

“ANYONE WHO WANTS TO BE GREAT AMONG YOU MUST BE YOUR SERVANT”¹

A DISCERNMENT ON VOTING IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN ELECTION YEAR 2024



Jesus Washing Peter's Feet by Ford Madox-Brown Tate Gallery in London
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When South Africans head to the polls for the national, regional and provincial elections on 29th May 2024 they will be one of 68 countries casting their ballot in the year 2024. This means that at least 2 billion personas worldwide will be heading to the polls in 2024. A truly historical election year 2024!

¹ Matthew 20: 26

National and regional elections raise hard socio-political and power political as well as moral and ethical questions for the respective electorates based on the context of each individual country.

This article is the attempt to provide Christian Catholic voters with guidelines for casting their ballot based on the catechetical and social teachings of the Catholic Church.

Why should I even bother to vote when criminals and corrupt government go unpunished, and nothing changes anyway?

This seemingly legitimate cry of despair and disillusionment, while understandable in the context of present-day South Africa – as in numerous countries globally- must be met with one answer only: NOT VOTING IS NO OPTION for Catholic citizens.

In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that each citizen's 'submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good (of all members of society) makes it morally obligatory...to exercise the right to vote....'²

"I honestly don't understand why the Church teaches that it is 'morally obligatory' to vote. Please explain.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] all political or civil authority has been received from God for our good. Consequently, our interior attitude and sense of duty as Catholic citizens towards civil authorities are determined by the Fourth Commandment, the Commandment which instructs one to honour your father and mother.

This might come as a surprise to most of us. It's a small wonder, then, that we ask ourselves: what has politics got to do with 'honouring' our parents? The CCC explains this vexed question as follows:

"God's fourth commandment also enjoins us to honour all who for our good have received authority in society from God. It clarifies the duties of those who exercise authority as well as those who benefit from it." [CCC 2234]

This means two things:

First, all authority stems from God. It is God's will that we should honour Him first. This charge is followed by honouring our parents. Thereafter, we have the politicians and civil authorities "who for our good have received authority in society from God."

Secondly, it explains what the God-willed duties of politicians and civil authorities towards citizens are; and *vice versa* it spells out what the God-willed rights and responsibilities of citizens are.

With which attitudes and behaviors should politicians and representatives of civil authorities exercise her or his duties?

The Catechism teaches that any Catholic in whom God has vested civil authority should exercise her or his office as a ministry of service to all God's people.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 2240

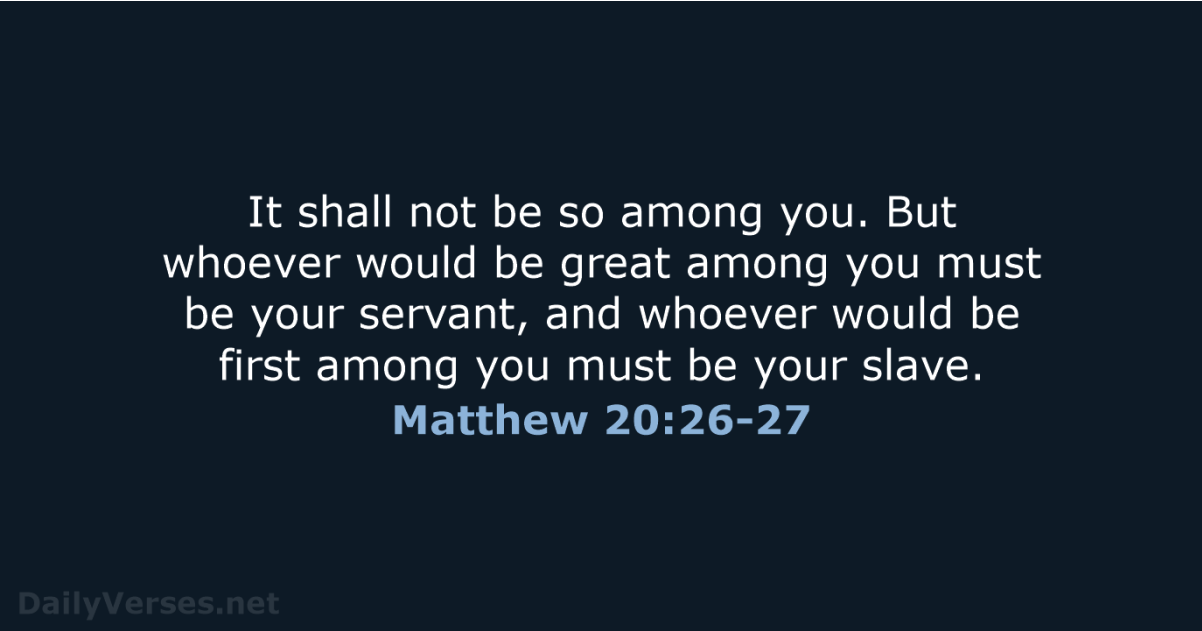
“Political authorities are obliged to respect the fundamental rights of the human person. They will dispense justice humanely by respecting the rights of everyone, especially of families and the disadvantaged.” [CCC 2237]

What is meant with the ‘ministry of service?’

In the Gospels of Saints Matthew [Mt. 20: 20 – 28] and Mark [Mk 10: 35 – 45] we read the accounts of John and James, the ambitious sons of Zebedee, who want Jesus to grant them the privilege of being seated at his left and right sides when He assumes His glory. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus’s response to such unabashed and impious ambitions is:

“Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant.”

This particular teaching of Jesus is the basis for the Church’s teaching on the ministry of service. It applies not only to persons who exercise political or civil power, but to every one of us in our relationship to our fellow human beings.



It shall not be so among you. But
whoever would be great among you must
be your servant, and whoever would be
first among you must be your slave.
Matthew 20:26-27

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‘Wash one another’s feet’ is the foundational principle of service and love that applies to every member of the human family.

To participate in a guided Ignatian contemplation of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, use this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2nCKfL7w88>.

With which interior attitude and behavior should Catholic citizens exercise their ‘right to vote?’³

Our beloved Pope Francis says in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [EG]: “Let us not forget that responsible citizenship is a virtue, and that participation in political life is a moral obligation.” [EG 220] These are strong, clear words.

³ This section is based on MIKE POTHIER PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT WHEN VOTING, WORLDWIDE APR-MA 2024

An important interior attitude is therefore to accept that it is our moral duty to be involved in politics and to vote. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by talk that 'politics and religion don't go together'. They do 'go together' because our political life should be a witness to gospel values! This has been the official position of the Church for at least a century.

In fact, the Catholic Church has a set of 'guidelines' that goes back more than one hundred and thirty years to assist us in making good moral and ethical choices when we participate in political and civil life. These guidelines are commonly called the Catholic Social Teaching (CST).