

The “Other” Life Issue

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In the quadrennial statement regarding Catholic social responsibility, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," the USCCB again emphasizes human life and dignity. As the bishops eloquently point out, respect for life encompasses a broad range of concerns. Among these is our obligation to protect the environment (God's creation) for the common good.

"Care for the earth and for the environment is a moral issue," the bishops assert. "Protecting the land, water, and the air we share is a religious duty of stewardship and reflects our responsibility to born and unborn children, who are most vulnerable to environmental assault. . . . Our Conference offers a distinctive call to seriously address **global climate change** . . ." (emphasis theirs).

Although most Catholics agree that life itself is priority, we dismiss the importance of our environment in sustaining life. Unfortunately, environmental degradation is already affecting millions throughout the world. People in regions like the Sahel are dying from drought, flooding, and other weather extremes outside normal cyclic variability. We now know that these irregularities are linked to human-induced climate change. And, like abortion, climate change is already killing the unborn: Changes in weather patterns are increasing miscarriage and infant mortality due to dehydration, starvation, and disease.

The bishops explain: "This culture of life begins with the preeminent obligation to protect innocent life from direct attack and extends to defending life whenever it is threatened or diminished." Albeit not as immediate or direct as abortion, environmental problems can be just as widespread and just as tragic. The only difference is the time required for their effects on life to become manifest.

Pope John Paul II linked environmental protection to "authentic human ecology," which can overcome "structures of sin" and promote both human dignity and respect for creation. This realization puts a new perspective on our consumer-driven, "first-world" way of life. We have become so accustomed to our non-natural lifestyles that we have lost our connection to nature. This can distance us from God who often reveals himself through creation.

The dilemma for those concerned about all aspects of life, from "high-profile" evils like abortion to environmental threats, is who to vote for. Can a Catholic in good conscience morally vote for candidates who seem inconsistent regarding the range of life issues?

The bishops admonish: "A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes the position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, *if the voter's intent is to support that position* At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate's opposition to an intrinsic evil *to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.*" (emphases added). Further, Pope John Paul II stated, "Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God."

Therefore, one cannot ignore a candidate's disregard for environmental justice, even though that candidate may be opposed to evils like abortion. If abortion were the only litmus test, then anyone running for office would be qualified by simply opposing it. Morally sound choices of leadership must be judged on the basis of all life issues. We must resist the temptation to isolate these issues and instead consider their entire spectrum.

In "Caring for God's Creation," one of seven themes outlined in their statement, the bishops summarize: "We have a moral obligation to protect the planet . . . We should work for a world in which people respect and protect all of creation and seek to live simply in harmony with it for the sake of future generations."

So, the environment is indeed a life issue. Uninformed or irresponsible disregard for creation, and environmental problems that impact human life, is inconsistent with pro-life values. Caring for creation, and other values that uphold sacredness of life, must all be considered in our calling to "Faithful Citizenship."

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