The first five books of the Bible are known as the Torah or “the books of the law” by the Hebrew people. Large sections of them are taken up with enunciating the moral and ceremonial laws that would distinguish them and their society as a people holy to God. And an interesting feature of how the law was typically promulgated in the Torah is that it was not really done in an organized or structured way: God did not hand them something like a modern legal code. Rather, as in our first reading today from the Book of Exodus, different types and categories of law are often set side-by-side, almost as if they were of equivalent weight. Thus we hear in the same stroke about how to treat foreigners and how to lend money at interest – very different concerns.

The Lord Jesus, as we know, abolishes the ancient ceremonial laws but leaves the eternal moral law intact, also re-asserting it. But he also, as we heard in the gospel, teaches that some matters are more important than others; thus he says that the love of God is the greatest of the commandments; the love of neighbor is secondary and flows from it. Moreover, in the Christian tradition, we come to learn that certain laws admit of no exceptions, and that, drawing upon concepts already present in the Hebrew tradition, the sins or crimes that give rise to our various legal precepts are of differing degrees of gravity.\(^1\) Not everything has the same weight; and some things are wrong always and everywhere, whereas others are wrong only sometimes and in certain situations.

These concepts, made very clear by our Lord and carried down to the present day, are key, especially in times like ours, when we again face a contentious national election. We again have the task of sorting through the widely varied issues and agendas, and of making a responsible decision that is also a moral one. There may indeed be a temptation just to step back and watch the process from afar, not participating in it; but we should not take our citizenship or its gifts for granted – we should take part in the process and let our voices be heard. Yes, all of us who are eligible should study the issues, apply the principles, make our best decision, and cast our vote. The Catechism, in fact, speaks of voting even in terms of moral duty.\(^2\)

The bishops always provide us with guidance on this task, and our own Bishop Raica has asked us priests to point to that guidance this year. Therefore, this week and next, there is a bulletin insert that summarizes in two parts the U.S. Bishop’s document on responsible citizenship and voting. In particular, it addresses the accusation often leveled against us Catholics: namely, that we are “single-issue voters”. In response to this charge, the bishops write:

As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. A candidate’s position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter’s support. Yet a candidate’s position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support.\(^3\)

So the Church does not teach that we are automatically to vote on a single issue alone. We are to consider all that is at stake – including the weight of the different issues. And in this regard, the bishops warn against two extremes. They write:

---

\(^1\) Thus the distinction, rooted in Scripture, between mortal (deadly or grave) and venial (light) sin, for example.

\(^2\) See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2240.

Two temptations in public life can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity: The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed. The second is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, environmental degradation, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care or housing, pornography, human trafficking, redefining civil marriage, compromising religious liberty or unjust immigration policies are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act.4

I am continually surprised how often I hear even Catholics casting various issues as if they were all morally equivalent. We certainly have our areas of interest or things that otherwise appeal to us; but we are also challenged to step back from subjective preferences and analyze the issues objectively, according to their proper weight. I have heard some claim, for example, that abortion is not really the pre-eminent life issue: “You pro-lifers don’t care about quality of life or other issues, like euthanasia or the death penalty; you’re really just pro-birth!”, they charge. But if we do not protect life when it is most innocent and vulnerable, on what basis do we claim any other rights? No pro-life person reasonably thinks that abortion is the only life issue – but it is the most important.

Indeed, it is one that cries to heaven for vengeance,5 our nation’s great shame for nearly five decades now. Our vote should be one that vindicates the more than 60 million innocent lives in this country alone6 that never saw the light of day, that were snuffed out in the womb, among which may well have been people who would find cures for cancer by now, or even become better political candidates than the ones we must presently endure. How could we meet those holy innocents at the pearly gates and say, “you know, I just thought that voting for this economic or other issue was more important than vindicating you”? Could we say that and then hope to enter into eternal bliss? The right to life is fundamental; it is most serious.

Twenty-twenty has certainly been an annus horribilis,7 and in many ways, the elections are but a variation on the overarching theme. As I have preached throughout the pandemic, we will get through this – with the Lord. We pray for and look to better days ahead. As we prepare now for the Holy Eucharist, we recall that Christ is with us; he has not left us orphans.8 We seek his wisdom and grace to apply his Church’s teachings and guide us through the decisions we face in the time he has chosen us for. Indeed, we are not here by accident! As we have faith in him, he has faith in us, that we can be his good coworkers even in this horrible year. He will guide us; and with him, all will be well!

---

4 Same document as previously cited.
5 See Genesis 4:10; see also Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1867.
6 To say nothing of the more than 1.5 billion total worldwide. See http://www.numberofabortions.com/.
7 Latin for, “a horrible year”. The opposite is an “annus mirabilis” – “a wonderful year”.
8 See John 14:18.