

# When the choice is Clinton or Trump, what's a Catholic to do?

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Jesuit Father John J. Conley can't recall a presidential election that has troubled practicing Catholics as deeply as this one.

"People criticize Hillary Clinton and say she's mendacious, corrupt and should have been indicted for criminal negligence," said Father Conley, Bernard P. Knott Chair of Philosophy and Theology at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore.

Regarding the Democratic nominee's Republican opponent, Father Conley quickly added, many criticize Donald Trump for being "xenophobic, misogynist and for being very reckless in his statements."

With a choice like that, how does a Catholic decide which candidate to support? What about third-party options or sitting out the election? What role does a person's faith play in discerning how to vote?

Evaluating the issues is an essential starting point. The U.S. bishops offer guidance in a document called "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," which emphasizes concerns such as abortion, the needs of the poor, court decisions on same-sex marriage, welcoming immigrants, religious liberty and concern for the environment.

Catholics find themselves in a quandary since each candidate takes positions that conflict with important Catholic values. Clinton embraces the continued legalization of abortion, for example, while Trump has taken a hardline stance against undocumented immigrants.

As Catholic voters form their consciences and evaluate the candidates' stands on the issues, Archbishop William E. Lori noted that "right reason" recognizes that "some things are so morally flawed that nothing can make them right, nor is there ever a good reason for choosing them."

"They cannot be reconciled with love of God and neighbor and these things we call intrinsic evils," the archbishop wrote in his October column for the Catholic Review.

"At the top of the list is the taking of innocent human life."

The archbishop said the common good is not identifiable with any party platform or ideology.

"Catholics should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment

to a political party or interest group," he said. "Nor is the common good (equal to) what the majority of people want."

Quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the archbishop said the common good is the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily.

In opting for the common good, he said, intrinsic evils may not be chosen. The taking of "totally defenseless lives" has a "great claim on our conscience," Archbishop Lori said.

"What evil rises to that level?" he asked. "And what policies are likely to be pursued in a next administration? We need to ask ourselves and appropriately form our consciences prior to making the important choices before us."

Pope Francis has also encouraged Catholics to study the issues, pray about the election and then vote according to their consciences.

Catholic News Service reported that when the pope was flying back to Rome from Azerbaijan Oct. 2, he was asked by a reporter what U.S. Catholics should do in a presidential election where both candidates hold some positions contrary to church teaching. The pope said he would never comment on a specific electoral campaign.

"The people are sovereign," he said. "Study the proposals well, pray and choose in conscience."

Father Conley suggested that in addition to looking at the issues, voters should evaluate the candidates' character and temperament.

"You want to look at the moral character of the candidates," he said. "You want to look at how apt they would be to fill the office of president."

For some Catholic voters, the election will be less about Clinton or Trump and more about the Supreme Court, according to David Hoovler, associate professor of history and political science at Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore.

With the death of Justice Antonin Scalia, there is already one vacancy on the nation's highest court. Two or three additional vacancies are likely in the near future as the remaining justices age. The oldest of the current justices are Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 83, and Anthony Kennedy, 80.

"We could have a liberal or conservative court for the next 20 years," Hoovler said. "It really matters, especially when it comes to a number of issues - abortion, campaign finance, voter identification."

Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, noted that assessing the candidates is not only a rational choice, but one that should be approached in prayer.

"We have to think about the impact of our vote on our priorities as concerned Catholic citizens," said Russell, who leads the legislative lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops in Annapolis.

Having Clinton and Trump as the nominees is a “real wake-up call” for many, Russell said. It shows what happens when people sit on the sidelines instead of engaging in the political realm.

“My strongest word of encouragement is for people to pay more attention to the elections at the local level,” said Russell, characterizing the tenor of this year’s presidential campaign as “abysmal.”

“Become more involved in advocacy within your party,” she urged, “asking it to make space for people who disagree with significant issues on the party platform.”

The American Solidarity Party, a newly formed political party modeled on Christian Democratic parties in Europe, stakes out a political platform that is overtly pro-life – opposed to abortion, capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide. At the same time, it embraces public programs to help the poor and vulnerable while also protecting immigrants.

“I love the philosophy of the party,” Father Conley said. “It reminds us the way things should be philosophically in our country.”

The priest noted, however, that Mike Maturen, the American Solidarity Party’s nominee for president, has no executive leadership experience. He is a professional magician.

“One of the key criteria for our presidents is that they have executive experience, whether that’s in politics, the military or business – heavy administrative experience that would indicate that they have some of the attributes you need to be president. I think being a professional magician ... is not enough.”

If Catholics can’t in good conscience vote for any of the major or third-party candidates, Father Conley said, they could legitimately decide not to vote in the presidential contest. Alternatively, if their state allows it, they could write in a vote.

As for himself, Father Conley said he is “really struggling” in this election.

“I think I know who I will vote for,” he said, “but I’m going to do it with reluctance. This is going to be an extremely painful decision for many Catholics.”

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