



AM I OBLIGATED TO VOTE?

Dear Father Kerper: Since turning 18, I've voted in every primary and general election. Now I'm tempted to stop voting because both candidates have positions that offend my faith. And, just as bad, when I follow the campaign I get angry and even have "bad thoughts" about the candidates. I have two questions: As a Catholic, am I really obligated to vote? And how can I pay attention to politics without falling into sin?

Your first question is easy to answer: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that it is "morally obligatory" for Catholics in democratized societies "to exercise the right to vote." (cf. 2240) This surprising obligation, which many ignore, flows from the Church's strong emphasis on the value – and duty! – of wide and active participation in governing society. We find this expressed forcefully throughout the *Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching*, published by the Holy See in 2004.

The *Compendium* states: "Participation is a duty to be fulfilled consciously by all, with responsibility and with a view to the common good." (cf. 189) It also criticizes those who separate themselves from the political process, "reaching the point where they even abstain from voting." (cf. 191)

Though the obligation to vote is serious, no one is absolutely obliged to vote for candidates for every office or to vote on every ballot question. Indeed, our election system recognizes "selective abstention" by accepting blank ballots, "write in" votes, or ballots with votes for only one or two offices. Ideally, we should vote in every contest. However, some situations can justify, and even require, abstention.

First, we should never vote for anyone

clearly committed to promoting and requiring our participation in intrinsically evil acts, notably killing innocent human beings. Here abstention may be the only morally acceptable course. Fortunately, we rarely have contests where all candidates blatantly promote indisputably evil policies.

This brings us to the second – and more common – situation: Having to choose among several "mixed bag" candidates who simultaneously support some policies that conform to Catholic Social Teaching (such as economic fairness and opposing executions) and others that violate it (such as state funded abortions and torture).

What should Catholics do? We need clarity about three things:

First, we cannot opt for the "lesser evil." Instead, we must vote for a generally good candidate who will advance the common good for several reasons, while also tolerating some "bad effects" produced by the victorious person, because there are proportionately important reasons. Simply put, we can never will evil, whether lesser or greater.

Second, as we ponder our decision, we must study candidates' records, see if they keep their promises, and consider

the positions and influence of their major financial backers. We should always seek objective information, not "propaganda" that confirms our own partisan views.

Even after doing this, we may end up disappointed because the stated positions of elected officials frequently "evolve" into the opposite positions; or shifting political dynamics may block some policies that we and victorious candidates strongly favor. After all, political outcomes are always unpredictable.

Consider this historical fact: since 1976 three presidents who had hoped to reverse *Roe v. Wade* appointed four Supreme Court justices who eventually sided with the majority favoring legalized abortion.

This reminds us how tricky it is to make accurate political calculations about the future. In the end, good, sincere and reasonable people will make different political choices based on their best – but fallible – "readings" of the political situation. We must respect these different choices, always trusting they have all acted in good faith.

Third, let's consider "character." Today many people say: "I don't care what candidates do in their private lives. I want competence, experience, toughness and intelligence." This tendency to split candidates into "public" and "private" persons ignores an essential truth: except in cases of severe mental illness, human beings normally behave in an essentially unified manner. How people behave within their families, toward their spouses, and within their professional careers gives us a preview of how they will govern.

What, then, is "good character"? Many biblical texts offer a basic "profile" of a good person. He or she is marked by concern for others, balance, kindness, mercy, patience, respect for others, gentleness of speech, humility and so on. Few people, of course, possess all these traits. But prospective leaders need to have at least some of these qualities – and to be free of their opposites, such as arrogance, egoism and rudeness.

Voters, then, must ask very tough questions: Which candidates have good character? Are they genuinely and consistently good? Does their behavior generally conform to the biblical "profile,"

which many non-Christian people may also embody?

Getting an accurate “fix” on a candidate's true moral character is very difficult today because advertising and media coverage deliberately magnify the defects of opponents, even their personal appearance! Still, we must do our best to make a fair assessment.

Just as we have no moral obligation to vote for anyone committed to evil policies, we are never obliged to vote for a person who lacks good character simply because the alternative seems worse.

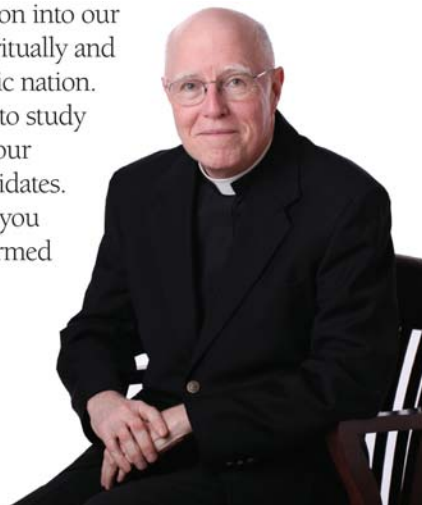
Because you have a sensitive Christian soul, you mentioned your “bad thoughts,” which I presume are feelings of dislike, disgust, and even animosity toward candidates who hold positions contrary to yours. Surely, you're not alone. Two powerful antidotes will help: the examples of Jesus Christ and St. Thomas More.

Jesus, in dealing with Pontius Pilate, treated him with unfailing respect. Moreover, the Lord acknowledged the legitimacy of Pilate's authority by saying, “You would have no power unless my Father had given it to you.” Here Jesus teaches a crucial lesson: We must respect – and even love! – political leaders as human persons. The political is just one dimension of human existence. Hence if we judge persons solely on their political views and affiliations we strip them of their individual souls and open ourselves to hatred, even extremism. Jesus never did such a thing. Nor should we.

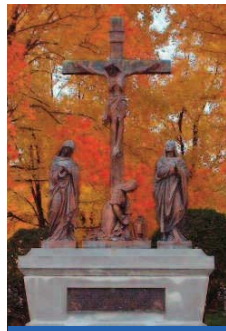
Can anyone really imitate Jesus? Yes! St. Thomas More, the great English martyr, followed the example of Christ perfectly in his dealings with King Henry VIII. Even as St. Thomas sat in the Tower of London awaiting his execution by beheading, he refused to speak ill of the king and forbade others from making disparaging remarks. Amazingly, St. Thomas continued to regard Henry VIII as an old friend who had tragically gone astray in politics and theology, yet retained his God-given office and humanity.

Like Christ and St. Thomas More, we must always respect and intercede for those entrusted with political authority, whether we agree with them or not. By refusing this, we risk ingesting poison into our souls, which harms us spiritually and undermines our democratic nation.

Please take time to pray, to study the issues, and to review your personal views of the candidates. Having done these things, you will make a good and informed decision on Election Day, giving you peace because you will have listened to God's voice in the stillness of your conscience. ■



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