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Pope Francis holds a news conference aboard the papal plane on Sept. 13, 2024, following his 12-day journey across Southeast Asia and Oceania. (Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane/Pool)

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Pope Francis recently encouraged American Catholics to vote, and he shared that it is OK to vote for the "lesser evil." The question is, though: Was Francis speaking solely about presidential candidates, or was this inclusive of political parties?

We know that abortion is a critical issue for the Catholic Church, as is immigration, human dignity, labor rights, assisting the vulnerable, and the environment. Knowing this, I wonder which major party or candidate is the lesser evil? Many Catholics feel it's Donald Trump and the Republican Party, mostly because of abortion. But the Democrats are more in line with the Church on immigration and the environment. Since Francis has spoken on the topic, however opaquely, we should read between the lines and consider the deeper meaning.

But before you get too anxious, let's look at the facts of what ails America.

- Abortion is an issue for each state to decide. Absent a filibuster-proof majority in the U.S. Senate, the next president will not impact the abortion issue, as he generally does not write legislation. The Supreme Court is the entity that can impact this issue at a federal and state level. Prior to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the issue was phrased as pro-life vs. pro-choice. Many still feel that this issue is about a woman's right to choose more than it is about having abortions.
- Immigration is an issue that can be impacted by presidential orders. The next president will be able to curb or expand legal and illegal immigration. The president will also be able to impact policies currently restricting visas to Catholic priests and religious serving in America. Keep in mind that undocumented immigrants cannot accept U.S. jobs unless Americans voluntarily break the law to provide them.
- The U.S. national debt exceeds \$35 trillion. The American people, current and future, cannot afford additional tax cuts. The time has come to reduce spending and increase revenue. If we are going to run deficits, taxpayer funds should be used to help the poor and build infrastructure; we shouldn't continue transferring the nation's wealth to the already rich. Economists will tell you that tax cuts really aren't helping America, as the increasing interest payments on the national debt crowd out investment opportunities.
- Wall Street and corporate America dictate what happens with the economy. The outsourcing of jobs over the past 40 years has led to a decline in America's working class and tax base while decimating communities. Presidents do not impact this issue or inflation as much as the average person thinks, primarily

because Americans do not produce most of what is consumed here. Presidents do not bring jobs to America. Corporations do, and only when profitable. Government stimulus and tax cuts prop up the economy, but at a cost to future generations.

- Character matters. America deserves leaders who, while flawed, are honorable individuals with strong moral and ethical convictions. Being a good parent or grandparent is not enough. We need leaders who will help and not harm the American people. There was a point in time when personal scandals caused candidates to leave races and elected officials to resign. Today, some individuals feel that their personal agendas are more important than the needs of the nation, and unfortunately, we allow this to happen. We cannot allow ourselves to be deceived by politicians and political parties.
- Racially inflamed statements and lies are old-school, Jim Crow, Southern-style politics designed to instill fear in a White minority while dividing our nation. Our leaders should be better than this, especially our Christian leaders. Honesty and integrity are integral traits for citizens and especially for leaders. Individuals who repeatedly make false and inflammatory statements must be evaluated thoroughly to determine what they truly believe and whether they are worthy to lead.
- There is a significant lack of investment in affordable housing and infrastructure in America. Why are we giving tax cuts to artificially prop up our economy when we should be actually investing in our nation? The time has come for everyone to pay their fair share, and if that means higher taxes and reduced services, so be it.
- The death penalty remains a concern for Catholics and many others. Alabama, Texas, Utah, Florida, South Carolina, Missouri, and Oklahoma recently executed citizens, men and women, most of them Black and brown. While this is primarily a state-level issue, we must fight to end the death penalty in this country overall. If we are pro-life, that should also include the well-being of all living people.
- Racially and politically motivated gerrymandering of congressional districts continues to restrict the voting power and influence of minority groups. Political parties should focus on expanding their membership, not minimizing the input of people of color. Putting forth policies and ideas that resonate is a preferable approach. At some point, gerrymandering will no longer be able to keep a White minority in power, so why not expand the base instead?

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- Efforts to suppress voters and the continued practices denying felons the right to vote have led to taxation without representation. Our country is better than this. We need to win over potential voters with policies rather than deny them the opportunity to participate in the system. For years, Republicans have equated Black people and felons with the Democratic Party and made little effort to win them over. When will this change?
- America did significant damage to many nations through its anti-communism battles, war on drugs, and destabilization efforts at home and abroad. Over the past century, the U.S. government created many of the problems that still plague countries all over the world, whose populations are now leaving to immigrate to the U.S.
- America owes a debt to Haiti and the Haitian people for its complicity with France in fashioning the 1825 [Haitian independence debt](#). It wasn't until 1947 that the debt was paid off, and Haiti remains in poverty today. America took a similar approach in Vietnam (a French colony at the time) and fought an unjust war against people who were our allies during World War II. Our immigration policies can help make amends for our prior acts.
- America's lack of consistent investment in education leads to competitive advantages for some communities and disadvantages for others. School boards and teacher unions that do not hold teachers, students, and parents accountable have led to a watered-down education for many children. Charter schools and voucher programs help level the playing field in some communities while providing an advantage to privileged students in others. If the education playing field is made level, the need for programs such as affirmative action and DEI will be lessened over time.
- Whether one believes in climate change/global warming or not, we have a duty to protect the planet that God has blessed us with. We are stewards of creation.
- Governmental deregulation has led to environmental disasters, financial and housing system collapses, and prescription drug abuse that have negatively impacted the American people. Additional deregulation may not be in America's best interest as corporations and wealthy individuals profit and taxpayers pick up the costs.

Both of our nation's major political parties have deviated significantly from their fundamental beliefs and policy positions. One has gone too far to the right. The

other has gone too far to the left. Politicians represent the values of their respective political parties, and the political parties represent the values of their leaders. The questions are simple: Which will do more harm or good for the American people? Which best represents your values?

In Genesis 3, we learn how the devil deceived Eve. We know he remains in the world. The possibility exists that he is deceiving people on both sides today, creating conflict, division, and reducing the likelihood of consensus and effective governance. Don't just listen to soundbites; take into consideration the past acts and policy positions of each candidate and whether they behave in a Christ-like manner.

As I wrote in a previous article, we should use the principles of Catholic social teaching to help educate ourselves to make wise choices, not just in voting, but in our daily lives. If you think Francis was speaking clearly and giving support for the "obvious" candidate, think again. Dive deep into the Bible, your Catholic teachings, and the candidacy of each candidate and decide which will be the lesser of two evils. Who knows? The answer might surprise you.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)