

On June 24, the State of Maryland will be holding primary elections for the general election that will take place in November. Once again, it is time to exercise our franchise to select those who will govern us.

To vote in elections is a civic duty. Is it a religious duty as well? In other words, is it something we owe to God?

According to Catholic teaching, voting in elections is a religious duty. As human beings, we are responsible to God for how we order our individual lives and our life together in community. God expects us to love and care our neighbor as we are to love and care for ourselves. How are we to love and care for our neighbor? Simply put, as he does, using the grace he gives us. How are we to love and care for ourselves? Again, simply put, as he does, using the grace he gives us.

We are obliged as human beings who come from God to labor for our individual good and for the common good. The two are intimately inter-connected. If I fail to care for myself properly, I harm the common good; if I fail to attend to the common good, I harm myself.

The demands of the common good are set forth in Catholic social teaching by St. John XXIII in his encyclical *Mater et Magister*, 421:

“These demands concern above all the commitment to peace, the organization of the State’s powers, a sound judicial system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression, and the protection of religious freedom.”

In a democracy, enfranchised citizens are responsible for “the organization of the State’s powers” which is set forth in its agreed-upon constitution and put into place through the voting process.

In the United States, we elect our legislative representatives and executive officials. In some cases, we directly elect judges; in other cases, we influence the selection of judges through our election of the legislative and executive persons who are responsible for nominating and approving members of the judiciary.

It is our vote that makes these things happen. It is not sufficient to say, “Let others vote. I do not have to vote.” As a citizen, and as a human being before God, I have a personal responsibility for “the organization of the State’s powers” for the common good. I cannot abdicate that responsibility to others.

Therefore, I must exercise my franchise if I am to be a good citizen and a responsible human being—responsible, that is, to God and the good order he expects from his creation.

How should a Catholic vote? The short answer: in a way that is pleasing to God; not for selfish reasons, but for the common good.

Of course, it is exceedingly rare to find the perfect candidate for public office who embodies all the values that are consistent with what our Christian faith teaches us about the common good. We are required to vote for the candidate that we believe will best further the common good.

Some candidates may be pro-life, but oppose broader health care. Some may support immigration reform, but also support unlimited access to abortion. Some candidates may push for affordable housing; others want to allow the market to dictate the price of housing. Some stress the role of government in addressing social issues; others stress the importance of subsidiary structures in handling them.

We as Catholic voters must choose as best we can. Some of us might judge one value to be of such over-riding importance that we cannot bring ourselves to vote for any candidate who does not support that value. Accordingly, some Catholics find it impossible to vote for a candidate who does not recognize a person's right to life from the moment of conception to natural death. Other Catholics might find it impossible to vote for a candidate who does not support universal health care. Still other Catholics might swallow hard and vote for a candidate who does not support some of the values they consider essential but does support other values they also consider essential.

Bottom line: as Catholics we must make the best decision we can to further the human project in a way that is pleasing to God. Therefore, in certain circumstances, we might find ourselves voting for a candidate who will further health care or fair housing but who will do little to promote the rights of the unborn. In other circumstances, we might find ourselves voting for a candidate who will promote the rights of the unborn and needs of individuals and families facing crisis pregnancies but who will do little to address the needs of the homeless or unemployed. In both cases, we might not be fully satisfied, but we believe we have done the best we can in these circumstances to promote the common good in a way pleasing to God.

What if there are no candidates on the ballot for whom we can vote in good conscience? In that case, we can write in a name. It may be that that person has no chance of winning, but so what? The important thing is that we have exercised our responsibility as a citizen and as a human being before God to be actively involved in "the organization of the State's powers" for the common good and have done so in good conscience.

This year Maryland will be electing a new governor, eight members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and all 188 members of the State General Assembly. Please inform yourself of the candidates for the upcoming primary elections by visiting the Archdiocese of Washington website at [adw.org](http://adw.org). We are in Maryland State District 22. And vote in the June 24 primaries if you are eligible. And vote in the November elections.

Yours in Christ,  
Father Walter