

Pro Patria: A Homily Fifty Days Before the Election

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Despite the fact that it was illegal for a Catholic to vote, hold office or practice his religion in public, the Catholic gentleman Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Maryland signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Thirteen years later, his cousin John was named the first Catholic Bishop in this land, a man who, by any historian's assessment, is to be counted among the founding fathers of these United States.

Yet, despite the advocacy for the new American nation which Bishop Carroll embraced (so passionately that it once got him excommunicated as a young priest), or perhaps because of it, he followed three cardinal rules which governed his actions at the intersection of priesthood and patriotism:

1. The government and her laws are to be obeyed, unless they would cause us to sin. Here he, like the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, might have cited a late second century Greek apologist: "Pay to all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."¹

2. All American citizens have an obligation to participate in the civic life, in order to foster, as our first President put it, "a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the field, and finally, that [God] would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind which were the characteristics of the divine author of our blessed religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation."²

3. No priest should ever publicly endorse the candidacy of a single person or party. Though Bishop Carroll was a close personal friend of Benjamin Franklin, neither Adams nor Jefferson ever received his public endorsement.

That was Bishop Carroll's vision for America as patriot and priest: an America established by the will of God through the work of our founding fathers.³ And this was his vision of the Church in America: "to grow with the growth and bloom with the development of the country,"⁴ serving as a leaven in the dough of the great American experiment by promoting the Gospel virtues of true religion.

And we are the inheritors of this great vision, though at times in these difficult days, we seem a long way from making that vision come true.

A long way even from realizing our Bishops' common guidance in their latest letter to us, *Forming Consciences For Faithful Citizenship*, wherein they counsel Catholics approaching the voting booth to act on "moral convictions of a well-formed conscience"⁵ on such vital issues as human life, promoting peace, marriage and family life, religious freedom, preferential option for the poor and economic justice, health care, migration, Catholic education, promoting justice and countering violence, combatting unjust discrimination, care for our common home in the face of climate change, communications, media and culture, and global solidarity.⁶

All towards making a decision on which candidate to vote for. Now it is always possible that, in any given election, all the candidates will espouse Catholic values. In which case our decision is hard.

But then it is also possible, in any given election, that one or even all candidate might promote policies which contradict the truth we proclaim as Catholics. And that decision is even harder.

Say, for example, that we are faced with a candidate who promotes intrinsically evil acts, like abortion or euthanasia. This alone, the Bishops tell us, "provides sufficient reason to vote for the other candidate."

But even more sadly, what if we are faced with an election in which "all candidates hold positions that promote intrinsically evil acts?" Then, the Bishops advise, the Catholic voter might choose to vote for no one, "or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods."⁷

But even faced with such awful choices, as Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia reminded us last week, we cannot give in to the "luxury of cynicism."

"If Christians leave the public square," the Archbishop of Philadelphia said in a talk at Notre Dame, "other people with much worse intentions won't. The surest way to make the country suffer is not to contest them in public debate and in the voting booth."

And so, the Archbishop of Philadelphia, like the first Archbishop of Baltimore before him, refused to tell us how to vote. But he did tell us to honor our nation, and he did tell us how to participate in civic life.

Only one thing can show us how to vote, he suggested: Prayer. Prayer which, as he wrote elsewhere, "involves more than mumbling a Hail Mary before we pull the voting booth lever for someone we see as the lesser of two evils," Prayer which "is a conversation, an engagement of the soul with God...We need

to be awake, we need to clear our heads of media noise, and we need to think quietly and carefully before we vote. None of us can afford to live the coming weeks on autopilot.”

So you have exactly fifty days to pray. Without cynicism, sarcasm or snide condescension. With humility, an open heart and a love for the truth. Pray for the country which Bishop John Carroll so loved, and that by rendering unto God what is truly God’s, we might render rightly unto Caesar as well.



¹*Ad Diognetum* 5: 5, 10.

² George Washington, “Circular Letter Addressed to the Governors of All the States on Disbanding the Army,” June 8, 1783.

³ Cardinal Gibbons on Bishop Carroll, quoted in John F. Fink, *Patriotic Leaders of the Church*. (Our Sunday Visitor, 2004) page 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 37.

⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. (USCCB Publications, 2016) [FC], no. 14.

⁶ Cf. FC, no. 13.

⁷ FC, no. 36.