



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 1)

In the election sphere today, there is often an attempt to link our Catholic faith squarely with one political party. Although most religious leaders assert that our faith is not adequately represented or served by the platform of any particular political group, some, overtly or tacitly, strain to demonstrate how one party is the only morally acceptable choice. Such effort is wasted. The world is a morally complex and ambiguous place, especially when it comes to political decisions.

Taking a wider view as Catholics inspired by the Franciscan path of following Jesus, how can we approach the elections? Is there a political party or candidate for whom it would be morally unacceptable to vote? Does our faith compel us to pull a particular lever in the ballot box? If not, is it all just relativism?

The problem is not the clarity of our moral foundations; these are clear. The challenge comes from the complexity of our globalized world, the pluralistic society that is our nation, and the limitations of our fallen, yet still blessed, human condition. While our faith tradition offers us principles by which to live in a complex world, they don't translate into a litmus test for choosing between candidates. Rather, our faith invites us to engage in moral reasoning—weighing the pressing issues of our day in the light of our tradition. While this is a process that often yields no categorical answers, it does provide us a method of discernment to guide us through troubling ambiguity as we make our decisions.

Our Franciscan tradition offers us a framework of five interconnected parameters that can guide our discernment: care for creation, consistent ethic of life, preferential option for the poor, peacemaking and the common good.

Our decision-making starts with the acknowledgement of creation as gift. Through creation God provides all that is needed for life to flourish. To conceive of human life as somehow independent from creation is a grave error. What we do affects creation and creation's future in determinative ways. The teaching of our faith is clear: God set humanity as creation's steward, to care for it as God would have us do, according to His love. Therefore, as stewards, not owners, of God's creation, we have the moral responsibility to examine carefully the impact that our political decisions will have in sustaining and protecting, rather than abusing and destroying, the integrity of creation.

Within the majesty of creation, we recognize the uniquely precious miracle of human life and our responsibility to protect and foster it. Thus, a second parameter for decision-making is the impact of our political decisions on human life. As Franciscans, we are informed by our Catholic-Christian faith that all phases of life, from womb to tomb, are important. Because Jesus identified himself with “the least” brother or sister, we dare not measure the intrinsic dignity and worth of the human person with judgments like innocent or guilty, rich or poor, fetal or senile. We also recognize that in the past few years the Church leadership has enjoined Catholics to pay particular attention to the unborn. The deliberate or direct destruction of innocent human life, at any stage of its existence, is always morally unacceptable. We must approach moral decisions with a consistent ethic that supports all of human life in all its conditions and stages.

Because all human life is sacred, we give special focus to how policy decisions will affect the most easily overlooked. In imitation of Jesus and Francis, we affirm a “preferential option for the poor” as one of our parameters. That is, we are required to pay particular attention to those who are most vulnerable in our society. Economic conditions and economic policies, immigration status and other social factors that affect the poor are significant issues for us in discerning the application of the preferential option.

As Franciscans, we are also known as peacemakers. This peacemaking element is one that impacts not only interpersonal relations but also socio-political affairs. Our commitment to peacemaking includes such issues as civil dialogue in political campaigns, how public resources are used to fund the military, and enhancing diplomatic efforts. The peacemaking tradition in its fullest seeks to support efforts that address the roots of

conflict in the world (i.e., poverty, religious intolerance, social marginalization.) Our political decisions ought not lead to, or support, violence.

The final parameter, the common good, is one that holds all of our principles together. It can be described as the circumstances and structures of society that enable people to live their humanity to the fullest within the larger socio-political order and within a flourishing creation. In our Catholic tradition, each of us has the responsibility to foster the common good. But there also is a particular call for government to help in establishing conditions that will enhance the pursuit of the common good. Building the common good does not mean increasing the economic wealth of each person. Its pursuit might require sacrifice, particularly by those who already enjoy greater wealth or power. Such sacrifice makes the world more stable and just by mirroring God's desire for all to have life and have it abundantly while living harmoniously with the gift of creation.

These five parameters do not always make for clear choices in the voting booth or in public legislation. In elections, apart from referendums or ballot initiatives, we are discerning a vote for a person whom we hope will best work to support the building of a more just world. In the complexity of our modern society, there are differing understandings of how to find the best balance between and among these parameters. Nor does this moral framework completely address how to make our voting choice when a given candidate appears to uphold some of the parameters but to violate others. Because these parameters are interdependent, there is no easy checklist. In fact, the discernment process might even require us to enter the troubling terrain of "cooperation with evil" in the public order.

Our Catholic tradition has a longstanding ethical understanding of "cooperation with moral evil." To be clear, "cooperation" is not to be understood as supporting evil; our faith is clear we can never support evil and remain morally justified. Rather it describes how we are to act when a decision of ours that seeks the good could also result in some evil. "Cooperation" falls into two categories, formal and material. Formal cooperation with evil occurs when a voter supports a decision or candidate *because* the decision or candidate supports an intrinsic evil. Formal cooperation is never justified and, frankly, is quite rare. The more difficult and usual decisions revolve around material cooperation: when a decision or choice is made because we believe it will lead to good results, but with knowledge that the choice will likely result in some evil being committed as well. For example, in a 2004 letter to U.S. bishops, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, "When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons." This reminder to the U.S. bishops as the teachers of our faith shows the complexity of our moral approach as Catholics. It illustrates how it can be morally permissible to vote for a candidate who supports abortion, or other intrinsic evils (e.g., torture, racism, euthanasia...), if, and only if, that is not the *reason* a voter supports that candidate, and only if the voter discerns that the elected official will foster proportionally other good. The U.S. Bishops in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2012) state, "A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, **if the voter's intent is to support that position.**" They further write "a voter should not use a candidate's opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity."

Understanding the U.S. Bishops' statement in light of our teaching about cooperation with evil, the challenge for voters is to look at the choice between the candidates in the present context, considering the best feasible directions for our nation. In doing so, unfortunately, it is easy to see that it is rare for any particular choice of candidate to be completely free of cooperation with moral evil. In essence, we are left to make the "least-bad" choice. With this ambiguity, it is important to understand that if we do not approach these decisions prayerfully, with humility and honesty, we can easily use the process incorrectly to justify whatever decision we wish to make. A faithful discernment process requires that we avoid using our faith to confirm our political biases but rather subject any of our political choices to the standards of the gospel message of Jesus. We all would welcome clear "yes or no" decisions that are completely consistent with the moral teaching of our faith, but unfortunately that is seldom possible in our complex, pluralistic and uncertain world.

Choosing the least-bad option is not an appealing choice, but it is often a necessity given the circumstances and candidates before us. Choosing the least-bad option in the light of our moral parameters has been the way that we as a people of faith continue to try to witness the presence of God in a morally compromised world. It is an exercise of the virtue of prudence—trying to choose the good in every circumstance and the best means of achieving it. As Catholics our response has not been to avoid these decisions, but to make them with as much honesty and humility as possible so as to build the common good and the Reign of God in our world.