

AN APPEAL TO THE U.S. BISHOPS, REJECT THIS UNHOLY ALLIANCE

Recent events, the April 25 Conference Call between the U.S. Bishops and President Trump and Cardinal Dolan's unabashed praise for the president, have resulted in speculations about a possible alliance between the bishops and the Trump campaign. Although in their 2020 voting guide, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," the bishops intend to remain nonpartisan and do not explicitly endorse any candidate, grounds for such alliance can be found in the document. A possible justification for such an alliance can be found in the U.S. bishops' teaching on the "preeminent priority" of abortion. For the bishops this means that, in the process of forming their consciences, Catholic voters should give abortion an absolute priority over all the other moral and social teachings of the church. Although they affirm that all the other moral and social teachings of the church, such as racism, the environment, immigration, poverty, healthcare, are "serious threats to human life and dignity" that cannot be "ignored or dismissed," they are secondary to abortion. The danger in such an approach is that it tends to make abortion the ultimate litmus test for how a Catholic, who wishes to be faithful to the church's moral and social teachings, should vote.

In the same voting guide document, the U.S. bishops seem to contradict themselves when they also present Pope Francis' view of the Catholic Church's moral and social teachings on the dignity of life. Pope Francis teaches that abortion and all the other Catholic moral and social teachings are "equally important." He criticizes those who hold the position that "the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend." Even though Pope Francis' view is included in the introductory letter of the document, it is rejected as the

model for the document. The view that is endorsed by the U.S. bishops in the body of the 2020 voting guide document is their own view of the “preeminent priority” of abortion.

On the one hand, the U.S. bishops’ teaching on the “preeminent priority” of abortion provides some U.S. bishops, some Catholic groups, and some Catholic laity who support President Trump’s reelection with a justification for calling for the bishops to enter into an alliance with the Trump campaign. On the other hand, such an unholy alliance actually violates the principles the bishops lay down in their voting guide document. In the document the bishops clearly state that the church is not partisan and cannot “champion any candidate or party.” They also state that Catholics are not single issue voters and that a candidate’s position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter’s support.” In their document the bishops also admit that there are exceptions to following the guideline of the “preeminent priority” of abortion. A Catholic can choose to vote against a candidate who supports their position on abortion if there are other morally grave reasons for doing so. Some of these morally grave issues “include a candidates’ commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue.” Consideration should also be given to a candidate’s integrity, philosophy, and performance. To this the bishops add that a voter should not use a candidate’s opposition to one intrinsically evil act, for instance abortion, to justify “indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.”

If the U.S. bishops truly want to affirm their neutrality, this might be an opportune moment for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as a whole body, to issue an addendum to their 2020 voting guide document. This addendum could include a clear statement that they do not endorse any of the 2020 presidential candidates. It could also point out that their position on the “preeminent priority” of abortion is not an intrinsic part of the Catholic Church’s official

teaching on abortion, but rather a political strategy for their effort to ban abortion in the United States. Catholics could be informed that they can support the Catholic Church's teaching on abortion, while at the same time disagreeing with the bishops' political strategy of "preeminent priority." The addendum could include an admission by the U.S. bishops that, in supporting their view of "preeminent priority," they actually are dissenting from Pope Francis's view that all the aspects of the Church's teachings on respect for life are "equally sacred." For the sake of consistency and openness, the U.S. bishops could publicly inform Catholic voters that they, therefore, have the freedom to dissent from the bishops' view of "preeminent priority." In the addendum Catholic voters could be told that they can inform their consciences on Catholic social and moral teachings by choosing to follow Pope Francis' view of "equally sacred."

Some of the spirit of the above recommendations can be found in the five videos that the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released in February 2020 to supplement the 2020 voting guide document. In the first video Archbishop Jose Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, states that, "We are not aligned with any party." Catholics are urged to both protect the unborn, welcome immigrants, bring justice to victims of racism, support families, protect the environment, struggle against poverty, and advocate on behalf of all who are vulnerable. In its approach to Catholic moral and social teachings, the videos speak as if they were all "equally sacred." There is no mention of "preeminent priority." U.S. Catholics are urged to fulfill their call to faithful citizenship by advocating for the life and dignity of all. In the videos the U.S. bishops sound more like Pope Francis. And, frankly speaking, that is a very nice sound.