests that these five nonnegotiables are to be set apart because they regard issues for which there can be but one legitimate application of church teaching—legal prohibition. Yet this is a clear case of asserting what needs to be demonstrated. Opposition to an intrinsic evil is an absolute moral obligation for Catholics, but this obligation does not relieve a Catholic of the prudential judgment regarding how this opposition is to be made socially effective.

To conclude, while granting the need to weigh the relative authority and centrality of Catholic social doctrine, there seems to be something arbitrary about the identification of these five “non-negotiables.” If this rather idiosyncratic approach to church teaching is inadequate, what is the alternative? One might start with a consideration of two overarching moral principles that undergird virtually the entirety of Catholic social teaching: 1) the unconditional affirmation of the dignity of human life with a special concern for the dignity of the most vulnerable among us and 2) a commitment to the common good.

For Catholics, the first principle proceeds from the basic Christian conviction that all human life is sacred and that this sacredness bestows upon humans an inalienable dignity. This dignity requires the preservation of those basic human rights necessary for human flourishing. The second principle, concern for the common good, proceeds from the biblical injunction to love one’s neighbor. Love of neighbor, in turn, requires a broad social commitment to the welfare of others. This second principle holds that the good of each person is bound up in the good of the larger community. All citizens must resist the temptation to look after only their own welfare, but must concern themselves with the welfare of all, even where the common welfare does not accrue benefit to them. Pope Benedict

describes this commitment to the common good quite eloquently in his social encyclical, *Caritas in*

*Veritate*:

Another important consideration is the common good. To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of "all of us", made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the *common good* and strive towards it *is a requirement of justice and charity* (7).

These principles ground the "consistent ethic of life" that the American bishops continue to champion and provide a key to electoral discernment. They provide a vital moral framework for the exercise of prudence rather than a simplistic alternative to the complexity of prudential judgment. For having developed a mature moral framework informed by Catholic social teaching and governed by its two most central principles, the Catholic voter must still navigate from the sure ground of binding moral principle to the much more dangerous terrain of concrete moral application. This leads us to a third precept, *be careful to distinguish matters of moral principle from matters of practical implementation*.

### **3. Third Precept: Distinguish Matters of Moral Principle from Matters of Prudential Judgment**

This precept is concerned with a basic feature of Christian ethics that goes right to the heart of the exercise of prudence. Catholic social teaching certainly possesses a dogmatic foundation grounded in the Decalogue and the teaching of Jesus. Yet an important passage from the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et spes* suggests that the council was not convinced that all moral teaching was divinely revealed:

The church is guardian of the deposit of God's word and draws religious and moral principles from it, but it does not always have a ready answer to every question. Still, it is eager to associate the light of revelation with the experience of humanity in trying to clarify the course upon which it has recently entered (GS 33).

What is the nature of this distinction between moral principles drawn from God's Word and answers to particular questions which do not necessarily come from divine revelation?

Roman Catholicism has always stressed the importance of human reason in the moral life. Catholicism has insisted that there is an identifiable moral structure to the universe (we can also speak of this as a moral "law" as long as we overlook the rigorist connotations of the word)<sup>14</sup> and that we are capable of discovering it through rational reflection on human experience. Because of human sinfulness, this is not as easy as it might be. For that reason, in addition to the employment of our powers of reason in reflection on our experience, we may also turn to divine revelation. We believe that God's saving Word calls us to moral conversion and a life dedicated to the achievement of virtue and goodness. Therefore at least some of what we might discover in the natural law through reasoned reflection on human experience is also confirmed in divine revelation. But does this hold for the entirety of the natural law? From the 16th through the 19th centuries it was not uncommon for theologians to teach that all of the natural law belonged to divine revelation, including the most specific of moral injunctions. Few theologians would hold this position today.

It may be helpful to distinguish between three integrally related categories of moral teachings. Of a more general nature are universal moral teachings regarding the law of love, the dignity of the human person, respect for human life, obligation to care for the environment. These affirmations constitute the very foundation of Catholic social teaching, would generally be considered dogmatic in character and, even though they have never been formally defined, demand of believers an assent of faith.

---

<sup>14</sup> For a consideration of the ambiguities inherent in speaking of a moral "law" see John Mahoney, "The Language of Law," in *The Making of Moral Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 224-58. See also Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Most of the more specific contents of what we think of as Catholic social teaching belongs, however, to the next two levels: specific moral principles and the concrete application of specific moral principles. Specific moral principles emerge out of the church's ecclesial reflection upon universal moral teachings in the light of theological inquiry, the insights of the human sciences and rational reflection on human experience. This complex ecclesial inquiry yields such specific moral principles as the affirmation of political, civic and economic human rights, the restrictive conditions that must exist in order to justify capital punishment, the preferential option for the poor and the prohibition of the direct taking of innocent life.

These specific moral principles generally fall within the category of church teaching known as authoritative doctrine. These are teachings that possess a provisionally binding status but are not, in principle, irreversible. The main reason for seeing such teachings as non-dogmatic lies in the way in which, as these teachings attend more to specific moral issues, they are shaped by changing moral contexts and contingent empirical data. These more specific moral principles can be of great assistance in the moral life, but because they are dependent in part on changing circumstances they can only apply, as the medieval tradition put it, "in the majority of instances" (*ut in pluribus*). This dependence on changing empirical data presents a strong argument against considering such teachings as belonging to divine revelation. Consequently, it is the conclusion of many theologians that, while it is legitimate and necessary for the teaching office of the church to propose specific moral principles for the guidance of the faithful, these teachings are not divinely revealed and cannot be taught as dogma.<sup>15</sup> This means that Catholics must treat these teachings as more than mere opinions or pious exhortations but as normative

---

<sup>15</sup> See John Boyle, "The Natural Law and the Magisterium," in *Church Teaching Authority: Historical and Theological Studies* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) 43-62; Richard A. McCormick, *Corrective Vision: Explorations in Moral Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 86-89; Franz Böckle, "Le magistère de l'Église in matière morale," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 19 (1989) 3-16; Francis A. Sullivan, "Some Observations on the New Formula for the Profession of Faith," *Gregorianum* 70 (1989): 552-4; André Naud, *Le magistère incertain* (Montreal: Fides, 1989), 77-121; Karl Rahner, "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976), 3-23.

church teaching that they must strive to integrate into their religious outlook. However, because they are not taught as irreversible, it is possible to imagine a Catholic who might be unable to accept a given teaching as reflective of God's will for humankind and could legitimately withhold giving an internal assent to it. A pacifist's conviction that it is never permissible to engage in an act of war would be an example of withholding assent from a specific moral principle taught authoritatively by the magisterium (but not infallibly).

At an even greater level of specificity are the concrete applications of specific moral principles. Here the dependence on changing contexts and contingent empirical data is even more pronounced than with specific moral principles. It is in this realm that the Second Vatican Council recognized the considerable range of judgment possible for Catholics today. The council renounced an ecclesiastical paternalism in which the laity passively submitted to the directives of the clergy. The council bishops boldly proposed a new framework reflected in one of the most remarkable passages of any conciliar document:

Let them [the laity] be aware of what their faith demands of them in these matters and derive strength from it; let them not hesitate to take the initiative at the opportune moment and put their findings into effect. It is their task to cultivate a properly formed conscience and to impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city. For guidance and spiritual strength let them turn to the clergy; but let them realize that their pastors will not always be so expert as to have a ready answer to every problem (even every grave problem) that arises; this is not the role of the clergy: it is rather up to the laity to shoulder their responsibilities under the guidance of Christian wisdom and with eager attention to the teaching authority of the Church. Very often their Christian vision will suggest a certain solution in some given situation. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that some of the faithful, with no less sincerity, will see the problem quite differently. Now if one or other of the proposed solutions is too easily associated with the message of the Gospel, they ought to remember that in those cases no one is permitted to identify the authority of the Church exclusively with his or her own opinion. [GS # 43].

This passage offers a balanced account of the Catholic Christian's obligations in the world. It is the laity who are to be the experts in applying church teaching to ever changing social contexts. The clergy provide guidance by their preaching and faithful presentation of Catholic teaching but it lies with the

laity to do the difficult work of bringing that teaching to bear on the problems and challenges of the modern world. Striking in this passage is the bishops' honest admission that Catholics of good faith may differ with one another regarding how best to apply Catholic teaching in a given circumstance.

In the 1980s the American bishops explored this final category in two groundbreaking documents, one on war and peace and the other on economic justice. Both documents acknowledged that while the bishops often make authoritative pronouncements regarding foundational moral principles, the specific policy applications they propose are not binding on the consciences of Catholics. For example, in *The Challenge of Peace*, the bishops wrote:

When making applications of these principles, we realize - and we wish readers to recognize - that prudential judgments are involved based on specific circumstances which can change or which can be interpreted differently by people of good will... However, the moral judgments that we make in specific cases, while not binding in conscience, are to be given serious attention and consideration by Catholics as they determine whether their moral judgments are consistent with the Gospel.<sup>16</sup>

For example, the bishops held that their condemnation of the first use of nuclear weapons constituted a concrete application of specific moral principles in a particular context. Catholics should carefully attend to the bishops' viewpoint, but they were not morally bound by it.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this distinction. Even Catholics who embrace the full range of church moral teaching may legitimately disagree with one another regarding the concrete implementation of these teachings in society. For example, church social teaching calls Catholics to a preferential option for the poor, a special concern for those who are poor and powerless in the world. No conscientious Catholic is free to dismiss the plight of the poor as somebody else's problem. Yet, even as two Catholics may agree that they have a religious and moral obligation toward the poor they may legitimately disagree on the particular economic policy initiatives that will best

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Challenge of Peace*, (#9-10). See also *Economic Justice for All*, # 135.

alleviate poverty. In like manner, two Catholics might disagree regarding whether the application of Catholic moral teaching on abortion requires a legal remedy in the form of criminalization.

Now, as I noted earlier, many Catholics who accept the distinction between binding moral principle and prudential judgment regarding the concrete application of these principles tend to overlook this distinction when it comes to certain issues. Nowhere is this more evident than in the volatile debates surrounding the question of abortion. The Catholic church teaches that abortion is a moral evil. But how ought a Catholic to work toward integrating this moral teaching into their civic obligations in a pluralistic and democratic society. How, in other words, do we move from binding moral principle to societal implementation?

It is commonly assumed that so called “pro-life” Catholics, by virtue of our acceptance of the church’s teaching on abortion, are morally obligated to vote for political candidates who support the appointment of Supreme Court judges intent on reversing *Roe v. Wade*. The pursuit of the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* is, in my view, a legitimate and defensible strategy for implementing Catholic teaching. Although I claim no special expertise in constitutional law, I believe a good argument can be made that *Roe v. Wade* is based on flawed constitutional interpretation. However, we cannot forget that a reversal of *Roe v. Wade* would have as its only direct effect a return of the issue to state legislatures. It is far from clear that even the majority of the fifty state legislatures would vote to criminalize abortions. And this is to say nothing of the practical problems associated with legal enforcement of anti-abortion laws or the fact that illegal and unsafe abortions would almost certainly continue.

My larger point is that, *as a matter of binding moral principle*, what Catholic teaching demands of a conscientious Catholic is a commitment to oppose abortion, not just privately, when faced with such a decision in the life of one’s family, but publicly as well. But, might a conscientious Catholic, precisely *because of* their convictions regarding the evil of abortion, pursue alternate strategies that in their judgment might be *more* effective in reducing the number of abortions in our country than

criminalization? To put the matter simply, could not a Catholic decide that it was more fruitful to change the culture rather than changing the law? I believe the answer is yes. Catholics can quite plausibly and defensibly act on church teaching by committing themselves to the cultivation of societal values that support not only the life and dignity of the unborn, but also the life and dignity of the already born, including the dignity of poor women who, having become pregnant, often find themselves in an impossible situation.

Many Catholics have made the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* bear the full weight of Catholic opposition to abortion. They have also made opposition to *Roe v. Wade* a veritable litmus test for Catholic orthodoxy. This approach, however well meaning, has undermined the exercise of prudence by suggesting that regarding certain issues, prudence's concern for attending to the particulars of practical circumstance were unnecessary. This brings us to a fourth precept for the exercise of prudential judgment in electoral discernment: *attend carefully to the particulars of one's social and political context.*

#### ***4. Fourth Precept: Carefully Attend to the Particulars of Political and Social Contexts***

It is considered among the highest compliments to refer to someone as a "person of principle." Yet in the exercise of prudence, principle alone does not suffice. One must attend to the particulars of a given context that are essential if the pertinent moral principles are to be appropriately applied. It is legitimate and necessary to consider not only a candidate's stated positions but also the likelihood that the candidate would actually bring about the implementation of some social value embedded in Catholic teaching. Candidates and parties have their own priorities and just because they take a particular stance on an issue, there is no guarantee that they will make that issue a priority should they be elected. So, for example, a candidate might say all the right things about education reform but a careful study of his past record and speeches may reveal that this issue is in fact very low on the candidate's list of priorities.

One must take into account not only a candidate's stated position, but also the strength and sincerity of their commitment to a given issue.

Other particulars would include the scope of authority that a candidate for a particular office would possess. As Cochran and Cochran have pointed out, a candidate's position on war and peace will be important in a presidential election but it will be much less so for the election of a state legislator. Someone running for the House of Representatives will have virtually no say on the appointment of Supreme Court justices. Catholic teaching on the death penalty is important, but presidents have considerably less power over the administration of the death penalty than do governors.<sup>17</sup> A prospective voter must weigh the likelihood that a candidate would have it in her power to actually effect change on an issue of concern to Catholics.

Finally, this attention to particulars means that one must also engage in a reading of the "signs of the times." "In the ebb and flow of politics, issues emerge and recede in relevance."<sup>18</sup> In a period of international calm one might choose not to focus on a candidate's foreign policy positions whereas in a period of international tension a more careful assessment of a candidate's approach to geopolitical conflict will become a priority.

In sum, this final precept encourages a religiously motivated voter to consider the particulars of a given political and social context and to give due attention not only to the principles that are to be brought into play but also the likely outcomes. This concern for the concrete political and social context was admitted by Pope Benedict when, as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he granted that it could be appropriate for a Catholic to vote for a political candidate who was "pro-choice" if there were proportionate reasons, that is, if one was not voting for the candidate *because of* their support of abortion rights but rather because, having taken all of the particular factors we have just

---

<sup>17</sup> Cochran and Cochran, *The Catholic Vote*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-5.

discussed into account, one had come to the conclusion that support of this candidate would most further the common good.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Vatican II understood well the complexities of the exercise of prudence in the public order. In the passage cited above in which the bishops called the laity to take the initiative in apply church teaching to contemporary social questions, they recognized the real possibility of disagreement in a Catholic's prudential judgments. How then were Catholics to deal with this disagreement? Sadly today many Catholics respond to these inevitable disagreements with shrill condemnation and recourse to simplistic bumper sticker slogans and thirty second sound bites. In doing so they are often unwittingly participating in the larger politics of demonization that has become endemic in our American political culture. Whether we are talking about the Rush Limbaughs and Sean Hannitys of the political right or the Michael Moores and Keith Olbermanns of the political left, what both sides share as a determination to demonize their opponents, imputing the worst of intentions upon those with whom they disagree. Too often Catholic have aped this demonizing tendency.

Yet the council offered a different way. In the passage from *Gaudium et spes* quoted above, the council called Catholics, when faced with different prudential judgments regarding the best way to implement Catholic social teaching to "...try to guide each other by sincere dialogue in a spirit of mutual charity and with anxious interest above all in the common good" (Gs 43). This alternative approach requires much of us. It demands that we submit our most precious viewpoints and convictions to the harsh light of the gospel. It demands that we have the courage to listen to those with whom we disagree, imputing to them the best rather than the worst of intentions. It demands the humility to

---

<sup>19</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life," (2002). This document can be accessed at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20021124\\_politica\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html).

know that others of equally good faith may disagree with us. It demands that we forsake bumper sticker platitudes and pseudo-Christian sound bites in favor of thoughtful, informed and yes, prayerful analysis. For anything less demeans the richness and transformative power of our religion and falls short of the faithful citizenship to which all American Catholics are called.