

Cultural Daily

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Election 2020: The End of Sunday Dinner?

Jenn Robbins · Wednesday, September 2nd, 2020

Voting for Biden is a mortal sin. This is what my mom told me she learned, after speaking with a close friend of hers about the upcoming election. I had just called my mom to do, as I jokingly called it, a Facebook Intervention. I had been urging her to stop posting what I found to be inflammatory, political things that were alienating her from some of our friends and family when she stopped me in my tracks. “We should vote Republican,” she warned. “It’s not about Trump. It’s about our vote and what it stands for in the Catholic Church’s teachings. A vote for the Democrat party is a mortal sin.” I hung up.

I couldn’t disagree more and, moreover, I don’t see how a vote cast, either way, can be a sin. Apparently it is, according to some of my fellow Catholics because it makes us complicit in whatever happens under our candidate’s watch. Understand, my mom didn’t caution me about sinning to upset me; she was honestly concerned, genuinely explaining herself. But clearly we wouldn’t be enjoying our weekend time together because we were both pretty upset. Our Sunday ritual of drinking too much coffee, laughing too loud, reading her diverse collection of magazine subscriptions, and cooking dinner together...that wasn’t going to happen. Typically our mantra when things get strained between us, or any topic is getting to be too much, has been: “I don’t want to talk about it.” If one or the other of us says it, the other shuts up. There’s a reverence there, an unspoken agreement: conversation over, move on to happier, friendlier things. But the last four years with Trump, and now the commencement of the election season, has been really tough. Can we agree not to talk about it? I’m not so sure we can...but if we don’t *not* talk about it, we may not make it to November. What’s more important: which one of us is going to hell, or who’s bringing what to Sunday dinner?

Mortal sin. I am Catholic enough to know that mortal sin is really bad, but not enough to be able to define it. So I searched the Catechism: “Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God...If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom, has the power to make choices forever, with no turning back.” Without repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes “the eternal death of hell.” I grew up in the Catholic Church; our pastor always advised us to “vote our conscience” bearing in mind our Catholic values. Never have I heard from a priest that voting one way or another was sinful. Maybe it’s because I grew up in California or because I was educated by the Jesuits. Honestly, I have no idea. But my mom’s claim about Biden knocked me out. I guess she is a product of her Catholic upbringing, as am I.

We kept trying. “I did not know that voting could be sinful – let alone send me to hell,” I offered.

She responded with a YouTube video. The priest in it said that because Democrats are pro-choice, voting for Biden/Harris is a mortal sin. For my mom, and many Catholics, abortion rights are enough to sway them to the right, no matter what. I pointed out that Kamala Harris is against the death penalty and so is the church – and that should count for something; no candidate or party fully represents all of the church’s teachings. Mom and I could agree on that, but that’s about it. A week went by. Sensing my desperation, a close friend pointed me to a Jesuit priest, Fr. James Martin, for support. Fr. Martin recently spoke out against priests who say that a vote for Biden, or any candidate, is a sinful one. He cited the Vatican’s “Congregation for the Clergy,” which clearly states that bishops and priests should not endorse or campaign for any candidate or political party for a variety of reasons; in fact, the document declares, “The priest ought to refrain from actively engaging himself in politics, as it often happens, in order to be a central point of spiritual fraternity.” Judgment alienates and divides.

On this, my mom agreed: “You make a good point.” I thanked her, feeling relieved (because I guess I’ll always want her approval). She told me to forget about the “sinning stuff” so we could be friends again, but I was on a roll. I told her to stop texting me anything political. “Leave me alone, too, please,” she responded. “Let me have my views.” Good point. It’s been a couple of weeks now of her reaching out, and me responding politely but distantly, and I’m just upset. Not so much about the sinning part – I don’t believe it to be true – but that my mom and I are so opposed that I can’t even talk to her. That she disapproves of my beliefs and I of hers. We didn’t hang out at my house for the last two Sundays. We didn’t watch mass on my phone while we drank our coffee. We didn’t make lasagna. We still haven’t talked.

“Let me have my views.” Her request tumbles around in my mind. She is indeed allowed to have her views, and I should not try to quiet her, even to protect her from her “friends” on Facebook. Even to protect her from me. I can’t claim it’s a dialogue when I’m really just trying to argue her opinions out of her. Can we just accept, without judgment, that we are different?

Let’s pretend for argument’s sake I agree that a “wrong” vote can be a sin. The Church aims to protect unborn children. The Church is also anti-capital punishment, a protector of the poor, and an advocate of the disenfranchised, refugee, and immigrant. It stands to reason then, that a vote for a pro-death penalty candidate, would also be a mortal sin – “Thou shall not kill”. Or take the border crisis for that matter. The Trump administration has, in my Catholic opinion, committed a mortal sin against humanity by its blatantly inhumane tactics. ICE’s treatment of immigrants and those seeking refuge in this country, has “destroyed charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law” – “Love thy neighbor”. Committing a mortal sin, according to the Catechism, requires a person to exhibit “full knowledge and deliberate consent”. I think it’s fair to say that all Americans, Republican, and Democrat, have full knowledge of the deliberate inhumane acts that have been committed against our neighbors at our borders. If we vote for the Trump/Pence ticket, we are signing up for four more years of this inhumanity and consenting to it.

So, come November: if I’m a mortal sinner for voting to support a woman’s right to legally obtain an abortion, my mom’s a mortal sinner for voting to support U.S. incarceration of migrant children. Will I see her in Hell...or confession? I vote for neither. I vote for a way back to Sunday dinner, immediately. Time is eternal.

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