

Your Conscience And Your Vote

By Sr. PATRICIA TALONE, RSM, Ph.D.

Recently, after viewing a particularly venomous political ad on television, I recalled the wry words of the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, who said, “An election is a moral horror, as bad as battle except for the blood; a mud bath for every soul concerned in it.”

Watching television, listening to commentaries, reading editorials — not to mention blogs — can leave one feeling angered, confused, cynical or even, as Shaw intimated, sullied. Yet, as proud citizens of a democratic society, responsible adults recognize that we bear both a privilege and a burden to exercise our consciences and make choices that will and do affect the future of this great nation. The exercise of conscience and good judgment, however, is not merely something that faithful citizens take out and dust off every four years in anticipation of voting in presidential elections. The judicious adult is one who lives a discerning life, recognizing that, as the Greek philosopher Pythagoras maintained, “Choices are the hinges of destiny.” What we decide determines what we do, which determines who we are — as individuals, as a faith community and as a nation.

For those ministering in Catholic health care, the 2012 election poses particular challenges because the goal for which the ministry has advocated for so many years — health care for all persons — is under attack from a variety of sectors. Catholic health care, committed to the sanctity and dignity of life from conception to natural

death, is furthermore committed to insuring that all persons — regardless of their physical, financial, employment or immigration status — have a fundamental right to receive the health care necessary to becoming full and productive members of society. Opposed by pundits from both sides of the political spectrum, the conscientious, informed, faith-filled voter may well feel as if he or she is trying to sail between the mythical monsters of Scylla and Charybdis. However, the rich belief that forms the foundation of our Catholic tradition provides guidance and insight even in increasingly troubled waters.

For more than three decades, the United States bishops have periodically issued a teaching document prior to presidential elections, most recently revising “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States” in October 2011. While not intended as a voter’s guide, the text nonetheless addresses areas of critical concern to believers. First, it addresses why religious pastors dare to speak publicly about the political life of the nation in which we live. Catholic social teaching, at the heart of who we are as a believing community,



has much to say about the burning issues of our day — human life, family life, social justice and global solidarity. Moreover the document articulates goals for political life and discourse while at the same time challenging citizens to enable our nation to work toward true moral integrity as we seek to achieve the common good.

The goal of this article is not to revisit this important document, but to explore the role of conscience in our decision-making processes. However, a deep and careful reading of the bishops' essay provides one a solid framework from which to analyze the cacophony of daily media bombardments.

"Faithful Citizenship" urges Catholics to address the questions of our times through the framework of a "well-formed conscience." Now, conscience is *not* Jiminy Cricket, that small, warning voice sitting on the shoulder of Pinocchio, trying (unsuccessfully) to teach the recalcitrant puppet right from wrong. Nor is conscience simply

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blind obedience, doing what one is told without use of reason, experience, or objective teachings. Neither is conscience simply an internal justification for doing what feels right or what one intends to do anyway.

Conscience roots one not in the self alone but in the source of our being, God. In his "Commentary on the Sentences," the 13th century Franciscan, St. Bonaventure, wrote, "conscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority." Similarly, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, in their document "The Church in the Modern World," situated conscience according to one's relationship with the Creator, describing conscience as "the most secret core and sanctuary of a man; there he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths."

Because Catholics comprise a believing community of faithful persons, the U.S. bishops in "Faithful Citizenship" urge the faithful to move beyond subjective feelings to "form ... consciences in accord with human reason and the teachings of the Church." They reiterate the definition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* by describing conscience as "a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right."

Some contemporary Catholic thinkers and teachers base their understanding of conscience on the Vatican II notion of the moral faculty of an individual, where he or she stands "alone with God." This view exhorts the believer to align one's conscience with God's will for him or her, always leading and drawing the person toward good. Biblically grounded, this notion of conscience re-echoes the interior call of the Lord, inviting each one to follow him in all of the person's actions.

A different but related contemporary concept of conscience views the faculty in a full and strict sense as an awareness and acceptance of moral truth. It is the exercise of reasoning, moving from principles to conclusions, relying upon and conforming to church teaching. As is so often the case in Catholic theology, with these two ideas of conscience, the truth lies not in an either/or but with a both/and. Wrestling with

conscience engages the believer at that deepest core of the self where one listens attentively to the call of the Lord, while it simultaneously engages the follower of Christ in relation to the Gospel and church teaching.

Applying one's conscience compels the believer to exercise the cardinal virtue of prudence, as the U.S. bishops observe in "Faithful Citizenship." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes prudence as enabling us "to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it." Medieval images of Prudence depict her as looking backward to learn from past experience, as well as forward to foresee possible consequences of one's actions. Some early statues depict Prudence with an implement in her hand, something very akin to a kitchen colander. In this device, she sifts good from evil, the gold from the dross, seeking to do that which is

good. Occasionally artists portrayed Prudence with a mirror in hand to denote self knowledge. It seems to urge the individual to pray with St. Augustine, “Lord that I may know myself, that I may know thee, and desire nothing else but thee.”

Now, if every vote were a clear choice between good and evil, the believing citizen would have no moral challenge. But sadly that is not the case. In a large and pluralistic democracy like the United States, good endeavors, as well as federal and state legislation, can and often do include a thread of evil that might mitigate the good that one seeks.

Does this mean that the faith-filled person must withdraw from society and political discourse because such engagement might sully one’s moral integrity? The Catholic tradition has never functioned in a sectarian manner. Rather, it engages in society, participating in public discourse and public service to bring about the Reign of God. Withdrawing from the public sector and refusing to engage in the challenges within our society is not an option. A discerning individual recognizes that one may feel drawn toward a particular candidate or platform because it addresses issues of poverty, health care, immigration, environment or education concerns that echo the person’s own convictions. However that same platform may support human life issues like capital punishment or abortion that differ from one’s own deepest beliefs.

Complex situations like these are precisely where discernment and attentive engagement with conscience come into play. Careful study of platforms, voting records and even laws may reveal patterns that preclude or confirm one’s initial voting inclination. Through political engagement, the committed person holds the power to change unjust and immoral structures. Bishop Richard D. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, advised in the Aug. 13, 2012, issue of *America* magazine, “The idea is that Catholics should work within their parties to change them, creating a diverse and substantial group motivated not so much by ideology but by challenging cultural issues, large and small.”

For its part, the Catholic Health Association, long committed to advocate for justice and the common good, first by providing health care to all in need, dialogues and collaborates with church leaders, political leaders and members of the ministry throughout the country to bring about a more just and healthy society for all. It still remains for individual believers to exercise a considered conscience, grounded in the rich tradition of church

teaching, the experience of our ministry and by practice of prayer and contemplation.

The conscientious voter must first be informed. Just as the medieval symbol of Prudence looked forward and backward, sifting good from evil, so too, we who are bombarded by media from all sides and at all times of the day and night must sift through the gold and dross of information. This means being selective in what one reads, listens to and watches. It means challenging oneself to listen to more than one side of a story, to analyze and critique information and slogans to move beyond the “spin” so typically expressed prior to an election. Such study and scrutiny require discipline and a humble ability to engage in dialogue with those whose views may run counter to one’s own.

Catholic health care prides itself on its fidelity to the church’s social teaching; and well it might. Still, the social teaching of the church is but one aspect of its long and rich moral tradition extending back to biblical times. As members of a believing community, each believer bears a responsibility to inform his or her conscience by studying and reflecting upon authentic church teaching related to a key decision. As the document “Faithful Citizenship” instructs, church teaching is a guide for the believer, meant to provide the backdrop from which one can judge national and local proposals and platforms. In *America*, Bishop Pates exhorted us, saying this teaching “urges Catholics to place the church’s priority teachings at the heart of their worldview and moral decision-making.” Authentic church teaching is seldom fully expressed, however, in blogs or on slick websites. It requires deeper research, study and analysis.

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While one can never adequately predict the future, the moral decision-maker can, and must, reflect upon and weigh the effects and consequences of one’s vote. This is part and parcel of any moral decision-making process. Furthermore, when perplexed, the judicious decision-maker seeks wise counsel from others who may be able to provide greater clarity and light to the decision. This does not mean speaking only to those who share one’s political persuasion. It means carefully seeking out and listening to persons of differ-

ing views, respectfully asking, “Please explain to me why you believe or think this.”

Because what we decide determines who we are as individuals and as a society, the Catholic tradition reaches into its long history of spirituality, prayer and discernment to seek counsel from God. To enter into the “secret core” of one’s person where one is “alone with God,” requires prayer, quiet and listening. While preceded by reading, study and probing conversation, the adult exercise of conscience requires prayer and contemplation. It is only then that one decides upon a course of action. Acting on conscience and discerning the best action implies moving beyond ideologies and allowing oneself to be formed and informed by accurate facts, societal needs, the Gospel and Gospel values and the church’s moral and social justice tradition.

Even after a full and robust process of informing one’s conscience, reviewing church teaching, analyzing consequences and engaging in deep, personal prayer, it is important to note that good and faith-filled persons can and will arrive at different conclusions. The committed citizen bears a responsibility to act in a way that is consistent with his or her conscience. Indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas advised that one cannot morally violate one’s conscience.

Although there is more than a grain of truth in George Bernard Shaw’s belief that “an election is a moral horror,” the U.S. bishops remind us in “Faithful Citizenship” that every election is “about values and issues as well as candidates.” Thus, we within the Catholic health ministry seek guidance from church teaching as we pray and reflect in order to exercise our consciences to determine the future of our nation.

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