

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Preparing for the Upcoming Elections

Everyone who follows the presidential election cycles, readily admits our '16 experience is much different from the past. I am receiving a great many questions and people are taking the opportunity to enter into conversation even though the election is in November.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops provides an outstanding electoral resource entitled "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." (www.usccb.org, USCCB Publications) The pamphlet offers reflections and guidance on the principal issues facing Catholics in the upcoming election and applicable teaching from the Church on these matters. Also, of note, is the highlighting of the contributions that Pope Francis has made in the last few years.

One important aspect of the booklet is its treatment of conscience – which is valuable for us Catholics in all circumstances. It is helpful to again reacquaint ourselves with this capacity. We ask: What is conscience?

The Second Vatican Council elaborated on the nature of conscience. It defined it as "the most secret core and sanctuary where one is alone with God whose voice echoes in one's depths." There a person "detects a law which one does not impose upon oneself, but which holds the individual in obedience. Always summoning one to live good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience, when necessary, speaks to one's heart: do this, shun that." That is to say, conscience is where a person discovers "in his heart a law written by God . . . which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor." (Gaudium et Spes, #16, Second Vatican Council)

Guided by conscience, persons employ reason to "judge the moral quality of a concrete act that one is going to perform or has already completed. In all one says and does, a person is obliged to follow faithfully what one knows to be just and right." (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1778)

In the resource cited above, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has outlined how a person exercises the responsibility to judge rightly by forming one's conscience for political choice. It is summarized in four steps:

- 1) Each person must “begin being open to the truth and what is right.” Does this mean setting aside the sometimes colored perspectives of the likes of CNN, Fox News, or Rush Limbaugh? In any case, we are to forego ideological biases and approach issues and situations with authentic openness of mind and heart.
- 2) Each of us must carefully and regularly study sacred scripture and classic fonts of human wisdom. We should reflect every day on authentic inspiration to serve the common good.
- 3) The third element of conscience formation entails examination of the objective facts, data and options that pertain to a particular decision. We are expected to avoid narratives from biased commentators and seek objective, thoughtful reflections from trusted analysts who are not swayed by any sort of special interest or agenda. Frequently occurring in our day is that described in *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis: “There are too many special interests, economic interests who easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their plans will not be affected.” (#54)
- 4) Finally, as believers, we are called to prayerfully reflect in order to discern the divine will in a particular situation. We are invited to bring our openness, reflections and examination to quiet reflection and be open to God's spirit to enlighten our hearts and minds of how to act.

The foregoing certainly points us in the direction of making solid, moral decisions.

Unfortunately, the objects of our decisions are not always crystal clear. Oftentimes, we have to sort out various shades of grey. Nonetheless, we are fortunate to have such guidelines as we begin to formulate our upcoming voting decisions.