

“Many Catholics may understandably feel that the bishops are talking out of both sides of their mouths: Catholics are not supposed to be single-issue voters, but, by the way, abortion is the only issue that counts. The bishops do not intend to tell Catholics how to vote; but, by the way, a vote for Senator Obama puts your salvation at risk. Catholics are to form their consciences and make prudential judgments about complex matters of good and evil — just so long as they come to the same conclusions as the bishops.”

From a commentary entitled, “Catholics and Choice (in the Voting Booth),” by Peter Steinfels. It appeared in the *New York Times* on November 8, 2008.

This is an excerpt from “Voting One’s Conscience,” by the editors of *America*, October 27, 2008.

“In their document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, published almost a year ago, the bishops called Catholic voters to prayerful reflection on the principles of Catholic moral and social teaching. First among these fundamental ethical principles is the dignity of the human person and his or her consequent right to life, “the most fundamental human good and the condition of all the others.” Issues that involve direct attacks on life itself, such as abortion or euthanasia or unjust war, therefore, should be the first concern of Catholic voters. Our duty to protect innocent human life, they wrote, ‘has a special claim on our consciences and our actions.’

“At the same time, the bishops reminded us of the breadth of our moral responsibility. ‘Catholic teaching about the dignity of life calls us to oppose torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty; to prevent genocide and attacks against noncombatants; to oppose racism; and to overcome poverty and suffering,’ they wrote. “Nations are called to protect the right to life by seeking effective ways to combat evil and terror without resorting to armed conflicts....’

“Some have argued—misleadingly—that our moral obligation to defend innocent human life means that it is never morally permissible for a Catholic to vote for a candidate who supports abortion rights. Yet the bishops have articulated conditions under which it may be possible. Given the specific choices facing voters, disqualification of pro-choice candidates is neither automatic nor universal. While it is never permissible to vote for a candidate who supports abortion rights ‘if the voter’s intent is to support that position,’ it may be permissible for a voter who rejects a candidate’s pro-abortion rights position to vote for the candidate, according to the bishops, ‘for truly grave moral reasons.’

“Wisely, *Faithful Citizenship* does not specify what counts as grave moral reasons. What might they be? The voter is required to speculate: The likelihood of reducing the abortion rate? Leading the campaign to support stem cell research on adult cells instead of fetal cells? Opposing preventive war and torture? Providing health care for the uninsured? Readiness to join a new international regime to curb global warming? Salvaging the American economy?

“The right to life, rooted in the dignity of the human person, necessarily implies rights to all the goods of human life, including peace and security, a home, health and employment. As Pope Benedict himself noted when he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, ‘a political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility toward the common good.’ In other words, Catholics are not automatic single-issue voters, regardless of the issue. Catholic social teaching is a unity and must be applied accordingly.

“A candidate’s character also matters. A voter’s decisions, according to the bishops, should also ‘take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity and ability to influence a given issue.’ Political history should also count. Repeated failure by a candidate or a party to make good on campaign promises must be calculated into a voter’s judgment. Prudence requires voters to remember that in choosing a political candidate, they are not choosing an amalgam of ideas and policies but a person in a specific and delimited political situation. Prudence also requires voters to recall that there are different ways of responding to compelling social problems that are morally acceptable.

From “Obama and the War on Brains,” by Nicholas D. Kristof. This article appeared in the *New York Times* on November 9, 2008.

Barack Obama’s election is a milestone in more than his pigmentation. The second most remarkable thing about his election is that American voters have just picked a president who is an open, out-of-the-closet, practicing intellectual.

Maybe, just maybe, the result will be a step away from the anti-intellectualism that has long been a strain in American life. Smart and educated leadership is no panacea, but we’ve seen recently that the converse — a White House that scorns expertise and shrugs at nuance — doesn’t get very far either.

... An intellectual is a person interested in ideas and comfortable with complexity. Intellectuals read the classics, even when no one is looking, because they appreciate the lessons of Sophocles and Shakespeare that the world abounds in uncertainties and contradictions, and — President Bush, lend me your ears — that leaders self-destruct when they become too rigid and too intoxicated with the fumes of moral clarity.

... as Mr. Obama goes to Washington, I’m hopeful that his fertile mind will set a new tone for our country. Maybe someday soon our leaders no longer will have to shuffle in shame when they’re caught with brains in their heads.

Mr. Kristof’s Blog can be found at www.nytimes.com/ontheground