As the 2006 elections approach, Catholics have good reason to reflect on the relationship between faith and political life. During the 2004 presidential campaigns, the polarization of the major political parties of the United States divided many Catholics. Some Catholics interpreted a homily about abortion before the election as the priest advocating a vote for Bush. Other Catholics concluded that a homily about the war before the election implied that the priest wanted them to vote for Kerry. These pastoral situations raise important questions about faithful citizenship. First, which issues should Catholics consider when deciding whom to vote for? Second, how should the Catholic Church engage the issues of our world?

As the tenth anniversary of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative nears, the contributions of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin to U.S. Catholic engagement in political life are worth recalling. From the quadrennial statements on political responsibility to the consistent ethic of life, Bernardin encouraged U.S. Catholics to

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consider a wide range of issues in their political activities. His approach, like that of the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et spes*, was one of dialogue. As the tenth anniversary of Bernardin’s death approaches, we can learn much about promoting Catholic common ground at election time by remembering Cardinal Bernardin.

First, we will examine Bernardin’s efforts both to respond from a faith perspective to war and abortion as signs of the times and to initiate dialogue in American Catholic culture about a consistent ethic of life. Second, we will note similarities in issues but differences in modes of engagement between Bernardin’s consistent ethic of life and John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium vitae*. Third, we will consider the importance of dialogue about many issues involving human life and dignity as one discerns for whom to vote.

Pastoral challenges at election time are not new, and Bernardin’s experiences provide illuminating historical perspective for the contemporary situation. First, his preaching took political issues seriously without being partisan in the process. Second, his experiences demonstrate the challenge of advocating for a particular issue while not being perceived as concerned only about that issue.

**Preaching: Political but not Partisan**

Weeks after the 1972 presidential election and days after being installed as bishop of Cincinnati, Joseph Bernardin proclaimed in his Christmas homily at Midnight Mass, “In Vietnam, especially, we can only feel grief and dismay that the long and tortuous journey which seemed so close to peace has again been interrupted by violent force and massive bombing. It is not my intention at this time to assign blame for the turn of events. However, at this birthday of the Prince of Peace, I do issue a plea to the leaders of our nation and to all parties in the Vietnam conflict to halt the hostilities and to resume the negotiations quickly and in good faith so that this devastating conflict might be soon ended” (Kennedy, 38). In so doing, he exemplified attentiveness to the signs of the times and an ability to interpret them in the light of the gospel, as called for by the bishops of the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 4.

This homily caught the attention of the media and President Nixon, who invited Bernardin to preach at an ecumenical prayer service the Sunday after his second inauguration. Rather than be co-opted for political purposes, Bernardin challenged as unbiblical and contrary to the common good the individualism that the president had praised in his inaugural address (Kennedy, 40). In this case, Bernardin’s careful remarks prevented anyone from identifying the Catholic Church with a partisan perspective. Bernardin’s preaching, which engaged political issues without being identified with one political party, is worthy of imitation.
Bernardin’s example also invites people to consider many political issues. Bernardin was not only concerned about the lives lost in war, but also those lost in abortion. The day after he preached at Nixon’s ecumenical prayer service, the Supreme Court found the abortion laws of Texas and Georgia unconstitutional in its *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions. The Supreme Court’s decisions overturning state laws and determining that women have a constitutional right to abortion resulted in efforts to amend the Constitution. In the 1975 “Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities,” the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, led by Bernardin as president, called for the Catholic Church to support this effort and to give attention to the issue of legalized abortion in public discourse.

While the pastoral plan for one department of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops emphasized one issue in public discourse, a couple of months later the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference emphasized a range of issues to consider at election time. At the beginning of the bicentennial year, the Administrative Board, on which Bernardin served, responded to declining political involvement in the United States by issuing “The Church’s Role in the ’76 Elections.” This statement drew on insights from the 1971 Synod of Bishops to communicate that the promotion of justice, human rights, and human dignity is a necessary dimension of proclaiming the gospel. In their “Resolution on Political Responsibility,” the National Conference of Catholic Bishops affirmed the Administrative Board’s statement. Making the words of the Administrative Board their own, they state, “As part of its mission, the church, the People of God, is required by the Gospel and its long tradition to promote and defend human rights and dignity. This view of the church’s ministry and mission requires it to relate positively to the political order, since social injustice and the denial of human rights can often be remedied only through governmental action” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1976, 7). The bishops then identified a “broad range of issues” that needed to be considered as one prepared to vote in the 1976 elections; these issues included abortion, the economy, education, food policy, housing, human rights and U.S. foreign policy, the mass media, and military expenditures (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1976, 7).
Despite the bishops’ multiple concerns, media coverage of advocacy for a particular issue can easily appear as an exclusive concern for that issue. During the 1976 presidential campaign, a group of bishops, including Bernardin as president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, met with both presidential candidates to discuss their support for a constitutional amendment to protect the unborn. Jimmy Carter did not support a constitutional amendment, but Gerald Ford supported one that would return abortion legislation to the state level, where abortion had been a subject of debate and deliberation in the decade before the Supreme Court decisions. The media’s reports about the meeting with Ford presented Bernardin’s comments as an endorsement of Ford, a pro-choice Republican incumbent candidate whose views of states’ rights provided support for returning the issue of abortion to the state legislatures and courts. Eugene Kennedy described Bernardin’s assessment of the situation as a near disaster (48). This event failed to communicate the breadth of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ message about political responsibility and motivated Bernardin’s later articulation of a consistent ethic of life.

Less than a year before the 1984 elections, Bernardin initiated a conversation about a consistent ethic of life in American culture. As chair of the committee that had drafted the recently released 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* and as chair of the pro-life committee, he was well situated to foster conversation about the relationships among various issues of human life and dignity. An invitation to give the Gannon lecture at Fordham University on the peace pastoral provided the opportunity to note that “[t]he pastoral letter links the questions of abortion and nuclear war” (Bernardin 1998, 8). Bernardin recognized that holding these two positions challenged conventional partisan thinking in the United States. Bernardin explained, “I am convinced that the pro-life position of the church must be developed in terms of a comprehensive and consistent ethic of life” (Bernardin 1998, 8). The following paragraph captures the heart of his message:

> If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker. Such a quality of life posture translates into specific political and economic positions on tax policy, employment generation, welfare policy, nutrition and feeding programs, and health care. Consistency means we cannot have it both ways. We cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the
Bernardin’s articulation of the consistent ethic of life became part of the 1985 “Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation.” He recognized that the consistent ethic of life challenges both pro-life groups and justice and peace groups to recognize the moral dimensions of issues that each might not otherwise be attentive to (Bernardin 1988, 83).

The statements of political responsibility that the U.S. Catholic bishops’ conference began to issue in 1976, as well as Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s consistent ethic of life, have their intellectual roots in *Gaudium et spes*. Inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan and Matthew 25, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council provided a general framework for thinking about offenses that do not respect life. They wrote:

> Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. (GS, no. 27)

Like the bishops of the Second Vatican Council, Bernardin identified many injustices that affect human life and dignity. He then invited critical reflection on these many issues as one participates in political life.

**Evangelium vitae: Tribute or Challenge?**

*Evangelium vitae* affirms the range of issues identified in *Gaudium et spes* and the consistent ethic of life. However, the dialectical approach in *Evangelium vitae* contrasts with the dialogical approach of *Gaudium et spes* and the consistent ethic of life. In the context of the contemporary polarization of political parties, the dialogical approach of *Gaudium et spes* and Bernardin invites constructive conversation about the implications of the gospel for the political issues that are of concern to each party.

*Evangelium vitae* is part of a tradition that cannot be identified with one political party. On the 100th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, which addressed the new condition of the worker resulting from the Industrial Revolution, the Extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals asked John Paul II to address new threats to human life.
in an encyclical letter. The cardinals envisioned a letter about threats to life that would complement the long standing tradition of letters addressing issues of socioeconomic injustice. While some wanted the letter to focus exclusively on abortion, the encyclical reflected Cardinal Bernardin’s efforts to link various life issues, like abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment (Bernardin 1998, 80–81). On the 30th anniversary of *Gaudium et spes*, John Paul II reaffirmed the Second Vatican Council’s concern for a broad range of threats to human life and dignity in his encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae*. As John Paul identified new threats against human life, he first reaffirmed *Gaudium et spes*, no. 27, at length and then focused specifically on cultural and legal climates that pose a threat to human life. As he appropriated the broad range of concerns about human life from *Gaudium et spes*, John Paul wrote:

The Second Vatican Council, in a passage which retains all its relevance today, forcefully condemned a number of crimes and attacks against human life. Thirty years later, taking up the words of the Council and with the same forcefulness I repeat that condemnation in the name of the whole Church, certain that I am interpreting the genuine sentiment of every upright conscience: “Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator.” (John Paul II, no. 3)

John Paul’s focus shifted to that which he considered new threats to human life. He identified as new a cultural context in which the right to individual freedom supported the destruction of human life and a legal context in which the state supported the practice either through toleration or entitlement. Drawing together *Rerum novarum*’s concern for what is new and *Gaudium et spes*’s concern for reading the signs of the times in light of the gospel, he focused on the legal acceptance or promotion of abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment as new threats to human life that are signs of the times.

While John Paul II shared with Bernardin and *Gaudium et spes* a concern for a broad range of issues involving human life and dignity, his vision of the church’s engagement with the world differed from that of Bernardin and the conciliar document. *Gaudium et spes* describes the church as being in dialogue with the world (no. 40; no. 43). Reading the signs of the times in light of the gospel leads
the church to affirm and learn from the world as well as challenge developments that are contrary to the gospel. This dialogical approach characterized Bernardin’s leadership style, as exemplified in the drafting of the peace pastoral. In contrast, *Evangelium vitae* is dialectical. John Conley rightly notes, “In *Evangelium Vitae* . . . the signs [of the times] emerge as markedly grimmer than they do in the Vatican II constitution” (15–16). *Evangelium vitae* is more oppositional: the gospel of life needs to struggle against the culture of death in order to establish a culture of life. As James Childress says, “*Evangelium Vitae*’s dominant rhetoric is Christ against culture, because of the strength of the culture of death” (33). Childress notes that this letter was received in the United States amidst what James Davison Hunter termed “culture wars.”

Within a couple of hours of the death of Pope John Paul II, President George W. Bush paid tribute to him saying, “Throughout the West, John Paul’s witness reminded us of our obligation to build a culture of life in which the strong protect the weak.” This was not the first time that Bush used the phrase culture of life from John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium vitae*. During the 2004 presidential debates, Bush referred to the importance of promoting a culture of life when he spoke about the issue of abortion in the United States. Bush’s appropriation of the language of culture of life seems to be more rooted in the oppositional stance of a culture of war in which he wants to align himself with the pope than in the transformational nature of the gospel of life that John Paul articulated, which calls into question Bush’s position on the war in Iraq and capital punishment. The stark contrast between the culture of life and culture of death does not invite reflection on the ways in which one contributes to both. In contrast, Bernardin’s nuanced articulation of a consistent ethic of life does. When Bernardin received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bill Clinton during the partial birth abortion debates of 1996, he articulated his consistent ethic of life, which challenged some of Clinton’s positions and affirmed others (Unsworth, 128).

### Common Ground in the Wake of *Evangelium vitae*

A year and a half after the promulgation of *Evangelium vitae* and just weeks before his imminent death from pancreatic cancer, Bernardin announced the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. Bernardin identified many divisions that exist in the Catholic Church in the United States and promoted dialogue about differences to recognize more fully our unity in Christ. In its foundational document, “Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril,” the Initiative identifies “the ways in which the church is present in political life, its responsibility to the poor and defenseless, and its support for lay people in their family life and daily callings” as an issue in need of open and honest dialogue (37).
In the wake of the 2004 elections, the Initiative dedicated the ninth Annual Bernardin Conference to the topic of “Religion, Law, and Politics.” For this conference, sociologist James Kelly analyzed exit poll data. He indicated that Catholic Republicans are more likely to support government spending for health and education than other Republicans, who more highly value cutting taxes and government spending. While this might point to the impact that Catholic social teaching about the common good has had on the Catholic imagination, the fact that Catholics were no different from the general population with regard to pre-emptive war raises questions about the reception of just war teaching by John Paul II and the U.S. bishops. With regard to abortion, the identification of it as a non-negotiable issue by Catholic Answers (a lay apologetics and evangelization organization) and others did not affect the majority of Catholic voters. On those who were affected, the language had the unintended effect of influencing more to vote pro-choice than pro-life.

Catholic Answers identified five issues as non-negotiable: abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, and homosexual “marriage.” Its “Voters’ Guide” justifies this claim on the basis that these actions are intrinsically evil. This view, however, does not adequately explain the choice of issues, given that all of the offenses against human life and dignity identified in Gaudium et spes, no. 27, John Paul II describes as intrinsically evil in Veritatis splendor, no. 80.

As the 2006 elections approach, we can honor the memory of Cardinal Bernardin by entering into dialogue with others about the many issues the bishops’ conference identified in its most recent quadrennial statement on political responsibility. “Faithful Citizenship” called Catholics to consider many important issues when discerning whom to vote for. Not only did it mention abortion, euthanasia, and cloning, but it also drew attention to policies regarding preemptive use of force, nuclear weapons, land mines, global arms trade, the death penalty, marriage, education, the organization of workers, affirmative action, welfare reform, child tax credits, social security, health care, housing, food security, farm workers, sustainable agriculture, immigrants, the environment, poverty, underdevelopment, globalization, refugees, regional conflicts in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Congo, Sudan, Colombia, and West Africa, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq and Afghanistan (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 326–29).
Engaging the World

As Bernardin recognized, at its best, the church challenges us to consider signs of the times that we might not be attentive to, and the church needs to avoid the danger of focusing only on issues associated with one party. The church should not be partisan, but it should be political. *Gaudium et spes* cautions against a separation between one’s faith life and one’s engagement with the world. As members of the church, we are called to interpret the signs of the times in the light of the gospel (GS, no. 4). Engaging in dialogue about these issues from a faith perspective is an important step in the process of discerning whom to vote for.

References


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