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Is it a sin to vote for abortion backers?

Q. I am thoroughly confused. Recent issues of our Catholic newspaper and magazines say that, according to some bishops, voting for a candidate who backs abortion is a sin, and we should not go to Communion. Other bishops tell us something different.

How can something be a mortal sin in one part of the country and not a sin somewhere else? It seems to me no politician's hands are clean, even on abortion. Are we expected to avoid voting altogether until we have a "perfect" candidate, which will never happen? (Maryland)

A. Catholic voters are wondering how to work their way through this. Fortunately, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops gave us some help at their June meeting.

After a brief opening statement, interim reflections from the USCCB task force on Catholics and political life were presented by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick (Washington), Archbishop William Levada (San Francisco) and Cardinal William Keeler (Baltimore). What I say here will apply their comments only to voters, not to politicians.

Your concern must be resolved on basic moral principles of cooperation with evil. In Catholic tradition, there are two kinds of such cooperation - formal and material. Archbishop Levada, quoting Pope John Paul's encyclical "The Gospel of Life" (No. 74), defines formal cooperation in this context as "a direct participation in an act against innocent human life or a sharing in the immoral intention of the person committing it." Such participation or intention is never lawful.

Material cooperation is an action which may abet a sinful act but does not directly participate in it, and does not concur in the evil intention



Question Corner

of the perpetrator. Material cooperation, therefore, is not automatically sinful, but it is lawful for a proportionate reason. (Proportionate reason would weigh factors such as the effectiveness of one's choice for achieving a desired good or avoiding an evil, and overall benefits of one option over another.)

Cardinal McCarrick, citing a letter from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, applies that distinction to voters. A Catholic would be guilty of sinful formal cooperation in evil, he said, "only if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion. However, 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 if there are proportionate reasons.'

I believe most people of good will almost intuitively use this process for making important moral distinctions and decisions.

Father John Dietzen is a columnist for Catholic News Service. Questions may be sent to him at Box 325, Peoria, IL 61651, or e-mail jjdietzen @aol.com.



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