

Reflections on the Moral Implications of the Upcoming Election

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**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

With the general election coming up in just a few days, people are pondering and praying over their choices. Although candidates are also running for state and local offices, the presidential election this year is unprecedented and most challenging. Those who are concerned with protecting human life from conception until natural death, promoting marriage and family life, and defending religious liberty point to the Democrats' aggressive pro-abortion stance and activist agenda expanding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, while restricting religious liberty, as expressed at the Democratic National Convention this past summer and reflected in the 2016 Democratic Party Platform. On the other hand, Republicans historically have not fared very well in these same areas in practice, as Supreme Court Justices appointed by Republican presidents in the past have rendered decisions advancing abortion rights, recognizing same-sex marriage and restricting religious freedom. Conversely, Democrats articulate strong concern for the poor, but half a century of the War on Poverty has yielded little progress in this regard.

Both candidates for president are seen as having such serious flaws as to lead some people to wonder if they can vote for either candidate of the two major parties or if they should skip voting in this year's election. In the end, people must follow their

consciences, but they should also take care to form their consciences properly and make informed decisions.

In this regard, the Catholic Bishops of the United States provide guidance in their document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, saying, “In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation” (no. 13). This reflects the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which reminds us, “It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life” (nos. 1913-1915).

The phrase “as far as possible” indicates that there may be legitimate limits to our active participation in public life. For example, priests do not normally hold public offices in the civic sphere. Voters may also legitimately conclude in conscience that they cannot vote for either candidate of the two major political parties. In such cases, voters in most jurisdictions can write in the name of a candidate of their choosing. In all cases, voters can skip voting for a particular office, but still vote for other offices on the ballot.

A phrase that has been coined to describe those who opt out of participation in political life is the “Benedict Option,” named not after Pope Benedict XVI, but St. Benedict of Nursia, who lived from about 480 to 537. St. Benedict was an educated young Christian who left Rome, the city of the recently fallen Empire, out of disgust with its decadence. He went south, into the forest near Subiaco, to live as a hermit and to pray. Eventually, he gathered around him some like-minded men, and

formed monasteries. Benedict wrote his famous Rule, which became the guiding constitution of most monasteries in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. The monasteries were incubators of Christian and classical culture, and outposts of evangelization in the barbarian kingdoms. As Cardinal Newman wrote, "St. Benedict found the world, physical and social, in ruins, and his mission was to restore it in the way not of science, but of nature, not as if setting about to do it, not professing to do it by any set time, or by any rare specific, or by any series of strokes, but so quietly, patiently, gradually, that often till the work was done, it was not known to be doing. It was a restoration rather than a visitation, correction or conversion. The new work which he helped to create was a growth rather than a structure. Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing and building; and other silent men, not seen, were sitting in the cold cloister, tiring their eyes and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully copied and recopied the manuscripts which they had saved. There was no one who contended or cried out, or drew attention to what was going on, but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning and a city."

The idea of the Benedict Option was suggested by Alasdair MacIntyre, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame in his book *After Virtue*, in which he drew certain parallels between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages, writing that a "crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and

women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing – was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.”

Taking up Professor MacIntyre’s suggestion, Rod Dreher, Senior Editor for *The American Conservative*, popularized the term “Benedict Option,” saying, “The country is not ours anymore. This is not our culture anymore. Maybe it never was our real home, but we have got to prepare ourselves and our families and our churches through intentional living, through disciplined living, and through an awareness of the cultural moment to deal with perhaps even persecution.”

A critique of the Benedict Option is that it seems to suggest withdrawal from the world. Neither MacIntyre nor Dreher intended anything like withdrawal from the common good, or even from a commitment to political institutions, but the image of retreating to a monastery suggests to some the notion of withdrawal.

Giving voice to this criticism, C.C. Pecknold, associate professor of systematic theology at Catholic University of America, says, "Better, therefore, to speak of the Dominican Option. When I see them in the white habits at prayer, or giving lectures, or playing guitars and banjos on the subway, I have a plausible image of a 'contrast society' that is very much engaged with the world—an evangelistic witness which is joyful, intellectually serious, expansive, and charitable. St. Dominic founded the Order of Preachers after a long contemplative season which, in the words of one biographer 'burst into flame' when he encountered Albigensians (ancient Manichean dualists) on travels through southern France. Dominic stayed up all night arguing with one Albigensian, and by morning the man turned away from his heresy and turned towards the Catholic faith. Dominic's missionary zeal flowed directly out of cloistered contemplation, but it convinced him of the need for a new evangelistic order."

Others have suggested a Franciscan Option or a Norbertine Option. In the end, we really do not need to choose Benedict, Dominic, Francis, Norbert or any other saint after which to name a new option. These are all wonderful saints who point us to a more compelling person. Heaven is full of saints who found different ways to imitate Christ. The real figure to whom we should configure ourselves is Jesus Christ. Moreover, Jesus Christ is not an option in the sense of being optional. He is the Way,

the Truth and the Life. We are called to live lives of ordinary virtue and heroic, saintly holiness in imitation of Christ, as intentional, dedicated and faithful disciples of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I wish to be clear that I am not saying that it may be best not to vote at all or that it would best to skip voting for president. I am saying that voters may legitimately conclude in conscience that they cannot vote for either candidate of the two major political parties. There is a big difference between saying that something is permissible and saying that it is the best thing to do. There is also a big difference between saying it is legitimate not to vote for either of the two main candidates and saying that one should not vote at all. I repeat that the U.S. Bishops and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, saying that “participation in political life is a moral obligation” and “As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life.” I say again in such cases that voters who conclude in conscience that they cannot vote for either of the two main candidates for president can write in the name of a candidate of their choosing in most jurisdictions, such as Illinois. In all cases, voters can skip voting for a particular office, but still vote for other offices on the ballot.

Having said that, I also wish to address the importance of taking into account the issue of abortion in voting for candidates on election day. Some might question why that issue should be so important in our election decisions. In that regard, I would like to hearken back to the time of Springfield’s most famous citizen and most influential politician, Abraham Lincoln.

Folks here in central Illinois are certainly familiar with the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, which were a series of seven debates between Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate for the United States Senate from Illinois, and incumbent Senator Stephen Douglas, the Democratic Party candidate. Although Douglas won re-election to the Senate that year, the debates set the stage for the presidential election two years later in which Abraham Lincoln emerged victorious.

Looking back at the content of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, what is noteworthy is that the main issue discussed in all seven debates was slavery in the United States. Modern observers of political debates would have a hard time imagining candidates being so focused on one issue. In fact, if a candidate tried to concentrate such attention on a particular issue today, he or she would be accused of being a single-issue candidate. Yet, in the mid-nineteenth century, the nation as a whole was so preoccupied with the question of slavery that a candidate who did not speak primarily about this topic would have been seen as ignoring the most pressing issue of the day while wasting time on trivialities.

For Lincoln, slavery was a moral issue that was dividing the nation. In his famous "House Divided Speech," which Lincoln gave on June 16, 1858 at the Old State Capitol in Springfield upon accepting the nomination as the Illinois Republican Party's candidate for the United States Senate, Springfield's most famous citizen quoted the Bible (Mark 3:25 and Matthew 12:25) in saying, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

Lincoln believed that the threat of expanding slavery came not from the slaveholding South but from Douglas's popular sovereignty position—allowing the territories to decide for themselves whether they wished to have slavery. Fundamental to Lincoln's argument was his conviction that slavery must be dealt with as a moral wrong. It violated the assertion in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." The "real issue" in his contest with Douglas, Lincoln insisted, was the issue of right and wrong, and he charged that his opponent was trying to uphold a wrong.

I mention the Lincoln-Douglas debates because they highlight how far our political discourse has strayed from addressing the defining moral issue of the time. In Lincoln's time, the defining moral issue was slavery; in our time, the defining moral issue is abortion. Yet most of our politicians, the media and apparently most citizens would rather not talk about abortion, either pro or con, wasting their time instead on petty distractions.

The Catholic Bishops of the United States teach that Catholics are not single-issue voters, yet "if a candidate's position on a single issue promotes an intrinsically evil act, such as legal abortion, redefining marriage in a way that denies its essential meaning, or racist behavior, a voter may legitimately disqualify a candidate from receiving support" (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, n. 42). On the level of the presidential election, both Hillary Clinton and Senator Tim Kaine, the Democratic candidates for President and Vice-President, respectively, both hold stridently aggressive positions

that promote intrinsically evils acts “such as legal abortion” and “redefining marriage in a way that denies its essential meaning.”

In this regard, Eric Metaxas, host of the nationally syndicated Eric Metaxas Show, recently wrote an op-ed piece in which he said, “It’s a fact that if Hillary Clinton is elected, the country’s chance to have a Supreme Court that values the Constitution—and the genuine liberty and self-government for which millions have died—is gone. Not for four years, or eight, but forever. Many say Mr. Trump can’t be trusted to deliver on this score, but Mrs. Clinton certainly can be trusted in the opposite direction” (“Should Christians Vote for Trump?” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 2016).

Although the official Democratic Party Platform vigorously pledges to “stand up” for Planned Parenthood, fund abortion nationwide and around the world, vows to “overturn” state and federal restrictions on abortion, proposes cracking down on pro-life sidewalk counselors, and affirms abortion as a “core” right, not all Democrats subscribe to those positions. Here in Illinois, we have some very devoted pro-life Democrats and some “pro-choice” Republicans, so voters must look at the positions of individual candidates and not just their party affiliations.

People who vote for pro-abortion candidates are cooperators in evil. Whether such cooperation in evil is morally culpable as sinful depends on a variety of factors, such as the voter’s intent in choosing to vote for such a candidate and whether the candidate’s positions or actions are a remote or a proximate cause in bringing about the killing of unborn babies. Catholics who are unsure of the moral implications of their election choices, especially with regard to abortion—the defining moral issue of our

time – should discuss these matters with a priest in the Sacrament of Penance in order to form their consciences properly as faithful citizens, or to be absolved of their sins, as the case may be.

I call abortion the defining moral issue of our time because our country's approach to this issue will define our nation for years to come, just as our country's approach to slavery has defined us a nation committed to the proposition that "all men are created equal," including people of different races. It is still within our power to steer our nation away from the "culture of death" and come instead to be defined as a nation committed to the "culture of life."

I hope these "Reflections on the Moral Implications of the Upcoming Election" are helpful to you and I pray that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patroness of the United States of America and of our diocese, will intercede for us in the upcoming election to be guided by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

+ Thomas John Paprocki