



Faithful Citizenship 2008

Third in a Series

Forming Consciences, Part II

“The more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by objective standards of moral conduct.”

Gaudium et spes (The Church in the Modern World) 16

Exercising Prudential Judgment

Having formed our conscience through Scripture, Catholic teaching, and prayer, we are all called to live as faithful citizens in a secular political environment where a perfect solution is rarely, if ever, possible. Thus we need to be prudent in arriving at a course of action.

Prudence involves the exercise of good judgment in practical matters. The prudent person takes the step of asking the right questions before choosing to act.

For example, our informed conscience tells us that the poor have a special claim on our concerns. But good people can disagree as to how we honor that claim in fashioning state or federal budget priorities.

The prudent person will examine, who are the poor? What are their needs? What is our capacity to help? Will direct assistance be more helpful than education and job training? How can we tell if our assistance truly helped the poor?

As the U.S. bishops write in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC 19), “Catholics may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems, but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to help build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended.”

Making Political Choices as Faithful Citizens

Politics is the art of the possible. And since it is a human activity, it will never be flawless. Just as we Catholics will rarely find a perfect policy or program, so will we rarely find a perfect candidate.

Given this political reality, the U.S. bishops offer the following guidance, not only for voting, but also for evaluating debates and policies between elections:

1. “As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help transform the party to which we belong; we should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths.” (FCFC 14)
2. “Sometimes morally flawed laws already exist. In this situation, the process of framing legislation to protect life is subject to prudential judgment and the ‘art of the possible.’ At times this process may restore justice only partially or gradually.... Such incremental improvements in the law are acceptable as steps toward the full restoration of justice. However, Catholics must never abandon the moral requirement to seek full protection for all human life from the moment of conception until natural death.” (FCFC 32)

3. “A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter’s intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate’s opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.” (FCFC 34)

4. “There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.” (FCFC 35)

5. “When all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, the conscientious voter faces a dilemma. The voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods.” (FCFC 36)

6. “In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. These decisions should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching.” (FCFC 37)

Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine

Over its two-thousand-year history, the Church has reflected on the moral implications of social questions. From its study of Scripture and Tradition, the Church has defined a consistent set of moral values or

principles that can help us build a more authentic and humane civilization.

Although some of these principles are unique to our own Catholic belief, most derive not from belief, but from a basic natural law written on the hearts of every reflective human being. For instance, we are opposed to slavery not only because we are Catholics, but also because as thinking human beings we realize that slavery— or abortion, or drunk driving— violates natural law.

Thus the Church hardly imposes its distinct teaching on anybody, but proposes to the culture what is most noble and decent in the human project.

If we apply these principles to the concrete situations that confront our nation and our world, we can come to a better understanding of what public policies will best protect human dignity and serve the common good.

The next four parts of this series will focus on the principles of the Church’s social doctrine. The four parts are organized as follows:

- Right to Life & the Dignity of the Human Person
- Family Life & Participation / Rights & Responsibilities
- Option for the Poor & Vulnerable / Dignity of Work & the Rights of Workers
- Solidarity / Care of God’s Creation

As you review the remaining parts of the series, it is important to remember two things.

First, what makes these principles coherent, and consistent is that the human person is at the center of them all.

Second, these principles do more than guide our policy choices as citizens. They are also central to all we do between elections. They apply to the many personal choices that confront us every day as parents, neighbors, employers, employees, producers, and consumers.