

# Catholic Dilemmas in an Election Year: A Franciscan Approach

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**A**merican Catholics find themselves in a difficult position today. As we decide which candidates to support in this election year, difficult moral considerations come into play around such issues as fair tax policy, same-sex marriages, abortion, terrorism and war.

We, the representatives of several Franciscan social justice committees, offer this reflection on our country's invasion of Iraq as a guide for deciding this and other equally complex election issues. Further, we need to understand the effects of the war in Iraq on other questions around the use of force particularly in the wider context of the war on terror.

We must ask ourselves: In light of the terrorist attacks on our country and elsewhere in the world, was the decision to wage war on Iraq morally justified or not? Simply to set down general moral principles is too easy. To apply those principles is difficult and open to disagreement, but necessary for valid moral judgments, which ought to guide future actions. Hard questions have to be asked.

Before the questions, however, there are some points on which all can agree. The patriotism, heroism and generous spirit shown by our men and women in the military are beyond question. We owe them our gratitude and honor. More than one thousand Americans have given their lives; more than seven thousand have suffered serious wounds. Those who were killed and those who suffered often life-changing injuries merit our lasting respect and consideration.

None of us, especially our government, can ever dismiss these sacrifices as simply the costs of war. Nor can we ignore the terrible loss of life and the devastation suffered by the people of Iraq. "Collateral damage" does not begin to describe that suffering or sweep away the enormous unrest and animosity that has continued to fester among Iraqis as this war drags on.

Precisely because of the awful sacrifices that war brings, questions about this and every military conflict have to be asked: What has been and continues to be the cost of our intervention in Iraq? What is being sacrificed in terms of human life? What needs here at home are not being met because of the huge expense of this war: health care, education, job training and infrastructure? What is the cost of this war with regard to noncombatants, to political upheaval and economic hardship in Iraq? Has the war helped or hindered the war against terror? How gravely has this war damaged U.S. relations with other nations and with the United Nations?

In the light of answers to these questions, American Catholics must judge the morality of our preemptive war against Iraq and which candidates to choose now that we are mired there. The questions can guide us in coming to morally sound conclusions regarding similar issues.

As an inspiration for serious consideration of this and so many other issues facing us, we offer a final prayer, taken from the Mass of Reconciliation:

"In the midst of conflict and division  
We know it is you  
Who turns our minds to thoughts of peace  
Your Spirit changes our hearts:  
Enemies begin to speak to one another,  
Those who were estranged join hands in friendship,  
AND NATIONS SEEK THE WAY OF PEACE TOGETHER."

*Signed:*

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