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Ethics and Elections: Two Key Issues

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A brief but insightful look at the dilemma of voting, especially for president. If a candidate is both for and against life (on different issues), for whom does one vote? This article offers sound perspective for answering this question.

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ETHICS AND ELECTIONS

Two Key Issues

Elections, especially for national offices, almost always raise a profound moral dilemma: For whom do I vote? Choices are almost always ambiguous, with candidates being positive on some issues, but not so much on others.

For many years now, the Consistent Ethic of Life has offered sound guidance for living morally. In the early 1980s Cardinal Joseph Bernardin was working with two different committees of the U.S. bishops' conference. The Pro-Life Committee dealt with a variety of issues including abortion; the Committee on War and Peace drafted the pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* on the possession and use of nuclear arms. In the committees' conferences and consultations Cardinal Bernardin found contrasting concerns: some people who opposed abortion were open to using nuclear arms; others who were opposed to nuclear arms were open to abortion. The stark contrast led Cardinal Bernardin to develop what he called a "consistent ethic of life," a comprehensive ethical system that links together many different issues, including health care, the death penalty, immigration, poverty, euthanasia, abortion, and nuclear war.

Often the convictions of an individual (whether candidate or voter) about such issues seem to cluster around conservative or liberal perspectives (as experienced by Cardinal Bernardin above). Not surprisingly, the same is true for political parties. The Consistent Ethic of Life challenges this view, cutting across such divisions. And almost always making voting a serious moral challenge! If the candidate is both for and against life (on different issues), for whom does one vote?

As a voter, a professor of Christian ethics, a person who desires to follow Jesus, how do I decide? (Surely a question for every person.) Since respecting life is the heart of the consistent ethic, I have concluded that I must choose the candidate whose positions and policies best defend life. Two issues emerge as absolutely essential: nuclear arms and the environment (for example, climate change).

There is, of course, a long list of other serious life issues, including abortion, health care, poverty, racism, violence, and on and on. However serious they are (and most are very serious, threatening many lives), none threatens all life. That is what makes the difference. Nuclear war or the destruction of the environment can wipe out humanity.

Given the reality of the political parties in the United States, just about every vote will contradict some aspect of the consistent ethic of life. This is a tragic reality. Voting for the elimination of nuclear war and for protection of the environment is not some kind of utilitarianism that seeks the greatest good for the greatest numbers. This vote is a defense of life itself, a basic good.

Recent popes have offered keen insight and strong guidance on both issues. A few examples will make this clear. In his encyclical *Peace on Earth*, John XXIII deplores the production of arms, with its “vast outlay of intellectual and economic resources” (#109), and the resulting profound fear among the nations. The pope concludes that justice and humanity demand that the arms race should cease, that stockpiles be reduced equally and simultaneously, that nuclear weapons be banned (#112). This will come about only when fear is replaced by mutual trust, the result of serious thought and sincerity in negotiations and faithful fulfillment of obligations (#113-119). Pope John also laments the immense suffering that would be caused by modern armaments and concludes: “for this reason it is hardly possible to imagine that in the atomic era war could be used as an instrument of justice” (#127).

All the popes who have followed John have emphasized these same points, especially in their annual World Day of Peace messages.

Pope Francis is well known for his efforts to protect the environment because of his encyclical *Laudato Si*, but he is not the first pope to address the ecological crisis. Already in 1971 Pope Paul VI discussed the issue in his Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, and both John Paul II (1990) and Benedict XVI (2010) made it the topic of their World Day of Peace messages. Benedict judged that concern for the environment is even more pressing in today's world. He asks, "Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions?" (#4) The pope responds by calling for a heightened sense of interdependence and for a lifestyle marked by sobriety, intergenerational solidarity, and responsibility. "In a word, concern for the environment calls for a broad global vision of the world" (#11).

For whom does one vote? Choose life—the very life of humanity and our world.