

Conscience Matters

The Catholic Review

Our elected officials in the Maryland General Assembly have been asked to consider many difficult and controversial issues since the legislature convened in January, with several more to come before the session ends in mid-April.

Most recently we have witnessed the protracted debate in Annapolis regarding the repeal of our state's death penalty. It is a debate in which the Catholic Church has played a long-standing and vocal role in urging legislators to respect all human life, and to reject the practice of state-sanctioned executions, since our society has an adequate means of protecting itself through life without parole sentences.

Sadly, the outcome of that debate, while not final, appears likely to end in a compromise that is a far cry from repeal, though one that at least may help to prevent the execution of an innocent person by requiring a higher standard of evidence in death penalty prosecutions.

Many more issues of great moral significance are pending or will soon come before the legislature – questions involving embryonic stem-cell research, marriage, our responsibility to the poor and vulnerable, and the rights of parents to choose their children's education.

Our state lawmakers have before them no easy task, and deserve our deep respect and constant prayers for their generous public service as they grapple with these issues.

That service is perhaps most challenging when a lawmaker faces decisions involving fundamental moral principles that may require acting against the prevailing opinions of his or her constituents. To a politician, "voting one's conscience" at times means contemplating the risk of voting oneself out of office. Whether that risk is real or imagined, we must acknowledge the courage and leadership required of our lawmakers when they face this dilemma, even as we continue to encourage them to make difficult choices that genuinely respect all human life and that promote the

common good.

To be sure, in our pluralistic and democratic society, voters have a legitimate expectation that those whom they choose to represent their interests will in fact advocate for laws that uphold and protect those interests. In the document *The Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recognizes the essential importance of our nation's form of government: "It is commendable that in today's democratic societies, in a climate of true freedom, everyone is made a participant in directing the body politic."

At the same time however, we must recognize the necessity to adhere to a coherent and consistent moral code that underpins the act of lawmaking. "The Church recognizes that while democracy is the best expression of the direct participation of citizens in political choices, it succeeds only to the extent that it is based on a correct understanding of the human person." That understanding is one based not simply in our Catholic faith, but upon "ethical precepts [that] are rooted in human nature itself and [that] belong to the natural moral law."

When the decisions faced by lawmakers involve issues that strike at the heart of our society's core understanding of the dignity of human nature, it is critical that we call upon our elected representatives to give primary consideration to the moral implications, rather than the political ramifications, of their decisions. It is not sufficient to claim that one's moral principles derive solely from one's religious faith, and therefore have no legitimate role in making public-policy decisions, particularly when those decisions may conflict with the views of a particular constituency. The Church recognizes and values the "rightful autonomy of the political or civil sphere from that of religion and the Church, but not from that of morality."

The Holy Father seemed to echo this call last month when he met briefly with Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in Rome. According to the Vatican, Pope Benedict, "took the opportunity to speak of the requirements of the natural moral law and the Church's consistent teaching on the dignity of human life from conception to natural death which enjoin all Catholics, and especially legislators, jurists and those responsible for the common good of society, to work in co-operation with all men and women of good will in creating a just system of laws

capable of protecting human life at all stages of its development.”

We live in a time of unprecedented complexity, when we face social, scientific and technological issues we could not even have imagined a generation ago. As we confront those issues within the cherished process of our country’s free and open political debate, it is imperative that we not abandon faith in the existence of unchanging and universal moral truths that underlie our civil laws. It is this faith that the Church brings to the public square, and it is one that can be shared through reason with all those who seek the common good.

Without a doubt, those truths may not emerge with simple clarity when elected officials are weighing a difficult vote. We can only ask that they seek first to discern those truths, and that they listen honestly to the voice of their conscience when casting their vote. For our part as a Catholic community, we must all – parishioners, parish and diocesan leaders, priest, religious, and bishops – continue to bring the light of the Church’s teaching to the public square, and to pray for those who face the difficult task of making critical decisions on our behalf.