The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

This brief document is a summary of the United States bishops' reflection *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.* It complements the teaching of bishops in dioceses and states. A large-print version of this document is available free at *www.faithfulcitizenship.org*.

Our nation faces political challenges that demand urgent moral choices. We are a nation at war, with all of its human costs; a country often divided by race and ethnicity; a nation of immigrants struggling with immigration. We are an affluent society where too many live in poverty; part of a global community confronting terrorism and facing urgent threats to our environment; a culture built on families, where some now question the value of marriage and family life. We pride ourselves on supporting human rights, but we fail even to protect the fundamental right to life, especially for unborn children.

We bishops seek to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with the truth, so they can make sound moral choices in addressing these challenges. We do not tell Catholics how to vote. The responsibility to make political choices rests with each person and his or her properly formed conscience.

Why Does the Church Teach About Issues Affecting Public Policy?

The Church's obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith, a part of the mission given to us by Jesus Christ. Faith helps us see more clearly the truth about human life and dignity that we also understand through human reason. As people of both faith and reason, Catholics are called to bring truth to political life and to practice Christ's commandment to "love one another" (Jn 13:34). According to Pope Benedict XVI, "charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as 'social charity'" (Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 29).

The United States Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to participate and speak out without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination. Civil law should recognize and protect the Church's right and responsibility to participate in society without abandoning our central moral convictions. Our nation's tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions into public life. The Catholic community brings to the political dialogue a consistent moral framework and broad experience serving those in need.

Who in the Church Should Participate in Political Life?

In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. In today's environment, Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party and few candidates fully share our comprehensive commitment to human life and dignity. Catholic lay women and men need to act on the Church's moral principles and become more involved: running for office, working within political parties, and communicating concerns to elected officials. Even those who cannot vote should raise their voices on matters that affect their lives and the common good.

How Does the Church Help Catholics to Address Political and Social Questions?

A Well-Formed Conscience

The Church equips its members to address political questions by helping them develop well-formed consciences. "Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act. . . . [Every person] is obliged to follow faithfully what he [or she] knows to be just and right" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778). We Catholics have a lifelong obligation to form our consciences in accord with human reason, enlightened by the teaching of Christ as it comes to us through the Church.

The Virtue of Prudence

The Church also encourages Catholics to develop the virtue of prudence, which enables us "to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806). Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act. Prudence must be accompanied by courage which calls us to act. As Catholics seek to advance the common good, we must carefully discern which public policies are morally sound. A good end does not justify an immoral means. At times Catholics may choose different ways to respond to social problems, but we cannot differ on our obligation to protect human life and dignity and help build through moral means a more just and peaceful world.

Doing Good and Avoiding Evil

There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. These intrinsically evil acts must always be rejected and never supported. A preeminent example is the intentional taking of human life through abortion. It is always morally wrong to destroy innocent human beings. A legal system that allows the right to life to be violated on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed.

Similarly, direct threats to the dignity of human life such as euthanasia, human cloning, and destructive research on human embryos are also intrinsically evil and must be opposed. Other assaults on human life and dignity, such as genocide, torture, racism, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, can never be justified. Disrespect for any human life diminishes respect for all human life.

As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. A candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support. Yet a candidate's position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support.[1]

Opposition to intrinsically evil acts also prompts us to recognize our positive duty to contribute to the common good and act in solidarity with those in need. Both opposing evil *and* doing good are essential. As Pope John Paul II said, "the fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment" (Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 52). The basic right to life implies and is linked to other human rights to the goods that every person needs to live and thrive—including food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work. The use of the death penalty, hunger, lack of health care or housing, human trafficking, the human and moral costs of war, and unjust immigration policies are some of the serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act.

Making Moral Choices

Difficult political decisions require the exercise of a well-formed conscience aided by prudence. This exercise of conscience begins with always opposing policies that violate human life or weaken its protection. "Those who formulate law

therefore have an obligation in conscience to work toward correcting morally defective laws, lest they be guilty of cooperating in evil and in sinning against the common good" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], *Catholics in Political Life*).

When morally flawed laws already exist, prudential judgment is needed to determine how to do what is possible to restore justice—even if partially or gradually—without ever abandoning a moral commitment to full protection for all human life from conception to natural death (see Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 73).

Prudential judgment is also needed to determine the best way to promote the common good in areas such as housing, health care, and immigration. When Church leaders make judgments about how to apply Catholic teaching to specific policies, this may not carry the same binding authority as universal moral principles but cannot be dismissed as one political opinion among others. These moral applications should inform the consciences and guide the actions of Catholics.

What Does the Church Say About Catholic Social Teaching in the Public Square?—Seven Key Themes

A consistent ethic of life should guide all Catholic engagement in political life. This Catholic ethic neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life and other human rights, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental obligation to respect the dignity of every human being as a child of God.

Catholic voters should use Catholic teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues and should consider candidates' integrity, philosophy, and performance. It is important for all citizens "to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self-interest" (USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life,* no. 33). The following themes of Catholic social teaching provide a moral framework for decisions in public life.[2]

The Right to Life and the Dignity of the Human Person

Human life is sacred. Direct attacks on innocent human beings are never morally acceptable. Within our society, life is under direct attack from abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, and destruction of human embryos for research. These intrinsic evils must always be opposed. This teaching also compels us as Catholics to oppose genocide, torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty, as well as to pursue peace and help overcome poverty, racism, and other conditions that demean human life.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, is the fundamental unit of society. This sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children must not be redefined, undermined, or neglected. Supporting families should be a priority for economic and social policies. How our society is organized—in economics and politics, in law and public policy—affects the well-being of individuals and of society. Every person and association has a right and a duty to participate in shaping society to promote the well-being of individuals and the common good.

Rights and Responsibilities

Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible. Each of us has a right to religious freedom, which enables us to live and act in accord with our God-given dignity, as well as a right to access to those things required for human decency—food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

While the common good embraces all, those who are in greatest need deserve preferential concern. A moral test for society is how we treat the weakest among us—the unborn, those dealing with disabilities or terminal illness, the poor and marginalized.

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Economic justice calls for decent work at fair, living wages, opportunities for legal status for immigrant workers, and the opportunity for all people to work together for the common good through their work, ownership, enterprise, investment, participation in unions, and other forms of economic activity.

Solidarity

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Our Catholic commitment to solidarity requires that we pursue justice, eliminate racism, end human trafficking, protect human rights, seek peace, and avoid the use of force except as a necessary last resort.

Caring for God's Creation

Care for the earth is a duty of our Catholic faith. We all are called to be careful stewards of God's creation and to ensure a safe and hospitable environment for vulnerable human beings now and in the future.

Conclusion

In light of Catholic teaching, as bishops we vigorously repeat our call for a renewed politics that focuses on moral principles, the defense of life, the needs of the weak, and the pursuit of the common good. This kind of political participation reflects the social teaching of our Church and the best traditions of our nation.

Notes

1 For more on the moral challenge of voting, see *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, nos. 34-39. Visit *www.faithfulcitizenship.org.*

2 These themes are drawn from a rich tradition more fully described in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). For more information on these seven themes, see *www.faithfulcitizenship.org*. For information on how we bishops of the United States have applied Catholic social teaching to policy issues, see *www.faithfulcitizenship.org*.

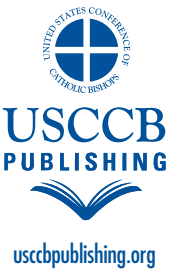
For a wide range of educational and other resources to help share Faithful Citizenship, go to *www.faithfulcitizenship.org*.

The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship was developed by the chairmen, in consultation with the membership, of the Committees on Domestic Policy, International Policy, Pro-Life Activities, Communications, Doctrine, Education, and Migration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was approved for publication by the full body of bishops at its November 2007 General Meeting and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Msgr. David J. Malloy, STD
General Secretary, USCCB

Excerpts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition, copyright © 2000, Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2007, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder.



To order, visit our Web site at *www.usccbpublishing.org* or call us at 800-235-8722. Para ordenar recursos en español, llame al 800-235-8722 y presione 4 para hablar con un representante del servicio al cliente en español.

Publication No. 7-027
USCCB Publishing
Washington, D.C.
ISBN 978-1-60137-027-3