

The Bishops Have Spoken: Abortion trumps all other issues in the Election



The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has been very clear in its characterization of the most important issue in this election: “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority.” Other issues—immigration, racism, poverty and the death penalty—are of great importance and require urgent attention, but even though they are prominent issues, abortion is preeminent among them.

There’s nothing new about this statement. Pope John Paul II made the Church’s teaching on abortion very clear in 1995’s **Evangelium Vitae**, which states that when a state legalizes abortion, it becomes “a tyrant state,” and causes the death of freedom and the disintegration of the state itself. Those statements sound like abortion is more than a single issue.

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The U.S. bishops followed suit with **Living the Gospel of Life** in 1998. That document, quoted regularly in subsequent documents of the bishops' conference about elections, describes the right to life, which abortion attacks directly, as the foundation of the house of social justice issues. They tell us that among all the priorities in elections, we must begin with a commitment not to kill the innocent.

There can be no doubt the Catholic Church sees protecting the dignity of every human life as the most important thing we can do as a Church, and as a society.

Many bishops over the years have taken it upon themselves to echo the key importance of abortion in voting. Since I took over the leadership of Priests for Life in 1993, I have worked to highlight these statements. Now is the best time I can think of to take a look at some of them again.

Cardinal John J. O'Connor, who ordained me in 1988 and gave me permission to devote my life to the pro-life cause, wrote a letter to the Democrats and Republicans in 1996, when President Bill Clinton was running against Sen. Bob Dole. It was signed by seven other New York bishops.

"We urge you to reject a 'pro-choice' position on abortion," the cardinal wrote,

For at the heart of the abortion issue lies the question: "What is the moral value of each human life?" And from the heart of the American, the Republican and the Democratic traditions, we would suggest, comes the unequivocal answer—all human lives have equal dignity and value. No court, no legislature, no political party can validly assign lesser value to the lives of some."

In November 2000, just days before Republican George Bush would face off against Democrat Al Gore, **Bishop John Smith** of the Diocese of Trenton in New Jersey wrote that "support and promotion of abortion is always wrong and can never be justified. Opposition to abortion must be a priority for Catholics."

That same year, **Bishop John J. Myers**, then bishop of Peoria, Illinois, wrote: “No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate for or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life.”

Also in 2000, **Bishop Paul Loverde** of the Diocese of Arlington in Virginia addressed the four priorities voters must weigh before casting a ballot: Protecting human life, promoting family life, pursuing social justice and practicing global solidarity.

“Obviously, protecting human life is the most basic of these four priorities, since the other three would be rendered meaningless without the first,” he wrote. “If we do not uphold and protect human life in its beginning at conception, there will be no life to uphold and protect thereafter.”

Four years later, when President Bush faced challenger John Kerry, **Archbishop Charles Chaput** wrote that “Catholics have a duty to work tirelessly for human dignity at every stage of life, and to demand the same of their lawmakers. But some issues are jugular. Some issues take priority. Abortion, immigration law, international trade policy, the death penalty and housing for the poor are all vitally important issues. But no amount of calculating can make them equal in gravity. The right to life comes first.”

In 2008, when a little-known Democrat senator from Illinois named Barack Obama faced Republican John McCain, Archbishop Chaput directed his comments to a group called Catholics for Obama that thought it could change the candidate’s mind on abortion, as he had once hoped to change the mind of President Jimmy Carter.

Changing the views of “pro-choice” candidates takes a lot more than verbal gymnastics, good alibis and pious talk about ‘personal opposition’ to killing unborn children. I’m sure Roman Catholics for Obama know that, and I wish them good luck. They’ll need it.

Obama never changed his mind about abortion.

The point that all the bishops make, consistently, and have been making consistently since 1973's Roe v. Wade decision made abortion on demand legal in our nation, is that the right to life is not just the preeminent issue but also the most fundamental right we possess as human beings. We don't need anything more than common sense to realize how true that is. Nothing takes more life than abortion. No victims are as defenseless as the unborn. No right is more fundamental than the right to life.

Pope Francis agrees, as well he should. **Archbishop Joseph Naumann**, chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities for the Bishops' Conference, reported last month that he spoke to the pope about the criticism bishops had received for their focus on abortion:

I shared with Pope Francis that the bishops of the United States had been criticized by some for identifying the protection of the unborn as a preeminent priority. The Holy Father expressed his support for our efforts observing that if we fail to protect life, no other rights matter. Pope Francis also said that abortion is not primarily a Catholic or even a religious issue, it is first and foremost a human rights issue.

Abortion is the preeminent issue of our time and thus the preeminent priority in this election. No Catholic should be distracted or confused into thinking otherwise. Nor should any other citizen. After all, if a politician can't respect the life of a little baby, how can he respect yours?

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