



September 17, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Many faithful Catholics have asked me to offer some direction regarding conscience formation and the moral aspect of the many issues facing us as a nation, as we approach this year's presidential election. We would all agree that this election has a contentious and angry divisiveness that we have not seen in our lifetimes. This is due, in part, to the personalities, policies and factions in play, and it certainly has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and social unrest. (I believe that there are other, more significant and fundamental reasons for the growing tension in our society, but that's a topic for another time.)

At the outset, I want to remind everyone that before all else, we belong to Christ. We are Catholic Christians before we are Americans and certainly before we might be part of any political party. Jesus Christ is our Savior; His teachings and the moral truths of the Church guide us in all aspects of our lives, including how we vote. The Church cannot and will not endorse a particular candidate or party. Instead, the pastor's role is to teach and preach the Faith, so that all may vote with an informed conscience, even as we acknowledge that no individual or party can ever represent the totality of our values and beliefs. For more on these distinctions, I highly recommend that you read the United States Conference of Bishops' statement on voting: [Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#).

A year ago, the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a statement, in anticipation of this moment, stating that abortion is the preeminent moral issue facing our nation. The choice of "preeminent" is deliberate here, meaning that procured abortion surpasses all other moral issues in its urgency, but clearly is not the only issue we face. The Catholic Church has always condemned procured abortion as a very grave and intrinsic evil because it destroys human life in its most initial stage of development and fragile state of vulnerability.

Although I have always been pro-life, my commitment and understanding deepened when, as a young priest, I listened to and learned from the emotional, psychological, and spiritual pain of so many women and men who have been profoundly wounded by the violence of abortion. As of this writing, some 62,237,640 human lives have been snuffed out in the United States since the Supreme Court made abortion the law of the land in 1973. That each of these human lives was violently ended before they could even be born should be incomprehensible and deeply painful to us. I am grateful for not only the unwavering witness of the Catholic Church to the sanctity of life from the moment of conception to natural death, but also for the many heroic and generous ways that the Church supports women—both in crisis pregnancy and after their children are born—provides health care, education and social services to those in poverty, and offers hope

O F F I C E O F T H E B I S H O P

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and healing to women and men grieving in the aftermath of abortion. The canard that the Church only cares about the unborn child, but not those who are born, is a lie.

In recent years, we have seen a radicalization of pro-abortion agendas and policies, some calling for unrestricted abortion, right up to birth. Others have pushed the notion that abortion is such a “right” that we all should be compelled to pay for it. Somehow, this violence is hailed as “progress” or “liberation” for women and the poor. It is neither. The Church will always stand up for the protection of human life and the dignity of every single person, beginning with life in the womb. Even the drafters of the Declaration of Independence, some of them agnostic deists, asserted that all people enjoy the “right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

I believe that this increasingly institutionalized disregard for human life in its most nascent and vulnerable stage has led to the increased violence against human beings that we sadly see all around us today. We want to build a culture of life enshrined in the laws of our society in which every human being is welcomed, cherished, nourished and received; where parents will choose life for their children, knowing that support, resources and care are available, so that all people will be able to live the dignity of a child of God, with rights and responsibilities, able to realize their potential and make their contribution to the common good.

Some Catholics are asking if they can vote for a presidential candidate who advocates for legalized abortion, as long as that is not the reason they are voting for that individual. Let me quote *Faithful Citizenship*: “There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.”

There are many other significant issues for consideration, to be sure. We must care for the most vulnerable in our society, the infant in the womb, yes, but also the elderly, the poor, the homeless and those whose lives are marginalized. We strive for greater justice in our society and for an end to violence, to racism and racial divisions. We must work harder and press for policies that enable every person to realize their own dignity, knowing that solid education and secure employment with a living wage are the surest path out of poverty. We have a pressing need to support marriages and families, the basic building block of our society. And we have an urgent duty to maintain good stewardship of our natural resources and our earthly home. We must consider policies that promote peace among nations and peoples. And we must address the growing attempts to limit one of our most basic freedoms – our religious liberty.

The promise of America, not always realized in actuality for everyone, we must say, stands for true freedom, expansive opportunity and justice for all. Catholic social teaching is a sure roadmap for all of us, as we seek to build a civilization of life and love, based on an authentic anthropology of the human person. Caring for each other, especially the most vulnerable, is not only the responsibility of the government. As Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, both articulated and exemplified, all of us are called to love those around us, especially as we live out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, seeking to build a just and humane society.

The United States bishops have declared abortion as the preeminent moral issue because no other fundamental moral evil has destroyed more human lives. There is no other evil extolled in either party's platform or candidate's policies that matches a party's or candidate's promotion of the intrinsic evil of the direct and deliberate taking of so many human lives – now nearly a million each year in the United States alone. Let me quote Saint John Paul II, “Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination.”

I cannot ignore that disturbing fact and so, personally, I cannot vote for a presidential candidate who advocates for the continued legalization of abortion. If a candidate is fundamentally wrong on such a basic and preeminent human rights issue of grave consequence to the most innocent in our society and to our own future, how can I trust the candidate to make moral and prudent decisions on many other important social justice issues pertaining to the common good? These fundamental questions are issues of both truth and conscience which each of us must take to prayer and ask the Lord to guide us. As we cast our ballot in the election this Fall, the Lord calls us to pray, study Church teaching, form and examine our conscience and vote in light of our Catholic principles.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "+ Donald J. Hying". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+Donald J. Hying
Bishop of Madison