

Holding Your Nose: How to Vote Like a Catholic

by [Brett Salkeld](#) September 23, 2020

This November, American Catholics will participate in an event of historical, even cosmic, proportions, an event that, though it shows up in our calendars with predictable regularity, is arguably more important to Americans this year than ever before. If approached with a well-formed and thoroughly Catholic perspective it has the potential to alter the fate, not only of the United States, but of the world, and not only of government and politics, but of individual eternal souls. I am talking, of course, about . . . the liturgical Feast of Christ the King, celebrated on the last Sunday of ordinary time, November 22, 2020.

The Feast of Christ the King was promulgated by Pope Pius XI in 1925, at a time when political extremism and nationalism were threatening Europe and partisans of both left and right were each offering a kind of secular salvation, often a salvation *from* partisans on the other side. Sound familiar? In this context, the Church felt it opportune to remind the faithful that no political system, party, or candidate will bring about the Kingdom of God, and that Catholics need to be ever wary of the totalizing claims of politics.

It has always been a temptation to seek salvation by political means. Indeed, for most of history, politics and religion have not even been recognizably separate entities. When St. Paul taught the early Christians to say, “Christ is Lord,” he was subversively co-opting a maxim common in the Roman Empire at the time, namely, “Caesar is Lord.” To acknowledge Christ as Lord is to relativize the claims of politics on our lives. God is in charge, and no matter who is elected on November 3, we will celebrate Christ the King on November 22.

It is Christianity, with a healthy nod to its Jewish “put not your trust in princes” roots, which brought the world the idea that politics are not sacred. When we hear that Christ told his followers to give to Caesar what was Caesar’s and to God what was God’s, we generally take this as a relatively benign injunction to pay our taxes and otherwise cooperate with just laws and just rulers. But the deeper and more revolutionary meaning is that *Caesar is not God*.

Being heirs of a Christian culture, we readily acknowledge that our politicians are not divine in any metaphysical sense. But are we as aware as we should be that politics still regularly makes the kinds of claims on us and our allegiances that only God can rightly make? Claims about ultimate meaning? Claims about sacrifice? Claims about salvation?

Many have noticed that, especially as what is typically recognized as religion becomes a more and more privatized reality in Western culture, political extremism steps in to fill the gap, with

ever more extravagant and totalizing pretensions that parade themselves in the public square where “religion” is supposedly not allowed. And those of us who consider ourselves religious in the more traditional sense are by no means immune to its claims.

Consider the following: What does it mean that American Catholics who identify as Republican or Democrat typically sound more like other, non-Catholic Republicans or Democrats than we sound like one another? We are happy to point out where we believe *our party* comports with the Gospel, but where it does not, we far too commonly downplay the irksome bit of Church teaching instead of critiquing our party with the Gospel. (We notice this pattern quite easily, by the way, when it is done by members of the *other* party.) Or, like Adam hoping he could hide his own guilt by blaming Eve, we think we can excuse the evils in our own parties because the other party is ostensibly worse.

This is a scandal! It shows that our priorities are often much more easily shaped by our partisan political commitments than by our faith. This is, to put it in the stark terms of the Bible, idolatry. And this idolatry is damaging our society, our Church, and our souls.

Let me lay my cards on the table. I do not care *who you vote for* this November. So if you hear me criticizing an argument you find compelling, or presenting an argument you do not, do not assume I am somehow telegraphing who I think you should vote for. On the contrary, one of the best things we can do as Catholics in the public sphere is to critique the bad arguments made by those who share our convictions. Bad arguments make us all look bad. Self-criticism is valuable and necessary. Indeed, we should critique the party we plan to vote for almost as much as the one we will not vote for.

I am, apparently, good enough at this to throw some people off. Before the last Canadian election I gave a public talk about how to vote as a Catholic. One person in the audience, who was utterly convinced that Catholics could only vote in one way, even went knocking door-to-door to known Catholic homes with the “wrong” sign on their lawns to warn them of the danger to their souls.

When I pointed out that certain arguments he used to get to his conclusions were contrary to Catholic teaching, he automatically (and furiously) assumed I was endorsing the other party. Weeks later, after the election, he cornered me and confronted me at the end of Mass at our parish. He was utterly bewildered when I told him something in private that I dared not say in a public talk about how to vote as a Catholic: I had voted for the same candidate and party as he had.

The fact that many will be tempted to imagine that I am endorsing a given candidate or party because I am willing to critique arguments made in favor of the other candidate or party is, to my mind, one of the deepest problems we face as Catholics in a democracy. The demands of utter loyalty to party that underlie this temptation show us just how deeply we have committed to politics over the Gospel.

So I will say it one more time: I do not care *who you vote for*. But I am a theologian, and one utterly committed to the teachings of the Catholic Church. And I do care *how you vote*. I care how you make decisions. I care how your conscience is formed. I care how you engage with your neighbor, especially your fellow Catholic, who disagrees with you. I care how you

understand and represent Church teaching in the public square. I care about whether you ignore or dismiss crucial elements of that teaching in the name of political expediency or party loyalty.

To my mind, having a Church full of Catholics who understand and are committed to Church teaching on political engagement is of vastly more importance than who wins the next election. The enormous problems facing the United States at this stage in its history cannot, and will not, be fixed with this election, no matter the outcome. Beyond any particular policy issues, both major parties present real, which is not to say equivalent, threats to democracy itself.

The short-term view that insists we must do everything and anything to win this most-important-election-of-all-time is a big factor contributing to the situation in which we find ourselves. The Feast of Christ the King should teach us that politics is not ultimate and that no election is important enough to justify sacrificing our witness or our integrity. It encourages us to take a longer view.

Our collaboration in this win-at-all-costs, politics-as-salvation circus has lowered the bar for what we can expect of our elected officials, in terms of both personal integrity and Gospel informed policy, and it has cost the Church much of its prophetic voice in the public square by turning a large share of our political energies against our fellow Catholics. How convenient that both parties can take for granted that their Catholic members will put so much time into justifying their own political compromises and vilifying those of their neighbors that little is left for challenging the parties themselves with the message of the Gospel!

The good news is that a proper Catholic understanding of political participation is just what the doctor ordered. By ignoring, and in some cases even positively misrepresenting, Church teaching for short-term political gain, we have sacrificed the Church's prophetic voice and cooperated in the crippling of democracy. But if we deepen our understanding of and commitment to Church teaching, we can play an essential role in healing this nation no matter who wins on November 3.

Prudential Judgment

The first thing to understand about Catholic teaching on voting is that voting is a matter of *prudential judgment* for each individual voter. The Church will never tell us who to vote for. As Joseph Ratzinger wrote before his election as Pope Benedict XVI, "It is not the Church's task to set forth specific political solutions and even less to propose a single solution as the acceptable one to temporal questions that God has left to the free and responsible judgment of each human person."

There is a common misconception that the Church does not tell the faithful who to vote for in order to maintain its tax-exempt status. Let me be blunt: if that is the only reason not to tell the faithful how to vote, the Church should simply pay the taxes and make the appropriate endorsements. If it were actually a good idea for the Church and for society that the Church endorse political candidates, taxes would be a small price to pay.

What is not a small price to pay is the Church's moral authority and prophetic voice. This is what would be sacrificed if the Church were to endorse parties or candidates. It is, in fact, sacrificed every time an individual priest, bishop, or religious endorses or even gives the appearance of

endorsing a party or candidate. Which is one reason that such political activism by priests is forbidden in canon law.

Consider the following situation: A given party fully supports Catholic teaching on an issue of utmost importance, but has an ambiguous relationship with many other elements of Catholic teaching. The Church endorses that party because none of the other issues rise to the level of importance as the one on which the party and the Church are in full agreement. Catholics vote *en masse* for the party and it forms the next government. That government then fails to keep its policy promises on the issue of utmost importance while governing in a way that is objectionable according to many other Catholic values.

In such a situation, what happens to the Church's credibility? How likely are the faithful to pay attention the next time the Church tells them how to vote? Or, how to do or think about anything else? And what does the party (and the other parties) learn from the experience? Not only is the Church's credibility harmed in this situation, but the Church becomes a group of, to use the technical term, "useful idiots." Parties love reliable blocks of votes that come with no strings attached.

Do not misunderstand me. None of this is to say that any Catholic who voted for a party necessarily voted poorly. That party may well have been the best option available to an informed Catholic conscience. The point here is that, even if it *was* the best option available to an informed Catholic conscience, it is still not helpful for the Church to offer an endorsement. An individual who votes for what ends up being a bad government can say, "I did my best with the information I had, and I did not will for things to turn out as they have." The Church does not have that luxury.

And so, the Church insists that voting is a matter of the prudential judgment of the individual. But this term, "prudential judgment," is itself widely misunderstood. Some Catholics give the impression that if something is a matter of "prudential judgment" it is of lesser moral weight than other things that are matters of intrinsic moral absolutes. So, the argument goes, if something is intrinsically (i.e., always and everywhere, without exception) evil, then it automatically outweighs matters that are subject to prudential judgment.

This is emphatically *not* the teaching of the Church. In fact, applied consistently, it would imply that Catholics should pay more attention to a candidate's views on masturbation, which is an intrinsic evil, than war, which is not. This seductively straightforward calculus is actually a category mistake. This is because prudential judgment is simply not about the ranking of moral issues. It is about how best to apply moral principles in complex real life circumstances. Let us look at a couple of relatively non-political examples to try to understand the concept without being encumbered by our political commitments:

1. Christian tradition, the Bible, and Jesus Christ himself are all perfectly clear that Christians must give to the poor. If you do not give to the poor, you are living in direct contradiction to your Christian identity and calling. Full stop.

But the matter of how we should best give to the poor is often quite complex. How much should I give to the poor? Should I give to the poor in my neighborhood or to those on the other side of the world? If both, in what proportion? Is it better in this or that case to

give to the poor directly, or through an agency like a shelter or soup kitchen? Does my obligation to give to the poor impact my views of or even advocacy for various social policies related to issues like taxation, welfare, or housing? How? Do I even know anyone who is poor? If I don't, why not? Is that OK? Do some ways of giving to the poor make certain problems worse? Does that even matter if Jesus says, "give to all who ask"?

That Christians should give to the poor is a moral absolute. How they should best apply this teaching in real life is a matter of prudential judgment.

2. The Catholic Church teaches that marriage must be open to children and that the deliberate sterilization of the marital act is never justified, i.e., it is intrinsically evil. Full stop.

But the matter of how best to live out a marriage that is open to children without ever deliberately sterilizing the marital act is quite complex. How many children should we have? Should we actively try to have a child right now? Should we, without deliberately sterilizing the marital act, order our intimacy to make the conception of a child as unlikely as we can right now? How do factors like health, finances, the needs of existing children, and our other obligations to family, work, Church, and society influence our discernment? With everything else going on in our lives and the real possibility of pregnancy, and with you looking really quite stunning, should we make love tonight, or not?

The Catholic teaching that couples should never deliberately sterilize the marital act is absolute. How they live out their marriage in accordance with that teaching is a matter of prudential judgment.

And—this is essential to understand—in both these cases Catholics of good will with well-formed consciences might well come to different conclusions when applying these principles in the particular circumstances of their own lives. This is not only possible. It is to be expected.

The same is true when it comes to voting. Many people have the impression that Church teaching would expect any two well-formed Catholic consciences to come to the same conclusion on election day. *It. Does. Not.* But when we believe it does, we imagine that, if a fellow Catholic disagrees with me about how to vote in this election, it must be because their conscience is faulty. In which case, all they need is to be set straight. If I set them straight, and they persist in their error, they are either [a bad Catholic](#), or not a Catholic at all. And so we come to see one another's political affiliations and decisions as a kind of proxy for our relationship with God.

This is the kind of logic that leads us to excommunicate one another and to cheer on those figures dedicating themselves to setting other Catholics straight on the internet (to the great glee of the parties, by the way, who are delighted to see us squander the immense political energy and capital of the Catholic Church in such squabbles). But it is rooted in a misunderstanding of Church teaching. Because voting is a matter of prudential judgment, we should fully expect Catholics with well-formed consciences to differ from one another in their conclusions.

Which is not to say, by the way, that every person who votes for any party does so with a well-formed conscience. Just as there will be folks with well-formed Catholic consciences voting for both parties (and spoiling their votes, and writing in candidates, and voting for third parties), there will be Catholics with poorly formed consciences doing all of the above as well.

Voting For Evil?

But, now we have come to a very important question, on which Church teaching is in fact quite clear and specific, even if it is widely misunderstood and misrepresented: namely, does the fact that Catholics with a well-formed conscience can vote for either party mean that a Catholic can vote for an intrinsic evil? No. It does not.

If an election were simply a referendum on the morality of an intrinsic evil, every single well-formed Catholic conscience *would* vote the same way. But that is not what an election is. There is no intrinsic evil that will cease in America on the morning of November 4 if the right candidate wins November 3. We know the other candidate will not immediately wipe out the evil they rightly oppose. That is how we justify not voting for them! We seem much less aware that our own candidate will not wipe out the evil *they* rightly oppose, at least when we are trying to convince others whom they ought to vote for.

So, no, a Catholic cannot vote for an intrinsic evil. But this is not so much because it would be wrong to do so, though it certainly would be, but because elections are not abstract questions about morality. Despite much rhetoric from both sides, intrinsic evil simply does not appear in the ballot box. The real question is, “Can a Catholic vote for a candidate or party that supports or proposes policies that contribute to evil, including intrinsic evil?” The answer to *that* is quite straightforward: that is the only kind of parties there are.

The technical category for thinking about this problem in Catholic moral theology is “cooperation with evil.” Cooperation with evil can take a great many forms and, though we cannot go into all the details here, it is enough to know that most of them are never permissible. What our tradition calls “remote material cooperation with evil,” however, *is* sometimes permissible. Indeed, it is more than permissible, it can be positively unavoidable.

There are times in this broken world when our legitimate pursuit of certain goods will involve tolerating certain evils. Think of defending your home or family against an intruder and taking an action that might foreseeably lead to his death *even though that is not your intention*. Or, ceasing some overly burdensome medical treatment knowing that cessation will likely lead to a loved one’s death *even though that is not your intention*. Or, driving faster than is generally safe or legal to get someone in need of urgent care to a hospital. Or, chemotherapy. Or, a just war. Or, it is becoming clearer every day, simply *being on Facebook*. In each of these cases, we tolerate evil that we do not intend in order to pursue a proportionately higher good.

Voting is another case of remote material cooperation with evil. A vote for either major party in this election is cooperation with their respective evil positions and policies. By the way, we will not do the moral analysis here, but many moral theologians would argue that voting for a third party, spoiling your ballot, writing in another candidate, or declining to vote are all also cooperation with evil. So, there is no escape hatch.

And—read carefully because this is the official teaching of the Church—a vote for either party can be justified provided that the evil being cooperated with is not intended and that the good being sought is proportionate in the voter’s informed and honest prudential judgment. This was made perfectly clear when Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that:

When a Catholic does not share a candidate’s stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons.

But here is the rub: there is simply no easy calculation to determine whether a given good being sought actually *is* proportionate. And the Church will not do it for us. Different Catholics of good will can come to legitimately different conclusions. To take only the most obvious example (abstracted for our purposes from all other considerations): two Catholics of good will with well-formed Catholic consciences, equally opposed to the intrinsic evil that is abortion, might come to different conclusions about whether or not a vote for a pro-choice party or candidate is justified by the presence of proportionate reasons in a given election.

One might believe, honestly and in good conscience, that the only, or at least the quickest, way to end abortion in America is through the appointment of conservative justices to the Supreme Court who will eventually strike down *Roe v. Wade*. They believe seats are likely to come open in the next four years, that a given candidate will reliably appoint such justices, *and* that such justices have a reasonable chance of being confirmed by the Senate, that a case will come before the court giving it an opportunity to overturn *Roe v. Wade* *and* that there is a good chance of replacing it with better legislation at the state level.

Another might believe, honestly and in good conscience, that conservative justices are no guarantee that *Roe v. Wade* will be struck down, and that there is no realistic short-term plan for altering the current legal status of abortion in America, but that many policies that are likely to be implemented by a given candidate who will not appoint conservative justices, will lower the demand for abortion by, for example, alleviating poverty.

These are extremely oversimplified positions and they do not even venture into questions involving weighing one evil against another or the character of the candidates or any of a host of other things we must consider when casting our votes. But even in this highly oversimplified form they make the essential point: that Catholics of good will, with well-formed consciences, can disagree on matters of prudential judgment.

Now, many of us have arguments at the ready to show that one or the other of the above Catholics is, in fact, quite mistaken. I do not deny it. Just because someone makes an honest and sincere prudential judgment does not mean they are right! Arguments against prudential judgments with which you disagree are a good and necessary thing. They are, according to our tradition, spiritual works of mercy. My point is not that the arguments I gave are correct, but that they are good faith arguments made by sincere Catholics who fully agree with Church teaching and have sincerely tried to form their consciences well and make a good prudential judgment.

When we disagree with one another, we need to make sure that we are clear about the level at which we are disagreeing. A Catholic who makes a different prudential judgment than you do

about whom to vote for may need to hear your argument in order to make a better judgment. And you may need to hear theirs. We should certainly challenge one another. Candid disagreement and an honest exploration of other considerations and points of view will only improve our capacity to make our prudential judgments well. But we will rarely get the chance to hear those good faith arguments if we excommunicate each other first because we have mistaken disagreements about prudential matters for disagreement about absolute moral principles.

This, it seems to me, is why it is so essential to get Church teaching on voting as prudential judgment right. Because when we get this wrong, the way we engage one another and the broader culture makes things worse rather than better. When we falsely denounce our brothers and sisters as unfaithful or even “not Catholic” because they have made a different prudential judgment than we have on an incredibly complex question, we do not convince them of our position. We convince them of our ill will.

It is also essential that we get Church teaching on remote material cooperation with evil right. Because it teaches us that all our votes are compromised, we can be honest about what our own compromises with evil look like. Without this, the temptation is to imagine that only those who have made a different choice than we have have been compromised.

If we want to change a fellow Catholic’s mind, we will have much more success saying,

Look, in this election, I knew I had to make a compromise, and after careful deliberation, this is the compromise my conscience was most comfortable with and here are the reasons why. And I strongly believe you should make the same compromise.

Not only is that approach much more likely to get you a hearing, it will help both of you to avoid two of the greatest dangers Catholics face in elections: obscuring the beauty and coherence of Catholic teaching, to the great detriment of both our civic society and the evangelistic mission of the Church, and damage to their own souls.

Holding Your Nose

It happens far too frequently that Catholics on both sides of the political spectrum almost casually dismiss essential elements of Church teaching. What is worse, they sometimes even work actively against Church teaching. Very often, the root cause of this is political compromise that was not recognized as such.

A vote is a blunt instrument. When we vote, we will not be able to fully represent our Catholic values. We will have to choose some over others. And not simply in the sense of ranking them and then choosing the higher goods over the lower. That would be relatively easy. But in the sense of judging, in an arena of incredible complexity and with incomplete knowledge, what candidates are likely to be able to achieve, what policies are likely to work, what strategies seem most promising.

These are all areas where it is easy to second-guess not only our neighbors, but, if we will admit it, ourselves. When we vote, we are not saying, “I think this good is good and this evil is evil,” but something much more like,

I think this candidate has the best chance at overcoming this evil and pursuing this good, even though I fully accept that this same candidate could fail or only partially succeed and that they will, at the same time, pursue some other evils and limit some other goods.

That is the kind of choice voting is. Which is deeply unsatisfying. And so we are very tempted to tell ourselves that our vote was not so compromised and the goods we tried to support with it are not so contingent. We do not like to think of the ways in which our vote compromised our Catholic convictions, and so we are tempted (and the parties are there to goad us on) to tell ourselves that those were not such important elements of Catholic teaching anyways. We do not like to think that the ways our vote exemplified Catholic teaching might not have been perfectly efficacious in manifesting Gospel values in the law of the land, and so we are tempted (and the parties are there to goad us on) to imagine a straight line between our vote and the achievement of the goods we seek, even though politics is much messier than that.

And as we engage in these little acts of dishonesty to salve our consciences, something tragic happens: the beauty and the coherence of Catholic teaching starts to fade in our minds and the incoherent and incomplete visions of the parties slowly come to replace it. And, before too long, we find ourselves judging Catholic teaching in light of the party line instead of the other way around. Thus, the prophetic voice of the Church is muted and the divisions of the political sphere come to be replicated in the Church.

As this takes place in our Church, something is happening inside each of us as well. Because the thing certain to be changed by your vote is not the election—that would be mathematically unfathomable—no, the one thing you will certainly change with your vote is you.

To make sure that our vote turns us towards Christ and away from the powers of this world, it is essential to keep before our minds those elements of Church teaching that did not carry the day for us when we marked our ballots. So here is a practical suggestion: if your well-formed Catholic conscience leads you to make the prudential judgment to vote for a candidate who supports a given evil, ask yourself what you can do practically to work against that evil in other ways in your life and make a plan to do it.

It is easy to downplay the importance of grave evils like abortion or racism, and thereby distort Catholic teaching in your own mind, to salve your conscience and justify your vote to yourself. It is harder to do that if you are actively helping women facing unplanned pregnancies or working to make your community and society more just for racial minorities.

Finally, we should ask ourselves, with all the honesty we can muster, before God in prayer, what our engagement in the political process has done for our souls. Has it made us more honest, more generous, more patient, more charitable, more self-controlled, more *holy*? Because what God really uses to change the world is not votes, but saints.

EDITORIAL NOTE: A version of this essay was recently delivered as a lecture hosted by the [Catholic Information Center](#) of the Grand Rapids, MI Diocese.

Featured Image: Artist unknown, The Bird of Self-Knowledge, 17th century; Source: Wikimedia Commons, PD-Old-100.

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