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Archbishop's column



10 points for Catholic citizens to remember

Personal witness is always the best proof of what we claim to believe. And this year, like every other year, with or without an election, we need to apply the idea of Catholic witness in a special way to our public life as citizens. We might find it useful to remember 10 simple points as we move toward November.

1. George Orwell said that one of the biggest dangers for modern democratic life is dishonest political language. Dishonest language leads to dishonest politics — which then leads to bad public policy and bad law. So we need to speak and act in a spirit of truth.
2. “Catholic” is a word that has real meaning. We don’t control or invent that meaning as individuals. We inherit it from the Gospel and the experience of the Church over the centuries. We can choose to be something else, but if we choose to call ourselves *Catholic*, than that word has consequences for what we believe and how we act. We can’t truthfully claim to be Catholic and then act like we’re not.
3. Being a Catholic is a bit like being married. We have a relationship with the Church and with Jesus Christ that’s very similar to being a spouse. And that has consequences. If a man says he loves his wife, his wife will want to see the evidence in his love and fidelity. The same applies to our relationship with God. If we say we’re Catholic, we need to *show* that by our love for the Church and our fidelity to what she teaches and believes. Otherwise we’re just fooling ourselves, because God certainly *won’t* be fooled.
4. The Church is not a political organism. She has no interest in partisanship because getting power or running governments is not what she’s about, and the more closely she identifies herself with any single party, the fewer people she can effectively reach.
5. However, Scripture and Catholic teaching *do* have public consequences because they guide us in how we should act in relation to one another. Loving God requires that we also love the people He created, which means we need to treat them with justice, charity and mercy. Being a Catholic involves solidarity with other people. The Catholic faith has social justice implications — and that means it also has cultural, economic and *political* implications. The Catholic faith is never primarily about politics; but Catholic social action — including political action — is a natural byproduct of the Church’s moral message. We can’t call ourselves Catholic, and then simply stand by while immigrants get mistreated, or the poor get robbed, or unborn children get killed. *The Catholic faith is always personal, but never private.* If our faith is real, then it will bear fruit in our public decisions and behaviors, including our political choices.
6. Each of us needs to follow his or her own *properly formed* conscience. But conscience doesn’t emerge from a vacuum. It’s not a matter of personal opinion or preference. If our conscience has the habit of telling us what we want to hear on difficult issues, then it’s probably badly formed. A healthy conscience is the voice of God’s truth in our hearts, and it should usually make us *uncomfortable*, because none of us is yet a saint. The way we get a healthy conscience is by submitting it and shaping it to the will of God; and the way we find God’s will is by opening our hearts to the counsel and guidance of the Church that Jesus left us. If we find ourselves disagreeing as Catholics with the Catholic teaching of our Church on a serious matter, it’s probably *not* the Church that’s wrong. The problem is much more likely with us.
7. But how do we make good political choices when so many different issues are so important and complex? The first principle of Christian social thought is: *Don’t deliberately kill the innocent, and don’t collude in allowing somebody else to do it.* The right to life is the foundation of every other human right. The reason the abortion issue is so foundational is not because Catholics love little babies — although we certainly do — but because revoking the personhood of unborn children makes every other definition of personhood and human rights politically contingent.
8. So can a Catholic in good conscience support a “pro-choice” candidate? The answer is: *I can’t and I won’t.*

But I do know some serious Catholics — people whom I admire — who will. I think their reasoning is mistaken. But at the very least they do sincerely struggle with the abortion issue, and it causes them real pain. And even more importantly: *They don't keep quiet about it*; they don't give up their efforts to end permissive abortion; they keep lobbying their party and their elected representatives to change their pro-abortion views and protect the unborn. Catholics can support "pro-choice" candidates if they support them *despite* — not because of — their "pro-choice" views. But they also need a compelling *proportionate reason* to justify it.

9. What is a "proportionate" reason when it comes to the abortion issue? It's the kind of reason we will be able to explain, with a clean heart, to the victims of abortion when we meet them face to face in the next life — which we most certainly will. If we're confident that these victims will accept our motives as something more than an alibi, then we can proceed.

10. Lastly, the heart of truly "faithful" citizenship is this: We're better citizens when we're more faithful Catholics. The more authentically *Catholic* we are in our lives, choices, actions and convictions, the more truly we will contribute to the moral and political life of our nation.

Archbishop Chaput's forthcoming book on American Catholics and public life, "Render Unto Caesar," will be published by Doubleday later this year.