CENTER VALLEY – Common courtesy suggests that two subjects should never be discussed at table, namely religion and politics. About neither one can people come to amicable conclusions. When considered together, the mix becomes volatile.

The clash between religious and political convictions is heating up again. On the one hand, President Bush appears too religious. Bob Woodward’s new book recounts Bush’s “conversation” with his “Father” – not George the elder, but the heavenly one – who convinced him that going to war was the right thing to do.

On the other hand, John Kerry appears not religious enough, at least in terms of his own faith. On the day of Kerry’s speech supporting a woman’s right to abortion, a Vatican cardinal claimed that any “unambiguously pro-abortion” Catholic politician “is not fit” to receive Holy Communion.

The contrast appears also in our local campaign. During their lone debate, Pat Toomey defended human life at its earliest stages against biomedical manipulation (as in stem cell research and cloning). In response, Arlen Specter touted science’s freedom from restriction by ideology.

Are there not already enough contentious issues that separate the contenders? Should the Church not stay out of political debates? Can we not keep religion in the realm of personal belief and allow politics to perform its role in the public square?

Quite simply, the answer is “no.” Religion cannot be a non-issue in politics precisely because personal convictions characterize the individuals seeking election, and their principles inform the decisions that affect all in society.
When Catholic bishops sanction Catholic politicians for publicly held positions that contradict the faith they profess, many see this move as a coercive ploy or bullying tactic. Supposedly, it subverts the separation of church and state and violates the candidate’s freedom of conscience. But never has the Church demanded that non-Catholics accept what Catholics believe. It does, however, require that those who claim to be Catholic not give the pretense of sharing that faith when their public actions, whether in speeches or by votes, defy what Catholicism professes.

More to the point, the beliefs in question here are not merely religious in nature. The claims that irk Vatican officials, and that should give pause for reflection to voters, concern a candidate’s position with regard to treating human life as a means to some other end. This matter is as secular as it is sacred; primarily a humanistic concern, it transcends any denominationalism.

Both abortion and biomedical research seek something good, be it personal welfare or better healthcare. The well-being of individuals and the advancement of knowledge are end results that we all value and which any politician should support.

Yet, the good of human life itself is primordial. It remains the condition for the enjoyment of any and all other goods. Thus, when human beings – whether at the cellular or fetal stages of development – are made subservient to other values, society itself is undermined. Candidates who deny or dismiss this natural law stake their political positions on the shaky ground of some ultimate value other than people.

This is not to say that sanctity of life is the only concern in a political campaign. To focus electoral consideration solely on this issue would be both imprudent and misguided.

Yet the question about life is more than “single issue” politics. Only if all issues are equally significant can a candidate’s position on abortion, euthanasia, and biomedical research be dismissed as one position among many issues.

But individuals are more than issues. Life is bigger than law. Persons are greater than policies.

Because the former is the foundation of, and the purpose for, the latter, where a candidate stands on this question is of fundamental importance to all people, not just religious believers. “Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community.”

That quote comes from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. But its provenance does not qualify its truthfulness. It could have been uttered by anyone predisposed to logic and reason. Its conclusion does not depend on religious persuasion for its veracity, nor does its claim reflect partisan politics for its support.

What the current controversy about candidates’ religious views suggests is that political positions concerning human life cannot be relegated to the sideline of campaign issues. They never were. And they should not be now or on election day.
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