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BISHOP'S BULLETIN - October, 2010

Statement Regarding "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship"
The Most Rev. Paul J. Swain

For many years the first Sunday in October has been set aside as Respect Life Sunday by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. That results in every other year it occurring during election campaigns.

Several years ago when I was rector of St. Raphael Cathedral in Madison, Wisconsin I gave a homily on Respect Life Sunday which emphasized what the Church has always taught, the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death and that the killing of innocent life is an intrinsic evil. After Mass as I was greeting people, one person in a raised voice angrily berated me for using the homily to endorse one candidate and oppose another candidate for the United States Senate. I had not mentioned either of the candidates. The fact was in the election that year one major party candidate was consistently pro-life and the other was pro-abortion, neither were Catholics. For this person the teaching of the church, no different that year from the year before, had become political. The uncomfortable truth perhaps pricked the conscience.

The Church does not endorse candidates or support political parties. We are obligated to discuss issues; especially such core issues as the sanctity of life every chance we get because it can affect the salvation of souls. That is no small matter, certainly more significant than one election. That this makes some candidates and voters uneasy is no reason to become silent during campaign cycles. Indeed if we adjusted for politics the teaching would be a sham. And so despite the criticism, the truth must be stated again and again: all life is sacred; the intentional taking of innocent human life from conception to natural death is a grave evil. This must be a consideration in decisions by voters, especially Catholics.

In this election and every election choices must be made. The Church has an important role to play in helping to assure that choices are made in the appropriate moral context. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest." (Deus Caritas Est, 28) In other words, Catholics should take seriously what the Church teaches and why, especially when it seems to conflict with personal interests or preferences. We as Catholics are called by Christ to a higher standard than that of the secular culture.

The pre-eminent issue of our day is the right to life. Without life all other issues do not exist. It cannot be just one issue among others as important as those other issues are. Pope John Paul the Great wrote: "Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights – for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture – is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination." (Christifideles Laici, no. 38) Without life one cannot vote.

Preservation of the right to life can never be fully accomplished by favorable government policies alone. As soon as one election is over another is in preparation which could overturn the results. More lasting is conversion of hearts and openness to God the Creator's law of love. Yet we must do what we can to assure that government policies reflect what is true; it is our government and it speaks for us.

The document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" dated November 2007 by the Bishops in the United States offers guidance:

1. "A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter's intent is to support that position."
2. "A Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position in favor of an intrinsic evil such as abortion or racism can vote for him or her only for other morally grave reasons." Partisan preferences, advancing personal interests or ties from the past are not morally grave reasons.
3. "When all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil such as abortion or racism, a Catholic may choose not to vote or to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance the morally flawed position."

The point is that all issues do not have the same weight. We have a moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts; this has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. Each of us is called to evaluate the candidates from the top of the ticket to the bottom as to their consistency with the sanctity of all life. Reminding you of this is not an endorsement of a candidate; it is a call to live our Catholic faith, on Election Day and every other day.