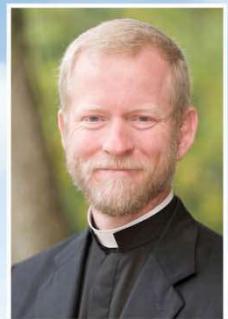


Making Sense of Bioethics

September, 2008

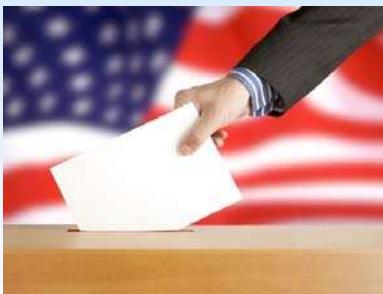
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Voting to Make a Difference

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We must exercise caution, however: abstaining from the voting booth can unintentionally lead to support for the more evil platform."



In the United States, only about half of those who were eligible to vote actually cast ballots during the 2008 national election. I admit I have not always voted in the past. When I am tempted not to vote, however, I think back to a story I once heard about a certain Aunt Katherine who died a few years ago. She was blind during the last months of her life, but she had her daughter read the ballot to her and fill it out on her behalf. She was careful to sign the ballot and make sure it was mailed. It was one of the last things she did before she went to the Lord. She believed that voting was important, and it was one way she manifested her concern for others and for the society she was a part of.

We face the daunting task of evaluating many hot-button issues and sorting through various candidates' positions whenever we vote. We may have to consider energy policy, access to health care, education, social security, the problem of homelessness, taxes, farm subsidies, and inner city violence, to mention just a few. Some issues, however, merit greater attention than others. The life issues — extending from abortion to embryonic stem cell research to euthanasia — are, objectively speaking, the most critical issues to weigh in on as we cast our

vote, because they address the basic good of life itself. Even if we strongly approve of a candidate's position on social security and taxation, would that ever allow us to vote for him if we knew that he condoned and promoted human slavery? Even if we strongly agreed with a candidate's position on health care and education, would that allow us to vote for him if we knew he supported the genocide of Jewish people? Certain kinds of evils, known as "intrinsic" evils, can never be permitted in a society, and candidates who promote such evils need to be shown the door by our votes, regardless of their positions on other, lesser issues. In the words of Fr. Brian Bransfield, a truthful conscience will wince whenever it

"hears a candidate claim that he can fix health care, but still agree that a child in the womb can be killed. Conscience knows that if a candidate favors human embryonic stem cell research, which always includes the killing of a human person, then our neighborhoods can never be free of violence - because we just voted for violence."

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When casting our vote, then, we ought to begin from a key and unmovable position — that every human being has a right to life, and that fundamental right makes all other rights possible. Absolute protection for the gift of life is the foundation of all the other goods we hope to promote and enjoy within our society.

Would it ever be morally justifiable to vote for a candidate who supports abortion or other intrinsic evils? Possibly. To vote this way, however, would require a *proportionate reason* for doing so. We can begin to understand what is meant by a “proportionate reason” if we consider a hypothetical and improbable case of two candidates running for president of the United States, one of whom favors a law that would authorize the killing of all Muslims living within the country (because the candidate claims that a small percentage of them might pose a terrorist threat someday). The second candidate, meanwhile, opposes all attempts to legalize the killing of Muslims, but supports and encourages the killing of the unborn through abortion. It might be permissible to vote for this pro-abortion candidate, not in support of his pro-abortion agenda, but as a means of preventing the killing of Muslims. Roughly 1 million children are killed

annually by abortion in the United States, while there are about 5 million citizens who are Muslims. Voting for the candidate who favored abortion would help prevent the genocide of 5 million Muslims. Meanwhile, voting for the candidate who favored the killing of Muslims would help prevent the genocide of 4 million unborn humans (during a typical 4 year presidency). Hence one could reasonably argue that there was a “proportionate reason” to vote for the pro-abortion candidate. One might prefer to refrain from voting altogether in these circumstances, considering that both candidates are supporting intrinsic evils in their platforms. We must exercise caution, however: abstaining from the voting booth can unintentionally lead to support for the more evil platform. We should probably refrain from voting only when the platforms of all candidates support intrinsic evils to a similar degree.

In sum, voting is an indispensable duty within our democracy. The attention we focus on protecting vulnerable and innocent human life when we cast our votes will determine, in large part, whether we promote a just or an unjust society for our children and grandchildren.

Rev. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D. earned his doctorate in neuroscience from Yale and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He is a priest of the diocese of Fall River, MA, and serves as the Director of Education at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. Father Tad writes a monthly column on timely life issues. From stem cell research to organ donation, abortion to euthanasia, he offers a clear and compelling analysis of modern bioethical questions, addressing issues we may confront at one time or another in our daily living. His column, entitled ‘Making Sense of Bioethics’ is nationally syndicated in the U.S. to numerous diocesan newspapers, and has been reprinted by newspapers in England, Canada, Poland and Australia.

