



Issues

Office of Peace and Social Justice
Diocese of Gary

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Election 2006—A Catholic Perspective

Even though it is not a presidential election, it is an important one because of the issues confronting us, and changes of direction for our country that could occur due to the results of the voting on November 7. The entire United States House of Representatives (231 Republicans, 202 Democrats, one Independent, one vacancy) and one-third of the U.S. Senate (15 Republicans, 17 Democrats, one Independent) are up for reelection. Also, every state has state offices, representatives, senators, secretaries of various offices, judges, and referendums on their ballots.

Our nation is engaged in wars which are increasingly costly in the amount of our dead and wounded troops, our allies, and the civilian populations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The wars are costly in money and debt, and place severe limits on our ability to respond to other crises. They change our moral standing in the world, especially in the Middle East, and are costly to our credibility because of going to war in Iraq. The wars are costly for us as Catholics when the norms of faith and the tradition of just war are applied.

Our country's care for the common good and for the least among us is suffering. Recent budget choices do not reflect care for the poor, low-wage workers, the elderly, or victims of disasters like New Orleans. Global warming seems to be real and there are safety questions concerning the air, food chain, and water. Add to this the safety questions we still feel about our ports, nuclear facilities, and transportation systems. Although we are all children of immigrants, we struggle with immigration reform and are often exploited by fears, both racial and economic. Who are we and where are we going as a people, as a society? Hard questions—what should we do?

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation...Every believer is called to become an informed, active and responsible participant in the political process...

Faithful Citizenship 2003

Catholics have a right and a duty to vote. But voting is much more complicated than a simple litmus test of a few selected issues. Candidates tell us what they think we want to hear in order to get elected, but they often do not follow through on their promises. These are things Catholics must consider before going into the voting booth.

Most importantly, we need to understand the

Church's social teaching:

- Life and dignity of the human person
- Call to family, community, and participation
- Rights and responsibilities—to one another, families, and society
- Prioritizing the needs of the poor and the vulnerable
- The dignity of work and the rights of workers
- Solidarity with all humanity, regardless of national, racial, ethnic, and ideological differences
- Care of God's creation

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There is no Catholic voting formula, and there is rarely, if ever, a perfect candidate for Catholic voters. However, there are three principles for Catholic voting—

1. Become informed about Church teaching and the candidates' positions. In *Faithful Citizenship*, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops identified the issues important to Catholics: abortion, death penalty, discrimination, environment, euthanasia, genocide, global arms trade, human rights, immigration, jobs, marriage, minimum wage, nuclear disarmament, poverty, religious freedom, stem-cell research, war, and workers' rights.¹
2. Apply prudence when deciding how to apply Catholic values in voting. It is basically "moral common sense" and requires us to question which candidate will actually deliver a more tangible process for the Common Good and important issues for us as Catholics. Seldom does a single candidate or political party offer a consistently Catholic set of positions. Therefore, we must often vote for candidates who hold the "wrong" Catholic position on some issues, in order to maximize the good our vote achieves in other areas.
3. Vote for the Common Good by focusing on what is best for everyone, especially the poor and the vulnerable. The Common Good is our responsibility, it is not charity. We are all neighbors, not out of charity but out of love, and the understanding that we are all safer, healthier, and freer in a world where we take

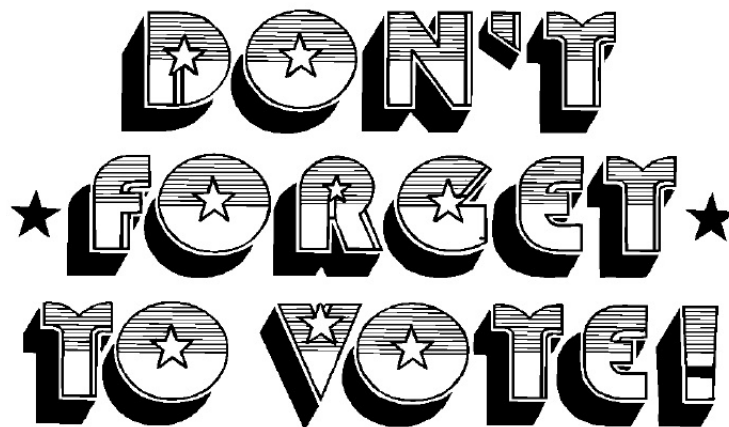
care of one another.

It is important to be aware that there are parameters that dioceses, parishes, and church organizations must observe regarding lobbying and electioneering. There may be support or opposition to issues, but not to candidates. There may be, indeed should be, education on issues and positions, but no show of preference for a candidate or a party. There may be encouragement of voter participation, but not any endorsement of political parties or candidates. These are basic norms which must be followed.

Congress has forbidden churches and other tax-exempt organizations to engage in any political activity. Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code prohibits churches from supporting or opposing candidates for public office in national, state, or local elections, and from supporting any political party. Nor shall funds from any such entity be contributed to any political candidate, party, campaign or political action committee.

Parishes and Catholic organizations should not use or distribute material, including voter guides and candidate questionnaires, that have been prepared by other organizations unless they have been reviewed and approved by the diocesan attorney. Frequently, organizations preparing these materials are PACs or 501(c)(4) organizations, and are not subject to political action prohibitions.²

✉James M. Dixon, S.J.



¹The complete *Faithful Citizenship* can be found at www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship. Heartland Center also is a resource for this document and for the Church's Social Teaching.

² Questions about the parameters, should be directed to your pastor (who will have received the complete ICC Guidelines, or Heartland Center, or the ICC, www.indianacc.org, or icc@archindy.org

The Pope and Islam

Few academic lectures have caused such a stir as Pope Benedict XVI's September 12th address in Regensburg on faith, reason, and the university. Judging from many of the negative responses, deriving from the pope's perceived criticism of Islam, few lectures have also been so poorly understood.

The central idea of the lecture is that religion and violence are incompatible because religion and rationality are intrinsically connected. The pope's justification of this claim rests on the premise that God is rational and has created us as rational human beings.³ Any attempt to justify violence, such as religiously motivated terrorism, is a contradiction in terms. Violence occurs in religions where faith and reason are not brought into complementary relationship.

How does the pope arrive at this conclusion? Let me focus on only the first of the four steps in his argument, which involves quoting from a dialogue between the 14th century

Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on Christianity and Islam. In criticizing the spreading of Islam through force, the emperor argues that any use of violence to spread faith is self-defeating, as faith itself is a free gift of God and cannot be forced on anyone. Here the pope also quotes from the Qur'an: "There is no compulsion in religion" to support his statement. This allows the pope to draw a central argument from both the Qur'an and the emperor about exactly why faith is incompatible with violence: "not acting according to reason, not acting responsibly, is contrary to God's nature. To act violently is to act against the reasonable nature of God, our own souls and the faith freely given to us by God."

This is not to insult Islam. Throughout the address the pope actually treats Islam with dignity. He was addressing its faith and community as adults who could be challenged and engaged. That

is a sign of respect. "What is insulting," as Thomas Friedman has observed in *The New York Times* (9/29/06), "is the politically correct, kid-gloves view of how to deal with Muslims that is taking root" in Europe and America today. It goes like this: "Hushhh! Don't say anything about Islam! Don't you understand? If you say anything critical or questioning about Muslims, they'll burn down your house. Just let them be. Don't rile them. They are not capable of a civil, rational dialogue about problems in their community." Now that is insulting. It's an attitude full of contempt and self-censorship, and typical of the attitude of many Western elites today.

Let me be frank. There is absolutely nothing in the pope's speech that isn't appropriate or pertinent to a civilized discussion of revealed religions and ethics. The fact remains that Pope Benedict's lecture is one of the few by a major Western figure to highlight the spiritual and cultural troubles that afflict the Muslim world. Think of the awful things we have seen over the last several years: suicide terrorism in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; the holy-warrior carnage in Iraq, where Sunni die-hard believers tirelessly slaughter Shiite women and children. Then recall the tepid, not always condemnatory, comments these atrocities have provoked among devout, especially fundamentalist Muslims.⁴

⁴Sunni and Shia represent two large branches of Islam; both contain many different sects and variations. Muslims of the Sunni branch adhere to Islam's orthodox tradition; they also acknowledge the first four Caliphs as the rightful successors of Muhammad as the temporal and spiritual leaders of Islam. Shiites believe that Muhammad's follower Imam Ali and his successors are the only rightful leaders of Islam. They

³John 1:1, God is described by the Greek word "Logos" meaning word and reason

The Pope and Islam continued

On the first day of Ramadan last year, a Sunni Muslim suicide bomber blew up a Shiite mosque in Hilla, Iraq, in the middle of a memorial service, killing 25 worshipers. This year on the first day of Ramadan, a Sunni suicide bomber killed 35 people who were lining up in a Shiite neighborhood to buy fuel. The same day, the severed heads of nine murdered Iraqi police officers and soldiers were found north of Baghdad. I don't understand it. How can Muslims blow up other Muslims on their most holy day of the year and provoke barely a peep of protest in the Muslim world? Yet Danish cartoons or a papal citation lead to violent protests. If Muslims butchering Muslims—in Sudan, Iraq, Egypt, Pakistan and Jordan—produces little communal reaction, while cartoons and papal remarks produce mass protests, what does Islam stand for today? It is not an insult to ask that question. Nor is it an easy question to answer.

It is often dangerous and always difficult for believing and non-believing Muslims to aggressively critique their own when they know non-Muslims are listening. The notion of “us” and “them” is very powerful in Islam, even though Muslims have often aligned themselves with infidels against their own religious brethren. There is also the issue of self-confidence. Militarily triumphant in the past, traditional Muslims had an easier time being tolerant to minorities in their midst. But the world around them has become ever more incongruent with the imagined, pure world of early Islam. Then, the faithful were unceasingly victorious because they perceived themselves to be more perfect in their submission to God's will. Now, modernity has left them behind and they are acutely more conscious about their Muslim identity.

As Reuel Marc Gerecht pointed out in *The Wall Street Journal* (9/22/06), Pope Benedict nailed two facts about Islam that contribute to its

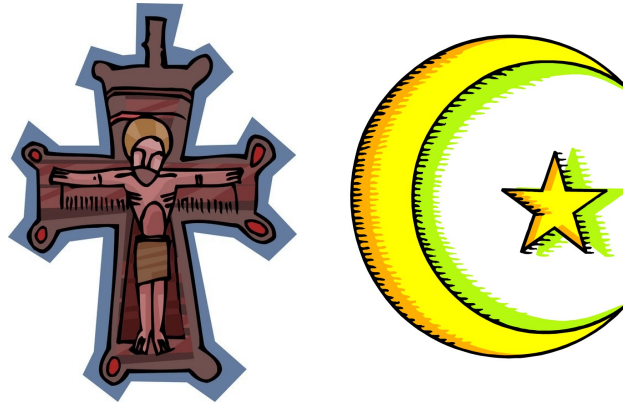
also believe in the concealment and messianic return of the last recognized Imam. Imams are seen as the divinely appointed, sinless, infallible successors of Muhammad.

very rough entry into modernity. First, the prophet Muhammad, the model for all Muslims, established the faith through war and conquest. His immediate successors, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, whom traditional and radical Muslims cherish, reinforced Islam's identity as a victorious faith through the rapid creation of a world empire. Christianity was also at times spread by the sword. And its use of that sword against non-believers and heretics was more savage than any Muslim imperialist. But Christianity was not born to power. Jesus is not a conqueror. The doctrine of the “two swords” always existed in Christian lands—the division of the world between church and state—and created enormous tension. But it helped produce Western civil society.

Second, the image of God in Islam conveys a cleaner expression of unlimited, almighty will than it does in Christianity. Islam is closer to biblical Judaism in emphasizing the unnuanced, transcendent awe of God. When radical Muslims take hold of this fearsomeness, it can quickly unhinge itself from conventional morality: young men firmly believe that killing women and children isn't an abomination. In that sense, sin is turned into virtue.

The pope doesn't tell us how we should proceed to counter the defects he sees in Islam. He offers many points worthy of meaningful debate, but sadly, what was to my mind an error of judgment has grabbed the headlines. The Pope did not clearly distance himself from what he called the “amazingly brusque” remarks of the emperor Muhammad.

What is most disturbing about most reactions to the pope's speech is the often well-intentioned refusal to talk openly about the other side. No one wants to offend, so we assume a public posture of liberal tolerance, hoping that good will, non-confrontational dialogue—which criticizes “our” possibly offensive behavior while downplaying “theirs”—will somehow lead to a more peaceful world. We won't talk about the history of jihad in Islam. We would rather emphasize that jihad can mean an internal moral struggle for believers, even though progressive Muslims know perfectly well that when most



Muslims hear the word “jihad,” they proudly remember holy warriors, from the prophet Muhammad forward.

The pope is telling us is that we need to talk about these issues. We need to stop treating Muslims as children, and viewing our diplomacy with Islamic countries as a popularity contest. For Pope Benedict, a particular responsibility for Christianity and Western secular reason derives from the fact that these cultural forces determine

the world situation more than any others. Because of their privileged position, it is up to these major players to take the lead in this interreligious and intercultural dialogue, so as to insure that the new balance between faith and reason can truly become what the pope calls a “polyphonic correlation” between religions and cultures.

✠Thomas M. Gannon, S.J.

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