

A chorus of conservative U.S. bishops, along with the conservative opponents of Pope Francis, and the right-wing Catholic media are misleading U.S. Catholic voters by making the claim that abortion is the “only Catholic issue” in the 2020 presidential election. What is so amazing is how such a view can be so loudly proclaimed and popularly accepted as the Catholic Church’s position when it is not the view of Pope Francis and is not supported by the church’s official statements on abortion. The cry of abortion as the “only Catholic issue” is coming from the conservative Catholics who are self-proclaimed opponents of Pope Francis and who are actively working to overthrow his papacy. Can one really expect such a group of Catholics to be a reliable and objective theological source for the church’s teaching on abortion? The other main source, the right-wing conservative Catholic media, is spreading the “abortion only” theory through its journal articles and online media services. The editors and writers of these outlets are also opponents of Pope Francis and have been criticizing him and questioning the legitimacy of his papacy from its very inception. Anyone who understands the nature of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church would not begin by looking at these sources to determine the official teaching of the church on abortion. Rather, one would begin by examining the church’s teaching on abortion as taught by the primary teacher in the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, and as proclaimed in the official documents of the church.

Pope Francis accepts and publicly teaches the traditional and official Catholic teaching on abortion. The church’s teaching is clearly stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Catechism states that “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence a human person must be recognized as having the rights of a person – among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CC, 2270*). This same formulation of the church’s

teaching on abortion can be found in John Paul II's instruction on human life *Donum Vitae*, February 22, 1987 and Benedict XVI 's instruction on bioethical questions, *Dignitas Personae*, September 8, 2008. (*Donum Vitae*, DV, I:1 and, *Dignitas Personae*, DP, 4).

However, the Catholic Church's teaching on abortion is not an isolated teaching standing on its own. The church's teaching on abortion, like all its teachings on respect for life, is rooted in its teaching on the sanctity of human life, as well as of all forms of life. "Human life is sacred because from the beginning it involves the creative action of God and remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end." (DV, 5). Through creation God grants all human persons a basic dignity that has to be respected from conception until the moment of death. (CC, 2319 and DV, 5). The Catholic imperative to respect human life extends from the moment of conception to the moment of death and to everything in between. Consequently, the basic dignity of the human person conferred through creation is the foundation, not only of the church's teaching on abortion, but of all its teachings related to human life.

It is for this reason that Pope Francis sees abortion and all the Catholic Church's teachings on respect for life as being "equally sacred." In *Evangelii Gaudium* he affirms the Catholic Church's constant concern for those who are vulnerable, among whom are the unborn who are "the most defenseless and innocent among us." (EG, 213). Pope Francis goes on to point out that the church's defense of the unborn is "closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right." (EG, 213). The church's teaching on abortion, "involves the conviction that a human being is always sacred and inviolable, in any situation and at every stage of development." (EG, 213). Pope Francis adds that it is precisely because the church's teaching on abortion involves "the internal consistency of our message about the value of the human person, the Church cannot be expected to change her position on this question." (EG, 214). The church's

teaching on abortion is not subject to reform or change. (*EG*, 214). In his apostolate exhortation on the call to holiness, *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, Francis reaffirms the connection between abortion and respect for life at all stages of its development.

Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. *Equally sacred* are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. (*GEE*, 101)

Pope Francis goes on to criticize those who relativize social engagement by holding that “the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend.” (*GEE*, 101). The pope concludes with a call for social justice, “We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore justice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.” (*GEE*, 101). For Pope Francis an authentic Catholic pro-life position means viewing all of the church’s teachings on respect for human life as “equally sacred.” Anyone who maintains that they can accept the church’s teaching on abortion, while rejecting its teachings on racism, the care for immigrants and refugees, respect for the environment, poverty, and health care cannot claim to be supporting the Catholic Church’s teaching on the sacredness of all human life.

The conservative U. S. Catholic bishops, as well as the conservative opponents of Pope Francis, and the right-wing Catholic media are basing their claim that abortion is the “only Catholic issue” on the U.S. bishops’ teaching on abortion in their 2020 voting guide document. According to the bishops, abortion must be given a “preeminent priority” over all the other Catholic teachings related to respect for life. (*Faithful Citizenship, FC*, p.6). The bishops admit

that all the other issues that threaten human life and dignity cannot be dismissed or ignored, but abortion supersedes and overrides the claims of all the other respect for life issues. (*FC*, p.6).

Whatever the original intention of the U.S. bishops, their position on the “preeminent priority,” has become the fuel for those who claim that abortion is the “only Catholic issue” in the 2020 presidential election.

However, on closer examination it becomes evident that the teaching on the “preeminent priority” of abortion actually distorts the Catholic Church’s traditional and official teaching on abortion. To begin with, the teaching on the “preeminent priority” of abortion is not found in any of the official documents of the church. It is not an intrinsic element of the Catholic Church’s traditional teaching on abortion. As a result, the U.S. bishops’ teaching on the “preeminent priority” of abortion is not a teaching in the area of faith and morals. In actuality, it is a political strategy adopted by the bishops to accomplish their goal of overturning *Roe v. Wade* and making abortion illegal in the United States. Secondly, the teaching on the “preeminent priority” of abortion is rejected by Pope Francis, the vicar of Christ on earth and head of the Catholic church, who affirms that all the church’s teachings on respect for life are “equally sacred.” As a consequence, those who accept the “preeminent priority” of abortion are rejecting the teaching of the pope, the successor of Peter and the vicar of Christ on earth. “Where Peter is, there is the Church.” Thirdly, the U. S. bishops admit in their voting guide document that a Catholic can choose to vote against a candidate who supports the bishop’s position on abortion if there are other morally grave reasons for doing so. (*FC*, 35). Some of these morally grave issues “include a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. (*FC*, 37). Consideration should also be given to a candidate’s integrity, philosophy, and performance. (*FC*, 41). 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.” (*FC*, 34). The U.S. bishops also list racism as an intrinsically evil act. (*FC*, 34). Finally, in the 2020 voting guide document, the U.S. bishops clearly 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.” (*FC*, 42).

Based upon the teaching of Pope Francis, the official documents of the church, and the limitations of the teaching on “preeminent priority,” the claim that abortion is the “only Catholic issue” does not adequately represent the Catholic Church’s teaching on abortion. This claim is actually a distortion of the Catholic teaching on abortion and an attempt by a group of some conservative right-wing Catholics to turn the Catholic Church’s teaching on abortion into a political ideology. It is time for the mainstream Catholic media to begin pointing out that the U.S. Catholics who follow Pope Francis’ teaching that all the church’s teachings on respect for life are “equally sacred” are the ones who are faithful to the true Catholic teaching on abortion and are in full communion with the church. Those who claim that abortion is the “only Catholic issue” and identify the political strategy of “preeminent priority” with the teaching of the church are the ones who need to demonstrate that these positions are compatible with the Catholic Church’s teaching on abortion. Perhaps, one might also ask how they can the reject the Pope’s teaching on abortion and be in full communion with the church?