

BE INFORMED ● REFLECT ● PRAY ● VOTE JUDICIOUSLY

The General Election to the Goa State Legislative Assembly 2017 is at our door. It is a call for the Citizens to celebrate their citizenship and the freedom to choose their political representatives as a blessing from God Almighty. *Elections are a sign that democracy is still alive in this country, for which Citizens must be thankful to God and also be mindful that they are God's instruments through which Justice and Peace are to be established in the world.* For Catholic Citizens, political participation and voting are not optional, but an integral part of their Christian faith. *"Every citizen ought to be mindful of his right and his duty to promote the common good by using his vote. The Church praises and esteems those who devote themselves to the public good for the service of men and take upon themselves the burdens of public office"* (Gaudium et Spes, no. 75). Responsible Citizens cannot have a casual and careless approach to this moral duty of voting, which also implies that, before casting their vote, it is incumbent upon them to make sincere efforts to obtain reliable information about all political issues and candidates.

With over a Rupees ten thousand crore public debt on the heads of Goan Citizens and a threat to the natural resources from unregulated and indiscriminate development, the outcome of this State Election 2017 will determine and impact the future, not only of the existing citizens, but of the generations yet to be born. **The wanton destruction of Goa's environment and culture cannot be seen as a one-way process in our democracy; it rather points to a material and formal cooperation of the Voters, who repeatedly elect insensitive and unscrupulous political representatives to legislate and govern every five years.** Pope Francis, in his homily of September 16, 2013, with reference to those who are indifferent to politics or who simply blame political leaders for all their problems, said: *"None can say, 'I have nothing to do with this, they govern... No, no, I am responsible for their governance, and I have to do the best so that they govern well, and I have to do my best by participating in politics according to my ability. Politics according to the Social Doctrine of the Church is one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good."* In other words, the quality of the seed sown by the Citizens during elections determines the quality of legislations and policies in governance that will follow.

In the federal structure of our democracy, the elections to the State Government cannot be seen in isolation from the Union Government. Citizens have to be aware of the reality that any oppressive, discriminatory and destructive legislations and policies proposed at the national level require the collaboration of State Governments for enactment and their cooperation for implementation. **So while the local issues of governance in Goa are also important and need to be seriously considered, one cannot be blind to the larger thrust that is being placed in recent times, at the national level, to undo the Sovereign, Socialist, Secular and Democratic fabric of our nation as enshrined in our Constitution.** The undue intrusion and interference of governments in the judiciary or educational and financial institutions cannot be a sign of good governance. The terror unleashed by the State and non-State actors to silence dissent or diverse opinions about governance by labelling them as anti-national or unpatriotic cannot be ignored by Responsible Citizens. The select private business interests being promoted through government policies under the pretext of fostering economic growth, tackling corruption and ensuring transparency through digitalisation, are a disturbing development. The commissioning of an Investment Promotion Board (IPB) by Union or

State Governments and the nationalisation of our State's natural resources to push projects in villages and towns by undermining the constitutional powers of the self-governments like Panchayats and Municipalities are in no way expected in good governance. **The shift from the social policy of 'Roti, Kapda aur Makaan' for uplifting the poor sections of the society to an emphasis on digital and cashless policy involving smart phones, ATM cards and Paytm apps as the basic requirement for every citizen to avail of government benefits and purchase their basic needs is a worrisome phenomenon.**

“Politics is noble; it is one of the highest forms of charity,” Paul VI used to say. “We sully it when we mix it with business,” stated Pope Francis at the Vatican to the participants of a World Meeting of Popular Movements, a collection of grass-roots organizations.

The young voters, particularly, should never forget that the Right to Freedom is not to be assumed as a guaranteed inheritance from past generations. It has to be preserved every single day by being adequately informed and engaged as a citizen. **The increased invasion of technology for political propaganda and the hiring of branding and marketing agencies to sell political parties and politicians present a greater challenge for citizens to be prudent and discerning in their political choices and decisions.** What is marketed to us as good governance may not necessarily be so. It is our general experience that party manifestos and electoral promises mean nothing for politicians and their workers as they are not legally binding and therefore are hardly respected once the candidates get elected to public office. Voters are often tricked by those in power into believing that political opponents are corrupt by appointing Inquiry Commissions, filing criminal charge-sheets which hardly ever result into a criminal conviction or recovery of losses; more often than not, people are told some years later that there was no scam involved. *“Not every opinion that is given publicity should be taken as the true expression of that public opinion which is held by a significant number of people... though usually one has a greater following than the others. The opinion of the majority, however, is not necessarily the best or closest to the truth”* (Communio et Progressio, no. 31).

The emergence of new political parties and independents in the run-up to elections, leading to confusion and a split of votes, is a challenge before every Citizen. **Political parties and individuals who whip up sentiments and emotions around certain lesser issues, while being non-committal on core issues and refusing to disclose their mind on where they stand regarding democratic principles and values which confront politics in this country, need to be treated with utmost caution.** Citizens need to understand that Governance is much more complex and is not about a few issues alone; they need to be aware that corruption in governance is not merely about monetary considerations, but also involves the abuse of power and the denial of transparency and accountability in governance policies and programmes. **Exploiting the vulnerability of the unemployed, the displaced and the economically backward voters by luring them with freebies and unrealistic promises of jobs also amounts to corruption.** Citizens also should not be ignorant and careless about the fact that the cancer of communalism and capitalism craftily make their way into governments through proxy political agents who deceive and divide the voters in an election. It is in situations like these that the Citizens have to invoke the power of prayer and reflection for the necessary enlightenment in choosing their political representatives.

The print and electronic media which is considered as the fourth pillar of a democracy and is ethically required to maintain autonomy and report factual and unbiased news to the public, is now increasingly seen to be the mouthpiece of the government and corporates, and driven by competition. **Citizens therefore need to access other sources of alternative and reliable political information before coming to conclusions on any issue and before making political decisions or choices.** They ought to be aware about rumours floated by vested ideological and political interests against the Church or individuals in politics and resist any attempts to create distrust, instigate hatred or violence against any individual, community, party, or any State officials entrusted with the task of ensuring free and fair election.

As Citizens, **we must elect principled leaders to the government, to ensure that good public policies, reflecting moral values and fostering the common good, are created.** It is the Goan Voters who will ultimately shape the future of the State of Goa and of the country through their vote. As the Book of Proverbs says, *“Putting confidence in an unreliable man is like chewing with a sore tooth or trying to run on a broken foot”* (Proverbs 25:9). It is in this **Christian spirit of ensuring the Common Good** that Catholic Citizens in our State must rise above religion, caste, creed or other selfish considerations, to vote for upright, knowledgeable, capable and sincere leaders to government.