

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Out of Faithful Citizenship: the 2008 American Catholic* issued by what, exactly, is an "intrinsic evil"? Why should voters give special attention to intrinsic evils in considering the candidates? Almost no Catholic opinion-maker who invokes the term goes on to ask these questions, let alone to answer them.

Perhaps this is because the answers seem obvious. After all, the term "intrinsic evil" seems to connote great and contaminating evil--evil that we take inside ourselves simply by associating with it. The term itself suggests that "intrinsic evil" involves wrongdoing of an entirely different magnitude than ordinary, run-of-the-mill wrongdoing. Consequently, intrinsic evils must pose great moral dangers to both individuals and society at large, and these dangers ought to dwarf all other considerations in casting one's vote.

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship tells us that intrinsically evil actions "must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned," because "they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons." At the same time, in national debates during the current election season, some Catholic political commentators have complained about Catholics who support candidates who do not, in the commentator's judgment, adequately oppose such intrinsic evils as abortion, euthanasia and homosexual acts, the last of which are implied by gay marriage.

The foregoing is meant to illustrate how the term "intrinsic evil" is used in the passionate give and take that characterizes many Catholic discussions about voting for a pro-choice politician. It is, however, in significant tension with the great weight of the church's long moral tradition. The term "intrinsic evil" does not have its roots in the expansive imagery of the church's prophetic witness, but rather in the tightly focused analysis of its moral casuistry. It is not a rhetorical flourish, but rather a technical term of Catholic moral theology. Ultimately, as Pope John Paul II reminds us in his encyclical *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)*, it is rooted in the action theory of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The Meaning of 'Intrinsically Evil'

In a nutshell, the fact that an act is called an intrinsic evil tells us two and only two things.

First, it tells us why an action is wrong--because of the "object" of the acting agent's will. To identify the object of an action, one has to put oneself in the shoes of the one acting, and to describe the action from her

gunpoint in order to give the money to a nearby homeless center. Robin Hood's good motive (altruistic giving) does not wash away the bad object or immediate purpose of his action (robbery).

But to say that an act is intrinsically evil does not by itself say anything about the comparative gravity of the act. Some acts that are not intrinsically evil (driving while intoxicated) can on occasion be worse both objectively and subjectively than acts that are intrinsically evil (telling a jocose lie). Some homicides that are not intrinsically evil are worse than intrinsically evil homicides. Furthermore, the fact that an act is intrinsically evil does not by itself tell third parties anything at all about their duty to prevent that act from occurring.

The following analyses and reflections may provide some clarity and further issues for reflection as we continue to debate the use and misuse of church teachings in the political realm.

Aunt Edna that you think her purple sunflower hat is fabulous if you think it is hideous. While such a lie would be intrinsically evil, it would not be a serious evil. To recognize that an act is intrinsically evil does not

Let us return to an earlier example. If a third party were unable to help both, he or she could legitimately

fallen world, moral character alone is not enough. Political competence and other practical skills are also required. The person with the best moral character may not be the best president.

Second, a defender of the usefulness of the category of "intrinsic evil" might say that it helps us prioritize our actions, and that politicians have an obligation to oppose intrinsic evils, particularly those occurring within our borders, before addressing other sorts of evils occurring elsewhere. After all, we cannot police the world. The trouble with this argument is that in a democracy, we do need to police ourselves. If our policies, including our military policies, are unjustly harming the inhabitants of other countries, we have a duty to stop causing harm outside our borders that is at least as urgent as our duty to prevent harm within them. We Americans justly impose the same duty on other countries, including those harboring terrorists.

'Intrinsic Evil' as Prophetic Language

Finally, the defender might admit that there is one issue of overriding importance for which the term "intrinsic evil" is useful in political considerations: abortion. For more than three decades, the regime of legalized abortion has taken the lives of well over a million unborn children a year. The Supreme Court of the United States not only permits this regime, it honors it as the instantiation of a fundamental right. In this circumstance, the term "intrinsic evil" helps evoke why abortion deserves prime consideration in voting. Abortion happens inside a woman's womb, inside what should be the safest relationship of all: that between mother and child. Abortion happens deep inside our society, permeating big cities and small towns alike.

But note that this use of the term "intrinsic evil" has moved far beyond the technical use normally employed in Catholic action theory: it is evocative, not analytical. Its prophetic tone echoes Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 27):

Source Citation

Kaveny, M. Cathleen. "Intrinsic evil and political responsibility: is the concept of intrinsic evil helpful to the Catholic Voter?" *America* 27 Oct. 2008: 15+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 29 Jan. 2010.

<http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/start.do?prodId=AONE&userGroupName=m_lin_m_bostcoll>.

Gale Document Number:A188284894

- [Contact Us](#)
- [Copyright](#)
- [Terms of use](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)