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A Voter's Guide
By ARCHBISHOP JOHN J. MYERS
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Amid today's political jostling, Catholic citizens are wondering whether they can, in conscience, vote for candidates who support the legalized killing of human beings in the embryonic and fetal stages of development by abortion or in biomedical research.

Responding to requests to clarify the obligations of Catholics on this matter, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome, under its prefect, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, released a statement called "On Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion." Although it dealt primarily with the obligations of bishops to deny communion to Catholic politicians in certain circumstances, it included a short note at the end addressing whether Catholics could, in good conscience, vote for candidates who supported the taking of nascent human life in the womb or lab.

Cardinal Ratzinger stated that a "Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of a candidate's permissive stand on abortion." But the question of the moment is whether a Catholic may vote for a pro-abortion candidate for other reasons. The cardinal's next sentence answered that question: A Catholic may vote for a pro-abortion Catholic politician only "in the presence of proportionate reasons."

What are "proportionate reasons"? To consider that question, we must first repeat the teaching of the church: The direct killing of innocent human beings at any stage of development, including the embryonic and fetal, is homicidal, gravely sinful and always profoundly wrong. Then we must consider the scope of the evil of abortion today in our country. America suffers 1.3 million abortions each year -- a tragedy of epic proportions. Moreover, many supporters of abortion propose making the situation even worse by creating a publicly funded

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industry in which tens of thousands of human lives are produced each year for the purpose of being "sacrificed" in biomedical research.

Thus for a Catholic citizen to vote for a candidate who supports abortion and embryo-destructive research, one of the following circumstances would have to obtain: either (a) both candidates would have to be in favor of embryo killing on roughly an equal scale or (b) the candidate with the superior position on abortion and embryo-destructive research would have to be a supporter of objective evils of a gravity and magnitude beyond that of 1.3 million yearly abortions plus the killing that would take place if public funds were made available for embryo-destructive research.

Frankly, it is hard to imagine circumstance (b) in a society such as ours. No candidate advocating the removal of legal protection against killing for any vulnerable group of innocent people other than unborn children would have a chance of winning a major office in our country. Even those who support the death penalty for first-degree murderers are not advocating policies that result in more than a million killings annually.

As Mother Teresa reminded us on all of her visits to the U.S., abortion tears at our national soul. It is a betrayal of our nation's founding principle that recognizes all human beings as "created equal" and "endowed with unalienable rights." What evil could be so grave and widespread as to constitute a "proportionate reason" to support candidates who would preserve and protect the abortion license and even extend it to publicly funded embryo-killing in our nation's labs?

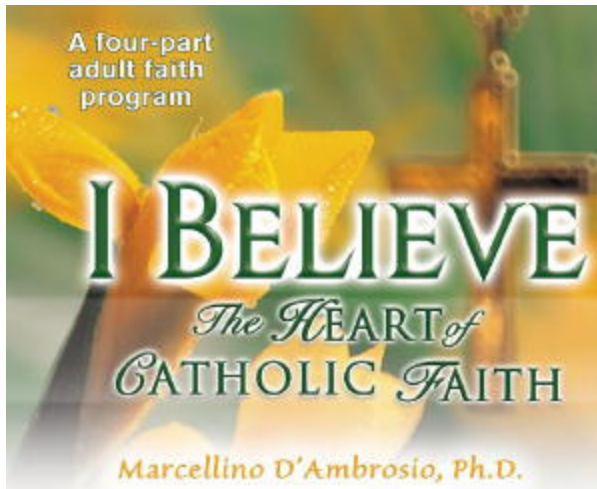
Certainly policies on welfare, national security, the war in Iraq, Social Security or taxes, taken singly or in any combination, do not provide a proportionate reason to vote for a pro-abortion candidate.

Consider, for example, the war in Iraq. Although Pope John Paul II pleaded for an alternative to the use of military force to meet the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, he did not bind the conscience of Catholics to agree with his judgment on the matter, nor did he say that it would be morally wrong for Catholic soldiers to participate in the war. In line with the teaching of the catechism on "just war," he recognized that a final judgment of prudence as to the necessity of military force rests with statesmen, not with ecclesiastical leaders. Catholics may, in good conscience, support the use of force in Iraq or oppose it.

Abortion and embryo-destructive research are different. They are intrinsic and grave evils; no Catholic may legitimately support them. In the context of contemporary American social life, abortion and embryo-destructive research are disproportionate evils. They are the gravest human rights abuses of our domestic politics and what slavery was to the time of Lincoln. Catholics are called by the Gospel of Life to protect the victims of these human rights abuses. They may not

legitimately abandon the victims by supporting those who would further their victimization.

Archbishop Myers heads the archdiocese of Newark.



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