

CATHOLICS AND ELECTIONS

Spiritual reflections by Fr. Dave Heney

Are we single issue voters? What about separation of church and state? Can Catholic pro-choice politicians receive Communion? ...should we get involved in politics at all? Well, we know God got personally involved in our troubled world by sending His Son for our happiness and salvation, which means we also get involved and are never just “spectators” of our world ...we take action to make it better.

We vote as our conscience tells us and use a simple three step system to make sure it is informed well. We **study** issues from reliable sources so that we have true information. We then weigh the pros and cons and **judge** what is right and wrong. (Yes, we make sound judgments, but never jump to conclusions by being *pre-judgmental* or *prejudiced*). After all, we would never be neutral or non-judgmental about murder and certainly judge it as a serious crime that we would actively fight. Finally, we **act**. In an election year, action means voting. Catholics get involved by study, judging, and action. Catholics are never just spectators. We vote!

Most moral issues are highly complicated, and they involve real people who can also be quite defensive about how they live their lives. Can we ever say anything is always right or wrong? Are there objective truths, always and everywhere true, and for every single person?

We endorse issues, not candidates

Fortunately, most people endorse helping the poor or fighting terror as good things. The Church usually endorses only general goals for most moral issues. *How they are accomplished is your call*. For example, we all want to help the poor, but we can sincerely differ on *methods*, e.g. whether high or low taxes create more jobs. We all want peace, but can honestly differ whether diplomatic or military action best secure it. These are your judgment calls on how best to achieve goals we all want. The Church hopes we all share these general goals but will intelligently study, wisely judge, and courageously act to discover and vote for effective and practical ways to actually achieve them.



Most moral issues are highly complicated...

Yet how do we prioritize so many very serious and complex issues like the economy, drugs, immigration, the war on terror, capital punishment, world hunger, poverty, global warming, health care, cloning, abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage, child abuse, euthanasia, and physician assisted suicide? The facts about each one could easily fill an entire book. ...perhaps that image of a book might actually help.

Imagine each moral issue as a “book” that includes all information about it. Now imagine each book taking its place in some kind of priority order on a “moral issues bookshelf.” Depending on how we view each issue we might rearrange the shelf, putting this or that book ahead of others because we feel it should be handled first or is more important. Good and sincere people might agree or disagree with the order and say this

issue should precede that one or this one is much more important than the other. Much of the moral debate in this country has been along these lines. While everyone tends to agree that all these issues are worthy of attention and deserving of intelligent discussion, there is sincere debate about the precise order of importance. How do we decide?

An especially harsh debate right now is between pro-choice and pro-life groups. Both sides fight hard for sympathetic Supreme Court Judges and both judge every candidate on this single issue. Where do we put the “pro-life book” on our imaginary bookshelf? We know the book that defines when life begins is in the *science* section because science, not faith, verifies human life begins at conception. Where then do we put this book about protecting the dignity of innocent human life from conception?

Perhaps it does not belong on the shelf at all...

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that a pro-life ideal of protecting the dignity of innocent human life at every age is actually ...the shelf itself, and therefore “holds” all the others up. That means we cannot fully grasp *any* of the other serious issues without knowing first what it means to be a *dignified, innocent, and human* life from the moment of conception to natural death.

We can more thoughtfully appreciate what it means to take human life in capital punishment or declare a “Just War” when we first grasp what it really means to be innocent. We can also more authentically feel what it means to be a victim of discrimination, or unemployment, or treated as an “object,” when we first recognize what it means to have dignity from the very first moment of conception to natural death.

A pro-life position is the shelf upon which all moral issues stand and guides our understanding of all other issues. It is not a single issue at all ...it is the foundation for our response to all of them.

While I’m not a politician, I try to study as many sources as I can. I certainly don’t depend on learning my faith from the LA Times! However, I do have expertise in one area. At Mass I say these words of Jesus Christ, “This is my **BODY & BLOOD** (my entire self) given for you!” Jesus does not qualify His words. They are not “I am for famous people, or rich, poor, young, or old.” He says, “I am for you!” God is no spectator and so got personally involved with people of every culture and age by sending His Son into our world for our happiness and salvation.

If God is for life, then so am I, even if *really* young, like a cluster of unborn cells, or *really* old, or even dying. As God affirms us, so we affirm all people. While God did not create poverty, crime, or other world problems, He does offer the wisdom and grace of His Son so we can fix them. We believe Jesus is that wise, respectful, and authentic answer to every human problem. The stakes are important; following the Lord leads to a much happier life here and makes eternal life possible in the next.

There are so many serious issues this year. Our responses to any of them come first from our attitude to life itself. Promoting the dignity of human life is something that is always right everywhere and for everyone on the planet because life everywhere is from God.



Each moral issue has enough material to fill an entire book and each competes for priority among so many other issues

We can feel His dedication to our life at Mass or contemplate His continuous presence in our Adoration Chapel, the very image of His enduring commitment. If Jesus is for life, then so am I!

Separation of Church and State

The Church strongly supports separation, as Jesus did (*Matthew 22:21*), and so never endorses candidates and only speaks to affirm the faith received from Our Lord.

Catholics profess our faith while living alongside people who don’t. American democracy and Catholicism are both designed to help neighbors with different beliefs stay neighbors *peacefully and lawfully*. Freedom, reason, and respect are central to both faith and country.

While our faith protects innocent life, affirms marriage of a man and woman, encourages adult stem cell research, opposes euthanasia, cloning, and embryonic stem cell production, (*and polls show that most agree*), our Catholic ideals are never an unfair imposition on anyone else. Speaking our faith is both the lawful exercise of our

American first amendment right to free speech and free exercise of religion, and a search for the common good based on reason. Again, most people are also opposed to murder too, and would state so clearly and loudly no matter what

others say, and believe they are not imposing anything on anyone but rather affirming a good thing, *even though it comes from the Ten Commandments*. It turns out that faith is already the foundation of our law. We believe all Americans must sincerely speak in a respectful way, as their informed conscience tells them.

While no candidate ever matches Our Lord in protecting the dignity of innocent human life from conception to natural death, common sense simply says we should support those candidates who are closest. We try to stay authentic both while voting and before God.

**If Jesus is for life,
...then so am I!**

Catholic politicians and receiving Holy Communion

Since we believe *taking* innocent human life is the most serious issue, what about pro-choice Catholic politicians? Some affirm a legal opinion that the unborn, while truly human, don't have civil rights, or that the mother's rights supersede the child. Some pro-choice candidates also endorse other important Catholic moral ideals, ...can they still receive Communion?

First of all, no one is ever *worthy* to receive because we cannot *earn* God's love, nor is it a *reward* for a virtuous life. We always remain undeserving; profoundly grateful that God loves us so much!

Again, the Mass reveals His love; "This is my Body and Blood, *my entire self, given for you.*" We receive Communion when our behavior reveals we have *already lived the same loving way.* What enables us to receive is living in that state of grace; when our life shows we have already chosen God. We receive not because we are worthy but because we have lived *consistent* with the love of Christ that the Eucharist is.

Only mortal sin prevents receiving. All sin is choosing self over God. Sin becomes "mortal" when our choice "kills" our relationship with God or others by some intrinsic evil. In Confession, God asks us to state that truth about ourselves, pledge to change, and accept His forgiveness. While communion is a public sign instituted by Our Lord that gives grace, sin is often private and something only the sinner knows, even though every sin hurts the whole Church.

We commit mortal sin by our own action or by directly helping another do so. But we can *indirectly* help others commit sin too. For example, when we pay taxes that promote abortion, the direct ending of an innocent life, our taxes are indirect or remote cooperation in an intrinsic evil. If we work at a company that makes immoral drugs, our work is remote cooperation. Our vote for a candidate who actively promotes immoral laws may or may not be remote cooperation; it all depends on why we are voting for that politician.

Our faith does not consider remote cooperation a mortal sin if we publicly oppose those intrinsic evils and affirm our vote supports other very serious moral issues. (Pope Benedict)

If our vote is precisely to promote abortion, now at over one million a year, (a very serious number) then it would be our direct help, and our mortal sin.

So when should we not receive? When you are aware of your own mortal sin then the best and most honest choice is to choose to not receive.

When the priest knows you are in mortal sin, he should privately counsel you *before or after Mass* to not receive. He should not refuse Communion while you are in line because he would not know that you might have confessed just before Mass, and the Communion line is not a place for interrogating each person! That would lead to chaos. His refusal would also publicly reveal your sin to others and damage your reputation.

If your sin is both very serious and widely known, then the local Bishop counsels you. If you still adamantly choose to live notoriously inconsistent with God's love, *that Bishop, as a last resort, can initiate an orderly and rational process leading to an official decree refusing you communion.* (Canons 391, 843, 912, 915, 1315, 1318, 1341) His refusal is done with love, care, and without rancor or antagonism. His refusal simply helps both you and the sacrament remain genuine and authentic. It is the truth that will set us free. (Jn. 8:32)

Again, our not receiving Communion is not a punishment, in the same way that receiving is not a reward. It simply makes common sense that we are as genuine and authentic as we can be when we approach the altar.

Politicians and citizens like us cannot be Catholic on Sunday and something else on Monday. Integrity expects that our life and words match every day as they did for Our Lord. The life of an unborn child, young pregnant mother, poor family, or elderly person all deserve the same courageous public support from us that Jesus gives to each of us everyday of the week.



The First Amendment and Catholicism ensure that Church and State will continue to guide each other in complex ways

It is the truth that will set us free... Jn. 8:32

Can we respectfully disagree?

Jesus wisely joins the command to lawfully fight social injustice with the command to love our neighbor. (perhaps needed now more than ever!)

We can never stand by and watch others being hurt, so we get involved to protect all innocent human life knowing that others might oppose us. We protect their dignity too, ...but respect and tolerance are never an excuse for silence.

Those who say, “there is no absolute truth” have just said something they believe to be,absolutely true!

Tolerance is not silence, and respect is not passivity. Love pro-actively seeks the good of others so love demands that we study, judge, and then act. We can never let sin stand. We must always speak out, we must always speak respectfully, *but we must always speak!*

Truth can never be “relative.” It either is or is not the truth about things. While good people often disagree about what it is, we can all agree that, at least, it is “objective,” to be discovered “out there” and not just something we create in our own mind. A “personal truth” has no accountability or openness to debate. Ironically, those who say, “all truth is relative and there’s no absolute truth” have just spoken something they believe to be, well, absolutely true!

Science affirms good mental health is having an accurate connection to objective reality. In other words, we open our eyes and see what is really there. We must go where the truth takes us: not where we might prefer. We affirm that the dignity of all innocent human life is both a reasonable and true understanding of God’s will that *anyone* can understand. Even our Declaration of Independence lists life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as “inalienable rights” that are “endowed by our Creator” as “self-evident truths.”

Abortion, same-sex marriage, and even Communion are again hot topics and good people argue for change. But protecting innocent life and affirming marriage of a man and woman and the especially the Eucharist are not ours to change. They belong to God who designed them for our happiness. The Church *just does not have the authority* to make adjustments or changes even if it wanted to.

This is an important time for our nation and each of us. Let us pray and ask for God’s grace as we study the

facts for accurate information, judge carefully with wisdom, and then act courageously. *This is our Catholic way to make the world a better place through love.* Loving as Christ loves makes us happier here and ensures happiness in the next.

We believe God created the universe and all life within it. While science appropriately discovers *how* it all happened, we know *by whom* it happened (We presume God knew what He was doing). Genesis affirms we have a dual purpose of both mastering the world and caring for it. (Gen.

1:26 & 2:15) We are called to unite these purposes in rational action to make the world a better place.

We act to make our world better

In calling us to both master and care for creation, God affirms we have the *power* to make good things happen and to *love* all life as He does. Both come together in the very person of Jesus. The God and master of the universe arrived in Bethlehem as a vulnerable and innocent child, in desperate need of care. Unless Jesus, Mary, and Joseph received some help, it was entirely possible that the Holy Family might have come to a bad end. How wonderful that angels, shepherds, and even Kings from the East came to their aid.

Catholics are the kind of people who come to the aid of a whole world in crisis. We step up to speak out on all moral issues facing us today, and affirm the foundation for our response is the dignity of all innocent human life from the first moment of conception to the end of natural life.

We can be proud to be Baptized into this Catholic community that takes the care and happiness of the entire planet so seriously. I can’t wait for tomorrow to get involved in moral issues even more. I hope you feel God’s call as well. The words of the consecration at Mass bring us the total unconditional commitment of God for our life. The final words reveal what we do next...

“Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord!”

- Fr. Dave Heney
daveheney@gmail.com
Website: daveheney.com

