

Homily for the Diocesan Curia Respect Life Mass

October 14, 2020

**St. Agnes Church
Springfield, Illinois**

† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki

Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

My dear priests, consecrated religious, staff of our Diocesan Curia, brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here at St. Agnes Church to celebrate this Annual Diocesan Curia Respect Life Mass.

The month of October is designated as Respect Life Month by the Catholic Bishops of the United States. In anticipation of Respect Life Month, I wrote my column on this topic in the September 20th issue of *Catholic Times*.¹ The timing of Respect Life Month this year comes just before our national elections, so I quoted from the *Introductory Letter* of the document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, in which the Catholic Bishops of the United States said that “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed.”²

In this regard, I quoted from the Party Platforms of the Democrats and the Republicans, and I noted where the candidates for the offices of

President, Vice-President, and the U.S. Senate from Illinois stood in terms of the “preeminent” issue of abortion.

I also pointed out, however, that not all candidates always follow their respective party’s platform. So, before you cast your ballot, it is important to find out where each candidate stands on critical life-related issues.

In light of this information, I and many of my brother bishops and priests have been asked if it is a sin to vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, especially since Mr. Biden has recently said he would seek to codify the abortion license of *Roe v. Wade* into federal law if it were overturned in the U.S. Supreme Court³ and he would support the repeal of the Hyde Amendment which prohibits federal funding of abortion.⁴

Kamala Harris has also been strident in her support of abortion. In 2016, for example, as Attorney General of California, Kamala Harris initiated the prosecution of David Daleiden, a journalist with nearly a decade of experience in conducting investigative research on the abortion industry, after he documented Planned Parenthood’s illegal sale of body parts from aborted fetuses.⁵ Harris orchestrated the raid of Daleiden’s apartment, in which authorities seized a laptop and several hard drives that contained the videos he filmed as part of his exposé of Planned Parenthood.⁶

Joe Biden's and Kamala Harris' vehement support for laws that promote abortion is what leads many people to ask if it is a sin to vote for them.

In seeking to answer that question, it must be noted first of all that voting itself is not a sin; in fact, it is a good thing to vote.⁷ But voting for someone who promotes an intrinsic evil raises the question of cooperation with evil. This is where the analysis becomes somewhat complex and does not lend itself to simple yes or no sound bites.

In this regard, Catholic moral theology distinguishes between formal and material cooperation. Formal cooperation is when someone shares the evil intent of the wrongdoer or otherwise "agrees with, condones, or approves of the wrongdoer's action, at least to some degree. Formal cooperation in the wrongdoing of another is always wrong."⁸

Material cooperation occurs when "one does not share the intention of the wrongdoer, but is in some way involved with the wrongdoer. . . . Material cooperation is considered immediate when the cooperator's act assists in the performance of the wrongdoing in an essential way. . . . Material cooperation itself can be distinguished by being 'proximate' mediate material cooperation or 'remote' mediate material cooperation. . . .

Material cooperation requires a proportionately grave reason. The more proximate the cooperation, the more proportionately grave the reasons needed for the action to be justified.”⁹

Applying these principles to the question at hand, voting for someone with the intent to support abortion is formal cooperation and is always sinful. On the other hand, the person who does not intend to support abortion but votes for someone who will promote abortion becomes a cooperator in an intrinsic evil.

Two points to note here: when we say that an action is sinful, the Church is speaking about an objective reality, not the subjective state of a person’s soul before God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. . . . Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.”¹⁰

“For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full

knowledge and deliberate consent.”¹¹ Abortion is always a grave matter, and it is a mortal sin if committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.

It can be argued that the cooperation in this grave evil when voting is mediate because that one person’s vote may not be essential to the procurement of abortion. But mediate cooperation in a grave evil requires a proportionately grave reason to be justified. Over 860,000 abortions took place in 2017, the latest year reported in the U.S.¹² In order to justify voting for a proponent of abortion, one would need a proportionately grave reason that outweighs the killing of 860,000 babies per year.

Some argue, for example that that the death penalty is a proportionately grave reason. There are two problems, however, with trying to make that moral equivalence. First, capital punishment is not in the same moral category as abortion. While abortion is considered to be an intrinsic evil,¹³ the death penalty has called “inadmissible” by Pope Francis, which is not the same as calling it an intrinsic evil, but is more of a prudential judgment about its efficacy.¹⁴

The second problem with this argument is the lack of numerical equivalency. While over 860,000 abortions took place in our country in the last reported year, there were a total of 22 executions of prisoners in seven

states in 2019, with zero executions in the State of Illinois.¹⁵ It is hard to see how voting for someone who opposes the death penalty would be a proportionately grave reason to justify voting for that same candidate who promotes abortion.

Notice that there are several steps that are involved in this reasoning process, only the last of which is for the person to reach a conclusion, but a conclusion nevertheless based on sound moral reasoning.

In our Mass today, then, let us pray for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to guide voters to think with sound moral reasoning and to keep in mind the issue of abortion as their preeminent priority as they form their conscience before casting their ballot. Please pray for our country that we may all live the Gospel of life. As Jesus says in the Gospel of St. Luke, “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it” (Luke 11:28).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, "Keep in mind abortion remains 'preeminent' issue in upcoming election," *Catholic Times*, September 20, 2020, accessed online at <https://ct.dio.org/bishops-column/message/keep-in-mind-abortion-remains-preeminent-issue-in-upcoming-election/read.html>.

² *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship - Introductory Letter* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019), accessed online at <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-introductory-letter>.

³ Alexandra DeSanctis, "Biden Reiterates Promise to Make Roe v. Wade the 'Law of the Land,'" *National Review*, October 6, 2020, accessed online at <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/biden-reiterates-promise-to-make-roe-v-wade-the-law-of-the-land/>.

⁴ Bobby Allyn, "Biden Reverses Position, Rejects Hyde Amendment, Cites Attacks On Abortion Access," *NPR*, June 6, 2019, accessed online at <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/06/730515910/biden-reverses-position-rejects-hyde-amendment-cites-attacks-on-abortion-access>.

⁵ Madeline Osburn, "Four Years Later, Planned Parenthood Whistleblower Still Trapped In Kamala Harris's Persecution," *The Federalist*, August 20, 2020, accessed online at <https://thefederalist.com/2020/08/20/four-years-later-planned-parenthood-whistleblower-still-trapped-in-kamala-harriss-persecution/>.

⁶ Samuel Smith, "California Atty. Gen Behind Raid of Pro-Life Activist's Apartment Actively Advocates for Planned Parenthood," *The Christian Post*, April 7, 2016, accessed online at <https://www.christianpost.com/news/california-attorney-general-kamala-harris-raid-pro-life-david-daleiden-apartment-planned-parenthood.html>.

⁷ "In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation." *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), n. 13, accessed online at <https://www.usccb.org/offices/justice-peace-human-development/forming-consciences-faithful-citizenship>.

⁸ Principle of Cooperation Task Force of the Catholic Health Association, *Resources About the Principle of Cooperation For the Catholic Health Ministry* (Washington, D.C. and St. Louis, Missouri: Catholic Health Association of the United States, 2013), p. 6.

⁹ CHA Principle of Cooperation Task Force, *Resources About the Principle of Cooperation*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1854-1855.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1857.

¹² Guttmacher Institute, "Induced Abortion in the United States," September 2019, accessed online at <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>.

¹³ “A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases, a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil.” USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, n. 34, accessed online at <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-part-one>.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Meeting organized by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, 11 October 2017, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 11, 2017, accessed online at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171011_convegno-nuova-evangelizzazione.html. See also <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-08/pope-francis-cdf-ccc-death-penalty-revision-ladaria.html>.

¹⁵ “The Death Penalty in 2019: Year End Report,” Death Penalty Information Center, posted on December 17, 2019, at <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/dpic-reports/dpic-year-end-reports/the-death-penalty-in-2019-year-end-report>.