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Gerald W. Healy

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The Modern Voter and Morality

GERALD W. HEALY

In its "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" the General Assembly of the United Nations, meeting in Paris on December 10th, 1948, declared in Article 21, paragraph 3:

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

In some parts of the world this would be accepted almost as a platitude, as an axiomatic fundamental principle that had been beyond dispute for more than a century. But for the majority of the population of the world of today, this "Human Right" is purely chimerical, the object of cynical jokes, a dream not to be realized within their lifetime or perhaps the lifetime of their children's children. Even since that historic day in 1948 when in solemn session the Nations of the World spelled out a declaration of human rights, millions have been stripped of nearly all rights and privileges, have been sealed off from the rest of the world by curtains of "iron" or "bamboo", and fed on propaganda based on the "big lie" technique, with their minds slowly being oriented to a new way of life, based on a perversion of their very nature.

This is war. War more terrible perhaps than history has ever recorded. It is war for the control not only of

oil and gold, steel and land, but war for the control of men's minds. There are no noncombatants. It is war that begins in the nursery and ends only with the grave. It is war with more terrible consequences than the radioactivity that struck terror into the hearts of the survivors of the first blinding flash at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whole nations are apparently succumbing to an "education" that enslaves and degrades human nature, and turns man from his last end by denying his spiritual nature.

In this war one of the most powerful weapons is the vote of the common man. The enemies that threaten to enslave the world today dare not leave this weapon in the hands of the people. Free elections cease the moment a nation is occupied. Yet the right to vote is so fundamental that even the most powerful modern dictator feels bound to honor it by allowing some semblance of an election. The party propaganda machine is put into high gear and millions of dollars are spent to give all the appearances of a bona-fide election.

Such a powerful weapon, such a fundamental right deserves our close study and attention. The vote is a weapon that free men use to protect their freedom. The vote is also a proof that they are truly free. Like all powerful weapons, if not properly used it may do great harm to the one who wields it. The vote misused may put into power the very men who will bring the country to ruin, and foment the unrest and discontent on which Communism thrives.

The right to vote is not a right that we may exercise or not according to our fancy. It is a right that involves a serious obligation. In these troubled days and especially in a presidential election year the obligation to vote and vote wisely should rest heavily on the conscience of each and every adult.

It is the burden of this article to throw this serious obligation of voting into proper focus, to bring to bear upon it the weight of ancient and especially of modern authority.

THE NOBILITY OF PUBLIC OFFICE

To evaluate properly the right and obligation of voting we must have an appreciation of the nobility of the public office to which our vote elects a man. The nobility of participation in the affairs of state has rarely been better described than by the late Pius XI in 1927, in his discourse to the Catholic University Federation of Italy.

He spoke of the field of politics as one which, because it concerned itself with the interests of the community as a whole, was a "field for the widest charity of all, the field of political charity, of which it can be said that none other is superior, save that of religion."

Centuries before, St. Thomas in his treatise *De Regimine Principum* sang the praises of those who assume or inherit the burdens of government, because the "common good is greater and more divine than the good of an individual". If a private person is praised by men "and his deed reckoned for reward by God, when he helps the needy, brings peace to those in discord, rescues one oppressed by a mightier . . . how much more", St. Thomas asks, "is he to be praised by men and rewarded by God, who makes a whole province rejoice in peace, restrains violence, preserves justice and arranges by his law and precepts what is to be done by men? The greatness of kingly virtue also appears in this, that he bears a special likeness to God, the Supreme Ruler."

Our present Holy Father, Pius XII, in his Christmas Message of 1944, stressed the importance of having the right men chosen for this profession, which is at once so important and so noble.

The question of the high moral standard, practical ability and intellectual capacity of their parliamentary representatives is, for every people living under a democratic regime, a question of life or death, of prosperity or decadence, of stability or perpetual unrest.

For such a noble vocation Pius XII demands men who are noble.

They should be chosen because of their solidly Christian convictions, their straight and steady judgment, and their grasp of what is practical as well as equitable. True to themselves in all circumstances, they should have clear and sound principles, healthy and definite policies. Above all they should have that authority which springs from an unblemished conscience and inspires confidence.

QUALIFICATIONS OF PUBLIC OFFICE HOLDER

The requisite knowledge, moral integrity, and willingness to accept the office are the traditional qualifications for a man seeking public office. Without the knowledge he will or may do untold harm to the country he serves. In this as in so many other cases good will is not enough. The *speculative* knowledge necessary for a competent public official is available for every intelligent Catholic. The directives from the Holy See in recent years have covered almost the whole range of national and international politics on the moral level. Yet this speculative knowledge is not enough; a *practical* knowledge or gift for government is also necessary, a talent for dealing with men and for reducing theory to practice.

For the development of moral integrity, the second quality, the Catholic has the high ideals of Christian life constantly presented to him by the Church, and the abundant supernatural aids of the sacraments and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. He has opportunities which non-Catholics are deprived of and a ready access to personal or official advice according to the nature of the moral problems which he may encounter in the course of his public life. With the sacraments he may more easily than non-Catholics possess that unblemished conscience which, as the Holy Father pointed out, begets authority and inspires confidence.

Supposing that he has the other qualities of mind and will, the Church will encourage such a man to take part in public life, reminding him that it is an act of sublime Christian virtue for a citizen to dedicate his services to

the welfare of his fellow citizens out of a supernatural motive. The recent Pontiffs have aimed at the restoration of all things in Christ, the complete reformation of society. This demands and supposes that the doctrine of Christ is brought into the forum as well as the market place. There is no more efficacious way to counteract the pernicious doctrine of a double code of morality—one for private and one for public life—than to have exemplary men enter the public service.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE POLITICIAN IN PUBLIC LIFE

Since the vocation to enter political life is so noble, it follows that the responsibilities of those who take part in politics are equally great. The men who govern the community need therefore to be ever conscious of the truth that, although they may have been chosen for office by the people, the authority by which they govern comes from God. The authority is given them so that they may secure the well-being not only of their own nation, but, as far as they can, the good of men and women everywhere.

Loyalty to the party must never be the politician's norm of morality. He is under the moral law of God at every moment of his political as well as his private life, and he is responsible to God and will some day have to give an account of his actions. When his religious faith and conscience come into conflict with the claims of the party, he must obey his conscience and withstand the demands the party makes upon him. This is the highest kind of loyalty to one's country, the finest kind of service, putting the good of the nation and respect for the law of God above every other interest. He cannot abdicate his conscience, surrendering it to the service of the party. His conscience and his moral responsibility for his actions are inalienable. His only norm of morality in public and in private life is the moral law, as manifested by the voice of conscience and the teaching authority of the Church. To act against this norm is even more serious in public life, since the harm

to others and to the common good is usually far greater than would be the case in some private offense of a citizen.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE VOTER

In this matter of politics, however, it would be a mistake to believe that the moral responsibility rests on the shoulders only of those who actually hold or aspire to public office. It is obvious that no Christian can declare that he is not his brother's keeper. We are members one of another. We are all brethren in Christ. It is unchristian therefore, to imitate Pilate in washing our hands of public acts for which, as members of the community, we have a share of responsibility. If our rulers, acting in our name, do what is offensive to conscience, we must ask ourselves, "Who put these men in power?" In a democratic community all who have the right to vote bear some responsibility for the actions of those in high office.

Ceaseless vigilance is the price we must pay for true freedom. If we allow politicians to run the nation as they wish during their term of office, corruption will be well advanced in the body politic before the end of a term. The ordinary citizen cannot take refuge in the foolish excuse that, because of the corruption of some politicians, he refuses to take any interest in politics. The common good, the good of the nation is everyone's business.

The ordinary citizen must exert his influence by means of his vote. He must remember that even the most powerful politician is interested in that vote, and is afraid of losing it. He is more interested, if it is the vote of someone who has influence in a group or many groups. Criticism of bills or proposed legislation will move even a corrupt politician, if such criticism comes from a group that exercises the suffrage intelligently, and which will make the record of performance, and not mere "campaign promises," the basis of their future balloting.

The voter can contribute to bad government by seeking special privileges for himself or for his personal or profes-

sional interests from his political friends. This is a violation of distributive justice, which demands that those in authority distribute the burdens and benefits of government fairly and equitably without consideration of persons. Often those who are the loudest in condemning "dirty politics," are more to blame than all others because they seek special privileges. In effect they are selling their patronage and seeking a remuneration for having voted for the politician.

Ignorance among the voters, whether it be due to lack of education or to lack of particular knowledge of public affairs, has been responsible for many a politician running the government to suit his own ends. When the people know nothing except what they hear in campaign speeches, there arises the danger of clever oratory deciding an election and of the masses being swayed by a shrewd demagogue. It is the duty of good citizens to use the modern means of instruction to bring the light of truth on the real issues involved in the election. The press and the radio must be made to serve this purpose; they cannot be mere instruments of political parties. As Jefferson once remarked: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be."

The voter should be made to realize the share he has in good government, the responsibility that continues to be his, even after the election. A letter written to a politician to encourage a certain bill or to prevent its passage is a potent weapon even in the hands of the individual.

When this weapon is used on a large scale, it will be enough usually to decide the politician, unless, of course, the conduct of his constituents in the past has convinced him that they have short memories, and that he will be able to keep them in line at the next election by campaign promises. If the politician believes this, there is no one to blame but the constituents.

Democracy thrives only when it is truly government of the people, for the people, and by the people. When the people abandon their share in government, they yield the field to unscrupulous politicians. They should not be

surprised if they find themselves under another "Hitler". When the War Trials were held in Nuremberg, the common plea of the defendants was that they were only executing orders of higher officers, ultimately of Hitler. The court refused to honor such a defense.

The morality of the individual citizen is also an important factor. As a statesman once remarked, "Governments rather depend upon men than men upon governments. Let men be good and the government cannot be bad . . . Though good laws do well, good men do better; for good laws may lack good men and be abolished or evaded by men. But good men will never lack good laws nor suffer evil ones." Where the voters are of a high moral caliber, the politician will soon conform to their standards or be deprived of his office. Men of good character will not allow an immoral man to represent them before the public. It would be a reflection on their character or their intelligence.

OBLIGATION TO VOTE

Since man is a "social being" and depends on society for his welfare, and claims a right to the benefits it affords, he has likewise a corresponding obligation to live not as a solitary egoist on the earth, but socially sharing with his fellowmen the responsibility of providing for the maintenance of that same society. Without it he would be abandoned to his own efforts, incapable of providing security and peace, and seriously handicapped in attaining either his natural or supernatural destiny. To help preserve that society he must exercise that primary obligation of "social justice" which enables him efficaciously to influence the selection of those who are to promote and preserve the common good. He has an obligation to vote.

The Sacred Penitentiary under date of Dec. 1, 1866, definitely recognized such an obligation when it stated that Bishops may call to the attention of the faithful at election time that they are bound to prevent evil and promote the good.

Pope Pius XII, speaking in 1947 to the International Union of Leagues of Catholic Women, stressed the seriousness of the right and obligation to vote.

Consequently, heavy is the responsibility of anyone, man or woman, who has the right to vote, especially when religious interests are at stake. As they well know, abstention in such cases would of itself be a grave and deadly sin of omission. On the contrary, to use and to make good use of this right is to work effectively for the true good of the people and to act as loyal defenders of the cause of God and of the Church.

A year later on the occasion of the Italian Elections in 1948, Pius XII warned the Catholics of Italy that failure to vote, in view of the imminence of the Communist threat, would constitute a mortal sin of omission.

In the recent presidential election in the United States, Cardinal Spellman called voting a test of one's loyalty to the nation.

Democracy means more than government *for* the people. It also means government *of* the people and *by* the people. And I do not hesitate to say that the citizen who neglects to perform his duty to vote for honest and able men for our leaders in government is guilty of disloyalty to America.

Theologians usually maintain that "those who without a just cause fail to vote, sin gravely when there is probable reason to fear that through their neglect a sufficient number of good candidates may not be elected, and thus great harm may result from the activities of unworthy office-holders." (Genicot-Salsmans 1, 359.)

Otherwise the obligation may be regarded as light, namely, if the good that may be accomplished or the evil to be averted be of small consequence. However, it might easily happen that even in such circumstances, this duty would still have serious binding force. For example there might be danger of bad example, since in most cases it is very easy to observe those who vote and those who stay away. Moreover, under the party system as we know it

today, an apparently unimportant election can have far-reaching consequences, only visible when the next major election is imminent.

THE VOTER JUDGES THE CANDIDATES

Since the voter will be partly responsible for putting the politician into office, he must form some judgment on his qualifications for the position. In making this judgment he must take into account the customs and traditions of the nation. He must moreover know whether or not the candidate fulfills his duties to God, to his neighbor, to his country.

We do not say that a Catholic must be given preference as President. But we do say that the President of the Philippines should be a man who will have sympathy with the beliefs and aspirations of his Catholic subjects. A man who is opposed to religious instruction in the schools, or in favor of relaxing the divorce laws, should never be elected to any office, much less to the Presidency. His efforts in legislation would be opposed to the fundamental needs of the nation. To elect such a man would be in direct opposition to the common good. No Catholic could vote for him without sin, nor could any right thinking Christian.

If a man treats his workers with open injustice, if he is a scandal to his own family or to his neighbors, if he openly or secretly disregards legislation which is important for the common good, if he puts money above his loyalty to country by trafficking with Communists, then he fails to qualify morally as a candidate for whom a citizen could vote. "Campaign promises" should not deceive the voter; he should judge by the record. No right thinking man could vote for such a candidate without offending against the common good. A man who has no respect for the moral law should not be put into a position where he will have many opportunities and facilities for violating the

moral law on an even greater scale and with more lasting results.

If both the candidates are bad we have a serious moral problem, for the grave obligation to take part in elections is not fulfilled by the mere signing of a ballot. To vote for an evil candidate would help him to obtain office, and would make the voter a cooperator in all the evil that he could foresee, at least in a confused way, as attendant upon the election of this particular candidate.

However, in practice the solution is not difficult. In the case of two evil candidates there will usually be a question of the lesser of two evils. It seems to be the commonly held opinion as well as sound reasoning, that the act of voting for the less worthy of two candidates, if it be done with the intention of preventing a greater evil, may be not only licit, but even meritorious. The ballot of such a voter produces two effects, the elimination of the more unworthy and the selection of the less unworthy.

The vote cast for a bad candidate under such circumstances is simply an efficacious bar to the induction of a worse candidate, and therefore the conscientious citizen not only may decide upon this course of action, but there would seem to be a positive obligation to do so. The command to avoid evil is just as urgent as the command to do good. In the situation here presented, the ballot cast simply amounts to lawful cooperation by a good or at least an indifferent act, in a lesser evil, in order that a greater one be prevented.

In practice, then, if one man is known, e.g., as an advocate of divorce or as opposed to religious instruction in the schools, or as an enemy of the Church, while the opposing candidate is not so inclined or so biased, even though this second candidate be unworthy for other lesser reasons, we should vote for the latter because of the less danger to the common good.

EXCUSING CAUSES WITH REGARD TO THE
OBLIGATION TO VOTE

If the election is a farce and the votes of the people mean absolutely nothing (because the results have been pre-determined by the party in power), then there is no obligation to take part in such a travesty of the democratic processes. Nevertheless, while there is no *obligation*, it would be a blow struck for freedom and justice and human dignity, to have an honest man cast his vote according to his conscience in defiance of a dictator or a corrupt party. It could be a heroic act of patriotism, a sacrifice akin to that of José Rizal, who was ready to die before he saw the dawn of all that he held worthwhile for his nation, another milestone along the century-old struggle for freedom.

Moreover, a grave inconvenience will ordinarily excuse from the obligation of voting. A long journey to reach the polls, the loss of a very good business opportunity, the need of going through dangerous territory, the peril of being molested by thugs at the voting place, all of these reasons would ordinarily excuse one from the obligation, especially in the case of women.

However, this is not always true. If the outcome of the election is of grave importance to the welfare of the Church or the community, the individual is bound to prefer the spiritual or common good to his own personal comfort or advantage. As Pope Pius XII warned in his Christmas address for 1947: "It is the duty of all to understand that the present social crisis is so great and so dangerous for the future, as to make it necessary for all . . . to place the common good before private advantage."

There are then occasions when a voter would have a serious obligation to vote even at considerable loss and inconvenience to himself. But even apart from such crises, even when the various candidates are of equal worth, and the temporal or spiritual welfare does not seem to be appreciably affected either way, the average citizen will not

ordinarily be entirely guiltless if he abstains from voting. After all, the reasons he alleges, if they are ordinary, would hold for everybody. Thus his act becomes a precedent and an incentive to civic negligence and serves to propagate habits of civic indifference that form a fertile soil for bad government.

CONCLUSION

In the present world crisis the caliber of the men chosen for public office is "a question of life or death, of prosperity or decadence, of stability or perpetual unrest." Supposing that a man has the requisite knowledge, the moral integrity, and the willingness to serve, the Church will offer him every encouragement to devote his life to the service of the nation. But it will never cease to remind him of the greater responsibilities that he is assuming, and it constantly reminds the voter of the rights and obligations and responsibilities that are his as a citizen in a modern democracy.

As the guardian of morality the Church must speak, but it does so with charity towards all and malice towards none. The Free World needs such light and guidance; the outcome of the present world crisis is not at all clear. Every nation should welcome the moral strength that the Catholic Church has to offer, but a Catholic nation should be especially willing to take advantage of such assistance. When that nation is the only Catholic nation in the Orient, when its nearest neighbors are locked in a life-and-death struggle with Communism, when its own internal security still leaves much to be desired, then it is time for all citizens to ponder well the responsibility they have before God and man.