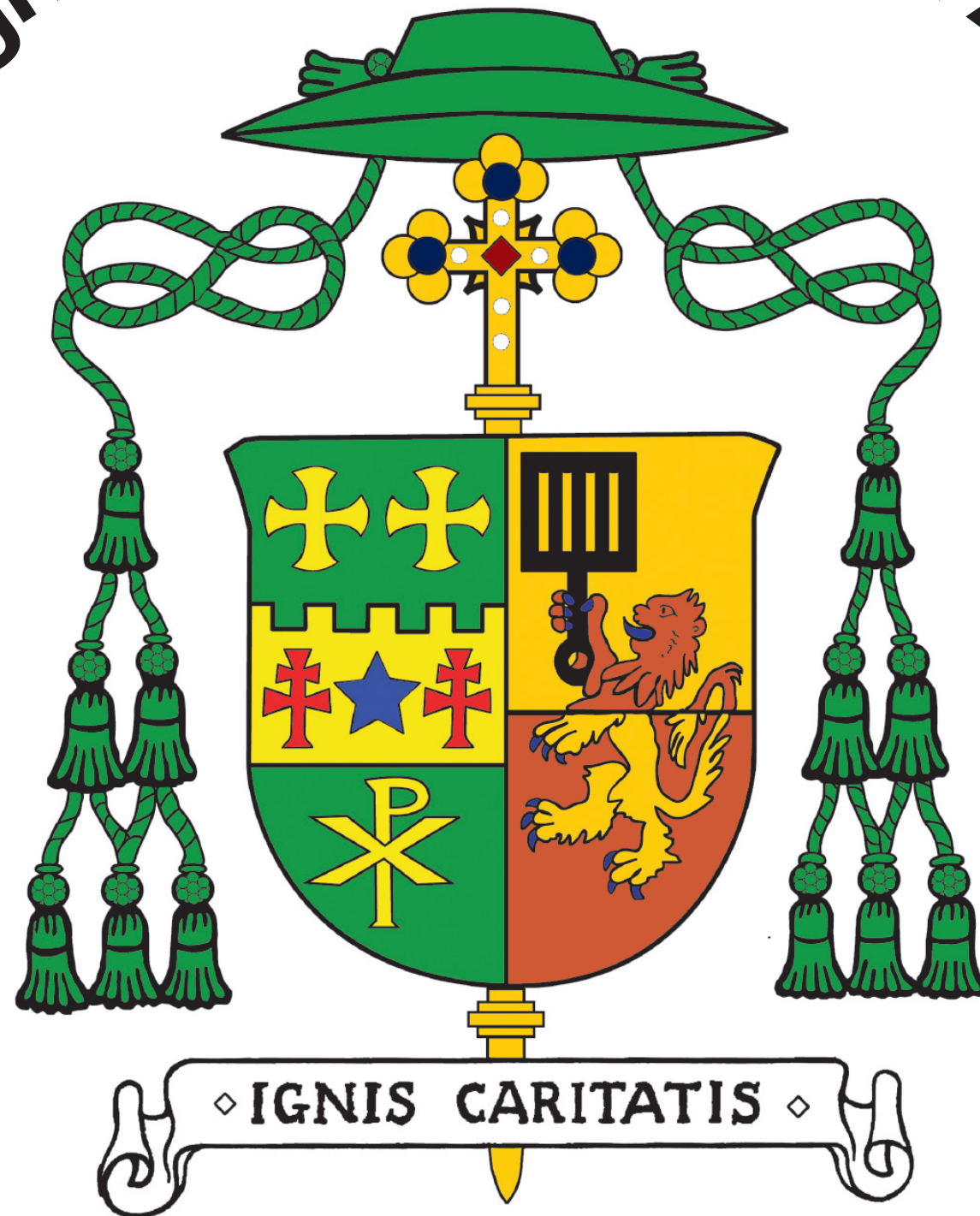


Integrity and the Political Arena



A Pastoral Letter
by
The Most Reverend Lawrence E. Brandt, JCD, PhD
Bishop of Greensburg

**Dear Brother Priests and Deacons,
Dear Sisters and Brothers in Faith,**

This pastoral letter is being addressed to you in an effort to clarify the Catholic Church's teaching as it relates to certain issues which have emerged as a result of this year's election campaigns. It analyzes these issues from a faith perspective. By way of conclusion, I have focused upon some practical measures which result from this analysis, and which are considered pastorally appropriate. I commend this statement to your careful consideration.

Religious Values and Societal Values

In the formulation of its laws and public policy, a society reflects the values by which it chooses to live. Moral values have their ethical moorings in religious faith. The Ten Commandments provide examples of such values. The Commandment "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor" is not only the religious basis for demanding that individuals be honest and be truthful, but it is also the moral basis for making perjury a crime in civil society. The Commandment "Thou shall not kill" not only expresses the religious basis for demanding from each individual a respect for the sacredness of human life and that one not kill unjustly, but it is also the moral basis for making murder a crime in civil society. These moral demands, as also the others made by the rest of the Ten Commandments, are directly related to God through the Commandments.

Conscience is simply a moral circuitry stamped on the soul of each one of us by God. We are wired for God. This circuitry, properly formed in the truth, enables us to relate such religious and moral values correctly to real-life situations. We do this as religious persons both in our private and personal lives, and also as citizens of civil society in our public lives. Some claim that these two dimensions of our moral lives – the public and the religious – can be separated into two distinct spheres which must be kept unrelated. However, when such a separation happens, it leads to a moral schizophrenia which produces dysfunctional citizens and spiritually flawed individuals. "Public" on the one hand and "religious" on the other must go together. One without the other means dishonesty. Such a separation means a lack of integrity: not being whole as a person.

The Church and Society's Values

Religiously grounded moral values lie at the heart of the way we lead our lives as religious individuals and also as citizens in a civil society. The Church has always had not just the right, but also the duty, of teaching about these values and showing how they apply to our lives as people of faith and as citizens of our country.

The Catholic Church has always been a partner in helping to define how the moral environment should look, in which we live as people of faith and responsible citizens. For that reason, the Church has likewise

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always been legitimately interested in what moral values are reflected in the laws and public policies which are part of this moral landscape. This moral landscape, at the present time, is in need of some critical examination for the good of our country and for the good of the Catholic community in the Diocese of Greensburg.

Religious Issues and Election Controversies

It has not been the policy of my predecessors nor is it my own now, as the present Bishop of Greensburg, to endorse or oppose individual political candidates for public elective office. It has likewise not been the policy of the newspaper of the Catholic Diocese of Greensburg, *The Catholic Accent*, to endorse or oppose individual political candidates for public elective office. However, this in no way limits nor abrogates the right and duty of Catholic bishops to speak out on issues in public life and activity, on the local, state or national levels, which touch upon matters of religious faith and moral values. We hold the values to be discussed here essential for the common good and for the right ordering of society itself.

The Catholic Church's Teaching on Abortion

The attention being given to this year's election campaigns has brought to the fore in sharper relief than ever the assertions of some aspirants for public office and of some elected officials, who claim that one can advocate for abortion and vote for legislation in support of abortion and still be a Catholic in good standing.

The position of the Catholic Church on procured abortion was just as clear and consistent in its earliest days as it is now. The oldest catechism of the Church, the *Didache*, written about 90 A.D., declares: "You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish." The Second Vatican Council and the most recent Catechism of the Catholic Church restate the same teaching. Throughout 2,000 years, the Catholic Church has taught consistently that abortion is a crime against our own humanity, as well as a grave moral disorder. This teaching on the sanctity of life concerns one of the moral values most fundamental to human society and to the Church itself: the sacred value of human life. Because abortion is about human life itself, it has priority of place among all the issues related to life. This doctrinal holding then is an essential part of the communion of faith and the covenant of values which identify a person as a Catholic.

In 1995, Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical "The Gospel of Life," reaffirmed the constant teaching of the Church and reiterated that those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a grave and clear obligation to oppose any law that attacks human life. For these individuals, it is impossible to promote such a law or to vote for it. The subsequent document of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life," repeats this teaching. It highlights the fact that teachers of faith (bishops, priests, and deacons) must instruct Catholics that abortion is a gravely evil action. This document reaffirms also that voting for legislation that permits or enables abortion is gravely wrong. It furthermore reaffirms that any attack on human life, which is based on abortion (e.g. fetal stem cell research), is likewise gravely wrong. If abortion is an intrinsically grave evil ac-

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tion, then legislative support of it is also gravely wrong. This kind of legislative support is then cooperation in a grave moral evil.

There is something further evident from the Church’s teaching on this issue. It is that the Catholic Church alone determines what it means to be Catholic, what the Church’s core doctrinal holdings are, and what is required to be a Catholic in good standing. No institution of higher education, no political party, no board of trustees, no think tank, no group of theologians, no newspaper, no individual, no one – no matter how well intentioned – does this except the Catholic Church itself through its official teaching authority (the magisterium).

In the last two documents just cited, it is clear that the teaching function of the bishops, priests, and deacons concerning the moral dimensions of abortion and its culture of death is absolutely crucial. Catholic public officials whose values on life issues are not consonant with the teachings of the Church should be invited by bishops and pastors to meet with them. These meetings should be held to clarify for these public officials any misunderstandings they may have regarding the teachings of the Church or to answer any questions or difficulties they present. On our part, we bishops, priests, and deacons have to ask ourselves also whether we have spoken enough about these teachings of the Church from the pulpit or in other available forums.

I am willing personally to meet with any Catholic candidate or Catholic elected official from the Diocese of Greensburg to discuss such pastoral matters. We welcome more effective dialogue and engagement with all public officials in conversations initiated also by political leaders themselves.

In view of the well-articulated, well-publicized, and consistent position of the Catholic Church on abortion for 2,000 years, and on the basis of dialogues which may have taken place concerning public officials’ advocating questionable positions from the point of view of Church teaching, it is difficult to imagine that Catholic public officials or aspirants for public office could be ignorant of the fact that voting in favor of abortion legislation is gravely wrong and is a rejection of a core doctrinal holding of the Catholic Church concerning the sanctity of human life from the moment of fertilization.

Governmental Support of Abortion

An established pattern of voting in favor of abortion legislation and an established pattern of public rejection of a core teaching of the Church amount to being a person who is engaged in public cooperation with a grave moral evil. It means, furthermore, also having separated oneself in a fundamental way from the Catholic Church because one is no longer sharing the covenant of core beliefs and values which identify a person as Catholic.

Any public official who says, “I can vote for abortion and still be a Catholic in good standing,” is being intellectually condescending to every Catholic by making himself or herself the sole judge of what “Catholic” means. For a public official or a person campaigning for public office to say, “I can be in favor of abortion and still be a good Catholic,” is asking us to believe that his or her position is just as valid as the position of the Catholic Church, which is diametrically opposed to it. This must be viewed as intellectual sleight of hand! This is also demeaning to the intelligence of any informed Catholic. When such candidates or public officials renew publicly and in church, during the Easter season, their baptismal vows, by affirming that they “believe

in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church . . .,” then such a declaration, in the minds of very many, is bearing false witness to the Catholic faith.

It is not honest for such politically-involved individuals to say that they are a Catholic and then act in a way completely incongruous with that faith by helping to legislate abortion’s acceptance or continuation. It represents a lack of integrity for a public official to expect others to accept the premise: “What I do publicly contradicts who I say I am religiously, but that doesn’t make any difference.” This is tantamount to asking citizens to accept a lack of personal integrity as a qualification for public office.

Integrity means acting in a manner which is faithful to one’s moral convictions. Moral convictions have no other meaning than to be translated into good action choices and behavior patterns. If they aren’t that, convictions aren’t even worthy of mention. When convictions are mentioned without the required personal integrity to back them up, then it must be concluded that convictions are mentioned only because they are self-serving. This reasoning, “What I do contradicts who I say I am, but that doesn’t make any difference,” becomes all the more menacing when one reflects on the fact that some of these “so-called” Catholic officials help keep pro-life individuals from becoming federal judges and justices on the Supreme Court of the United States.

Public Support of Abortion and Holy Communion

A public pattern of cooperation in a grave evil, which affects the lives of millions of people, and a public pattern of rejection of a core doctrinal holding of the Catholic Church, have a direct bearing on one’s proper dispositions for receiving Holy Communion. A pattern of public cooperation in grave evil inevitably calls into extreme question one’s worthiness to receive Holy Communion. To do so nonetheless, as Saint Paul says, profanes the Body and Blood of Christ (1 Cor. 11: 27). A pattern of public rejection of a core doctrinal holding of the Catholic Church separates one in a fundamental way from the communion of faith which is the Catholic Church. What sense then does receiving the effective sign of that oneness in a communion of faith, which is the Eucharist, have in such a situation? None, because it is a contradiction in terms. The Eucharist is aptly called Holy Communion because, of its nature, it reflects a communion or unity of belief on the part of those receiving it. Here the words of the second-century martyr Saint Justin are appropriate: “No one may share the Eucharist with us unless he believes what we teach is true, unless he is washed in the regenerating waters of baptism for the remission of his sins, and unless he lives in accordance with the principles given us by Christ.” The reception of the Eucharist by those who enable grave evil and pub-

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licly support it is offensive to every committed Catholic in the Church because such individuals have proven that they have repudiated what we are because of what they do. To receive Holy Communion under these circumstances is not only offensive to committed Catholics, but it is also offensive to pro-life Catholic public officials who often risk their public careers to fight for the pro-life cause. It is also offensive to those Catholic public officials who voluntarily refrain from receiving the Eucharist because of their recognition of their compromised status.

Should such a public official, as we have been talking about, be denied Holy Communion? Each bishop can make prudential judgments regarding this question in accord with established canonical and pastoral principles and with what is deemed to be pastorally appropriate.

I think the decision about the reception of Holy Communion should be put where it belongs – on the person contemplating receiving Holy Communion. It should not be imposed on the bishop, on the priest, on the deacon, nor on the Eucharistic minister. That is "passing the buck!" It should be placed exactly where it belongs, which is on the conscience of the individual contemplating receiving communion. Such public officials who have notoriously cooperated in enabling a grave moral evil to become a fixture of our ethical environment, should, of their own accord, refrain from presenting themselves to receive Holy Communion. If they nonetheless do receive Holy Communion, they should be challenged to take ownership of the consequences of a lack of integrity by publicly acknowledging that what they *do* contradicts who they *say* they are. In acknowledging this, they should also take into account the sensitivities of ministers of Holy Communion who resent the perception that they are being used for political purposes. Furthermore, in receiving Holy Communion under these circumstances without the proper dispositions, these public officials create also the perception that they are opportunists who are willing to try to barter even their religion for political power. Should an individual who demonstrates that his religious core and personal convictions play so paltry a role in what he does, be a person entrusted with power over others?

I think the moral responsibility for the decision to receive Holy Communion should be put where it belongs, so that it is the potential recipient who bears the full weight of the consequences of his action before God, the Catholic Church and "society itself." I say society itself because this is not just a Catholic problem about Holy Communion. It is a problem with much deeper and wider implications. It is a cause of very serious concern for all the citizenry about a matter of integrity. It is a very serious concern about placing public trust in a person who

has demonstrated public misrepresentation. Any individual who says he can advocate for and enable the practice of abortion and claims that he can still be a Catholic in good standing, has a very serious problem with integrity which any community can ignore only at its own peril.

Consequences for the Catholic Community

In view of the seriousness of this situation, as well as the false witness and the misunderstanding it can cause, it is pastorally appropriate that the Catholic community, its organizations, and institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of the fundamental tenets of our faith and the moral requirements which follow from them by giving such public officials or candidates for office any awards or honors or platforms, which might be interpreted as support for their positions or actions. It must be borne in mind that the polarizing tendencies of election year politics can lead to circumstances in which Catholic teaching and sacramental practice can be misused for political purposes.

Furthermore, as with the reception of Holy Communion, such public officials should voluntarily refrain from presenting themselves as candidates for the positions of lector, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion or other public functions in the life of the Church, including being a godparent at baptism or a sponsor at confirmation. All of these roles require that a person live a life of faith in conformity with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

We are privileged to live in a country where we have the freedom and the right to vote and to participate in public life. In voting, we demonstrate our gratitude for this freedom. We may certainly also use this right to bring our faith perspective, as outlined above, to evaluate the integrity of the candidates and the validity of the positions they advance or support. In voting from a faith perspective then, we use our right to help renew the moral landscape in which we must make our home.

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