



*As we prepare ourselves for the fall 2012 U.S. elections, the JPIC Office and JPIC Directorate have been asked to present short pieces to help introduce particularly Franciscan and Catholic approaches to the decision-making process. Given their brevity, these pieces are not intended to address the complexity of the issues, but rather to provide broad parameters for use in our discernment of “what is ours to do.”*

## **Franciscans are not “party animals”**

*A reflection on the U.S. elections from the JPIC Directorate (Part 2)*

In Part 1 of “Franciscans are not ‘party animals,’” we looked at the difficult and often uncomfortable discernment process for Catholic voters. We outlined a method that might be used in applying a moral framework to specific voting decisions.

As Franciscans, we see voting as a communal decision-making process that eschews political slogans and mere intellectual abstractions or principles. Instead, it begins with a call to pay close attention to our experience, especially to our relationship with those who are powerless and marginalized. This unique path of discernment goes back to St. Francis of Assisi. Just as St. Francis of Assisi encountered Christ and his love in the embrace of the leper, we as Franciscan-hearted people are invited to embrace the excluded of today and speak for those who are not able to speak for themselves (Proverbs 31:8-9). Now more than ever, our love for Christ and all the powerless and vulnerable who bear his image impels us to bring their voices to the public square. To do this, it is incumbent upon us to ask critical questions and identify the processes by which so many of our brothers and sisters are being impoverished and excluded. Our desire for integrity and the all-embracing vision of God’s love calls us to transcend the blind spots and biases of any political party with its ideologies. As we work to this end, we hope that in the silence of our hearts, made more open by compassion, we can behold the beauty of all God’s creation, especially the children who are victims of abortion, the children who live and die in abject poverty, the elderly, the immigrants, the victims of injustice, violence and war, and the homeless, the sick and the unemployed.

In this spirit, we offer the following questions to help voters discern their choices. Though persons of goodwill may draw differing conclusions, the questions will help to move the discussion beyond abstractions. In grouping our questions, we have utilized the five interconnected parameters introduced in Part 1.

### **Care for Creation**

This first characteristic of the Franciscan framework for moral discernment is our experience of the goodness of God’s creation and our moral responsibility to care for it (Genesis 2:15). Related questions might include:

- Given the gravity and urgency of global climate change, attested by the overwhelming majority of climate scientists around the world, what kind of leadership will the candidate offer in responding to this issue?
- What path does s/he propose that would help to move our nation from its dependence on fossil fuels to an energy policy that is based on renewable and sustainable sources of energy?
- How does s/he suggest addressing the need for environmental regulations that provide safeguards from environmentally destructive actions caused by human ignorance or greed, without their being too onerous?

Evaluating answers to these questions should awaken our sense of kinship with all human and non-human creatures. Each voter is called to critically assess the likely impact that a particular environmental public policy would have, especially on the poor, our children, the unborn, the elderly, future generations, and the biodiversity of our planet that is in a precipitous decline.

### **Consistent Ethic of Life**

The second characteristic of the Franciscan framework for moral discernment in political life reflects our firm commitment to a consistent ethic of life. We believe that all life – especially human life – is a precious gift from God. Questions that might be used in discernment include:

- What is the candidate’s record/stance on issues such as abortion, torture, the death penalty, and euthanasia? How has s/he approached these issues in policy choices?
- How will the candidate’s approach to a number of issues, including the environment, the economy, health care and poverty-related matters, impact life at all stages? Will his/her policies, if enacted, foster life or be detrimental to it?

In the area of the consistent ethic of life, voters need to base their decisions on how best to promote life and oppose the deliberate or direct destruction of innocent human life at any of its stages of existence.

## **Preferential Option for the Poor**

The third element in the Franciscan framework for moral discernment is our “preferential option for the poor.” This element requires us to pay particular attention to those who are most vulnerable in our society, particularly those vulnerable because of economic conditions. Questions might include:

- How will the candidate’s policies, if implemented, affect direct, life-sustaining assistance to those who are poor? In particular, what are his/her approaches to food assistance, housing assistance, and health care (which the Catholic Church has long taught to be a basic human right)?
- As Catholics and as Franciscans, we have a strong belief in the human dignity that arises from work. Do the candidate’s policies provide means to assist persons who are poor with job skills and/or opportunities for work?
- What is the candidate’s approach to immigration? Does s/he support a policy that will lead to comprehensive and humane immigration reform? Does s/he support policies that address the challenges of immigration without resorting to dehumanizing actions against immigrants?
- In the long run, large government debt is unsustainable and will impact persons who are poor more intensely because they are less able to shield themselves from its harmful effects. How will the candidate approach the challenge of managing government debt while protecting those who are economically poor from additional burden?

For those who promote a preferential option for the poor, the central question to consider is whether a particular candidate’s policy choices will make the lives of the poor more or less burdened.

## **Peacemaking**

Franciscans and Franciscan-hearted people take seriously the invitation from Jesus “to be peacemakers.” In this vein, some questions that voters might consider:

- What are the candidate’s positions regarding the best ways to help bring a just, peaceful and lasting solution to conflicts, such as the ones between Israel and Palestine, in Syria, Afghanistan, central Africa and other parts of the world impacted by violence? What background does the candidate bring to suggest s/he would be able to help bring an end to such conflicts?
- Would the candidate support public policies that seek to dissuade Iran from developing nuclear weapons and prevent a war through diplomatic means, such as upholding international law and agreements, as well as advocating regional demilitarization and security guarantees?
- The U.S. military budget has grown over the last decade and is unsustainable at its current size; the U.S. spent more on defense in 2011 than the countries with the next 13 highest defense budgets combined. How does the candidate propose reducing the defense budget while upholding the government’s responsibility to safeguard its citizens?
- Does s/he suggest a strong turn towards diplomacy and international development as a more cost-efficient and effective (though not necessarily easier) approach to safeguarding long-term peace?

A more peaceful world is not simply one in which violence is ended. A peaceful world is one in which the conditions that lead to the possibility of violence (e.g., poverty, ignorance, bigotry, intolerance) are addressed, reduced and ultimately removed. This idea is at the heart of voter discernment about peacemaking.

## **Common Good**

The final characteristic of our Franciscan discernment is our resolve to pursue the common good. This involves fostering in our society all that enables and empowers people to develop their God-given potential, so that they might live their humanity to the fullest within the larger socio-political order and within a thriving creation. The questions voters ask themselves with regard to this area will fit into many of the previous categories but will have a focus on the conditions that allow for human flourishing. Some might include:

- How do the candidate’s policies, if enacted, enable people to practice religious freedom within the ambiguity of the U.S.’s pluralistic society?
- Does the candidate seem to be someone who will welcome and participate in vigorous public debate, and work for balanced compromises that move the world closer to achieving the common good?

In the end, voters should base all questions around the central premise of faithful voting: which candidate will best be able to help our nation and world move closer to becoming a place where all humans flourish?

Obviously this list of questions is not exhaustive. Other questions might be particularly relevant for a specific voter’s region. In addition, the questions suggested here were written with an eye towards candidates for Federal office; they could be modified for other levels of government. Our hope is that these two reflections might be helpful to voters as they work to bring their faith into the voting booth. While not an easy task, the world clearly is in need and we must put forth the effort.