



2021 Public Policy Positions

“We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. If indeed ‘the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics’, the Church ‘cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.’”

Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) #183, citing Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (2006) #28

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference is the public policy voice of Wisconsin’s Catholic bishops. The *2021 Public Policy Positions* reflects the seven themes of Catholic social teaching and their corresponding priorities as set forth by the U.S. bishops on their website, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching> and in their statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility* (<https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-title>). We urge Wisconsin’s citizens and lawmakers to implement these policies for the sake of the common good.

SEVEN THEMES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Since the time of the Apostles, the Catholic Church has sought to relate the Gospel to the conditions of each age. Jesus’s call to be good and faithful servants who serve the hungry and thirsty, who welcome the stranger, who clothe the naked and visit the ill and incarcerated (Matthew 25) – all these and more are the basis for Catholic social teaching. From the late nineteenth century to the present day, these teachings have been condensed into the following seven themes.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Family, Community, and Participation

Rights and Responsibilities

Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

Solidarity

Care for God’s Creation

LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, each person’s life and dignity must be respected from conception to natural death. People are more important than things, and the measure of every good society is whether it protects and respects the life and dignity of the human person, especially the most vulnerable.

Protect each and every human life. Wisconsin must effectively affirm, protect, and defend each and every human life, including the unborn. We must also oppose all attempts to legalize euthanasia, assisted suicide, and taxpayer funding for abortion.

Affirm the dignity of human life in medical and life science research. Each human life, regardless of the stage of development, must be protected and respected in scientific research. Wisconsin must reject research that requires the destruction of a human embryo or that clones a human embryo and bar it from receiving public money.

Support women facing unplanned pregnancies with real alternatives. In addition to adequate financial and medical support, women facing a crisis pregnancy need emotional and wrap-around services that can enable them to parent or place their child for adoption. Wisconsin must also provide high quality childcare and decent housing to women in need and make it possible for them to continue their education.

Stop domestic abuse and human trafficking. No human being should be abused or enslaved. Wisconsin must give all persons experiencing domestic abuse and human trafficking ready access to services that can assist them in resolving or escaping their situation.

Support the aging, those with disabilities, the chronically ill, and the terminally ill. Respect for all human life means assisting those with limitations. Wisconsin must ensure these individuals receive the necessary dignity, support, and services, including transportation and quality care.

Reject the death penalty. Pope Francis has stated that the death penalty “is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.” Wisconsin made a similar judgment when it abolished the death penalty in 1854. This policy has served us well and we must retain it.

FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND PARTICIPATION

The human person is not only sacred, but social. The God-given institutions of marriage – the lifelong commitment between a man and a woman – and family are central and serve as the foundations for social life. Marriage and family should be supported and strengthened, not undermined. Every person has a right to participate in social, economic, and political life, and a corresponding duty to work for the advancement of the common good and the well-being of all, especially the poor and weak.

Keep children safe. Public policies must promote the safety and well-being of our children. We must continue to advance the protection of children from all forms of abuse and neglect through programs such as the Catholic Church’s *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. Wisconsin must make every effort to eliminate child poverty.

Encourage and strengthen marriage. Lifelong marriage between one man and one woman is essential to the continuation of the human race, to the total development of the human person, and to the dignity, stability, peace, and prosperity of the family and society. Wisconsin must promote marriage and evaluate all public policies in light of their impact on marriage and families.

Respect and promote family relationships. Wisconsin must design and implement policies in the areas of taxation, employment, and welfare that foster family unity and reward personal responsibility. Whenever possible, parents must be given the option to care for their young children at home or place them in quality day care programs. Parents must also be allowed sufficient flexibility and leave from work to attend to their family’s needs, especially in times of illness and loss.

Support choice in education. Parents are the primary educators of their children and have the right to send their children to the school of their choice, whether public, private, religious, or independent. Social justice further demands that government resources be provided to poor families so that they may choose the educational path best suited to their child’s success. The state’s Special Needs Scholarship Program and parental choice programs deserve continued support. Wisconsin should also alter its tuition tax deduction to a tax credit that better serves families in need.

Strengthen support for education. Education is the surest path to full participation in the social, economic, and political life of our nation. Wisconsin must therefore sustain its public commitment to strong elementary and secondary schools. In particular, it must make greater efforts to ensure that all our children continue to advance in their education and achieve their highest academic potential.

Promote adoption and foster care. Wisconsin must maintain support for state-sponsored adoption awareness campaigns, adoption counseling, and tax credits for adoptive parents. Parents adopting or fostering children, especially those with special needs, must receive the necessary supports to help their families thrive.

Require parental consent for medical treatments. Parents have primary responsibility for ensuring the health, well-being, and education of their children. Wisconsin must not undermine parents by supporting programs that provide medical treatment, abortion, and artificial contraception to children without parental knowledge or consent.

Promote responsible sexuality. The most effective sex education in schools requires the participation of parents, not their replacement. Wisconsin school curricula must be developed with local parental involvement and must teach children why and how to avoid sexual activity.

Assist veterans, their families, and those affected by armed conflict. Wisconsin must ensure that veterans and their families receive proper support and care as they return to civilian life. Wisconsin must also assist refugees and others whose lives have been harmed by military conflict.

Support family farms. Family farms form the backbone of Wisconsin’s rural economy. State grants and loans must help existing family farmers maintain their operations and encourage the creation of new family farms.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Every person has a fundamental right to life – the right that makes all other rights possible. Each person also has a right to the conditions for living a decent life – food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression, and the protection of religious freedom. We also have a duty to secure and respect these rights not only for ourselves, but for others, and to fulfill our responsibilities to our families, to each other, and to the larger society.

Support equitable taxation and sound fiscal policies. Our political institutions are responsible for securing the social conditions that enable each of us to share our gifts and reap the benefits of life in community. Taxes, though unpopular, are essential if government is to fulfill this responsibility. Citizens have a moral obligation to pay those taxes. Justice also requires that the tax burden be distributed equitably and based on a person’s ability to pay. Fiscal policies must avoid excessive debt that burdens future generations.

Protect religious freedom and conscience. Freedoms of conscience and of religion are primary and inalienable rights of the human person. Insofar as they touch the innermost sphere of the spirit, one can even say that they are the source of all other liberties. Public policy must guard religious freedom by limiting government intrusion into religious matters, allowing for reasonable collaboration between public and religious entities, and protecting the rights of private employers and employees. People of religious faith should be free to witness their faith in places of worship, the marketplace, and the public square.

Support healthy lifestyles. Binge drinking, smoking, drug abuse, and unhealthy diets take a huge toll, not only on individuals, but also on society. Wisconsin must promote healthy and responsible choices and provide greater health support for those struggling with addiction and other destructive behaviors.

Wisconsin’s criminal justice system must reflect the principles of the WCC’s 1999 statement, *Public Safety, the Common Good and the Church*. Specifically, this means: 1) victims of crime, including the community at large, must have opportunities to be healed and restored; 2) policies, even those that enforce strict punishment, must serve the end of rehabilitation; 3) sentencing and inmate release policies must reflect restorative justice principles; and 4) corrections policies must make special efforts to reintegrate poor and marginalized offenders into society.

Support law enforcement personnel and all who help preserve public safety. Law enforcement personnel have a responsibility to be peacemakers and they deserve the public’s respect and support in carrying out duties that are often dangerous and unpleasant. Wisconsin must provide law enforcement with adequate resources to recruit, screen, and train the finest candidates and to carry out their duties safely and humanely. Wisconsin must also ensure that policing is transparent and accountable.

Promote racial justice and reconciliation. The Church teaches that “any theory or form whatsoever of racism and racial discrimination is morally unacceptable.” As racial prejudice and tensions persist in our communities, Wisconsin must take the lead in ensuring justice for all, an end to disproportionate incarceration, and improved access to quality education, employment, and housing. Lasting reconciliation cannot occur unless the root causes of racial bias are addressed.

PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

Scripture teaches that God has a special concern for the poor and vulnerable. The Church calls on all of us to embrace this preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, to embody it in our lives, and to work to have it shape public policies and priorities. A fundamental measure of our society is how we care for and stand with the poor and vulnerable.

Make affordable health care available to all. Health care is a basic human right. Small employers, farmers, and the working poor must be able to purchase affordable health benefits. Wisconsin must provide its uninsured and underinsured with access to quality health care.

Eliminate hunger. Food is a basic human right, yet thousands of Wisconsin residents go hungry every day. For children this is especially harmful, as malnutrition impairs cognitive and physical growth. Wisconsin must ensure that all residents have access to healthy and affordable food.

Increase funding for safe and affordable housing. Shelter is a basic human right. Wisconsin must ensure that all its residents have access to decent and affordable housing.

Prohibit predatory lending practices. In 2018, the average payday loan in Wisconsin had an annual percentage rate of 486 percent. Wisconsin must cap interest rates and do more to encourage alternatives to predatory lending.

Reform the juvenile justice system. State law treats 17-year-olds as adults in the criminal justice system and places them in adult jails and prisons if convicted. Recent research indicates that placing youth in adult institutions results in higher recidivism and more serious subsequent offenses. Wisconsin must return 17-year-olds to the juvenile justice system where they can receive developmentally appropriate treatment.

Strengthen public transportation. In urban areas, many residents need public transportation in order to obtain employment in the more prosperous suburbs. Rural communities also struggle with transportation needs. Wisconsin must ensure that its transportation infrastructure meets the needs of all its residents.

DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s act of creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers, owners, and others must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and choose to join a union, to economic initiative, and to ownership and private property. These rights must be exercised in ways that advance the common good.

Provide living wages. All employed persons supporting themselves and their families must be able to afford the basic essentials of food, clothing, shelter, and health care. Wisconsin's minimum wage laws and the Earned Income Tax Credit must be indexed to reflect changes in the cost of living.

Protect workers' rights. Workers have the right to choose whether to organize, join a union, and bargain collectively, and to exercise these rights without reprisal. Workers also have responsibilities -- to provide a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, to treat employers and co-workers with respect, and to carry out their work in ways that contribute to the common good. Workers and employers should not only advance their own interests, but also work together to advance economic justice and the well-being of all. Public and private employers must reasonably accommodate a pregnant employee so that she can retain her job and not endanger her health and life or that of her unborn child.

Remove barriers to employment. Social and economic policies should foster the creation of jobs with decent working conditions and just wages for all who can work. Wisconsin must help remove barriers to equal pay and employment for women and those facing unjust discrimination.

Foster employment opportunities for people with disabilities. All persons have the right to earn a living, to participate in the economy, and to contribute to the common good. Wisconsin must make every effort to assist persons with physical and mental impairments to find and retain employment.

SOLIDARITY

We are one human family. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions in a shrinking world. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Pope Paul VI taught that "if you want peace, work for justice." The Gospel calls us to be "peacemakers." Our love for all our sisters and brothers demands that we be "sentinels of peace" in a world wounded by violence and conflict.

Uphold human rights of immigrants and refugees. Federal immigration reform must be comprehensive and include a temporary worker program, a viable path to legalization, due process, and family unification. Laws aimed at enforcement must distinguish between dangerous criminals and non-violent persons whose only offense is lack of proper status. Federal and Wisconsin laws must also protect immigrants and refugees from all exploitation.

Participate justly in the global economy. Wisconsin's policies governing our participation in the global economy must respect the dignity of all people. Trade agreements with firms in other countries and investment policies must respect the human rights of workers and their families, and foster sound stewardship of the earth's natural resources.

CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION

The world that God created has been entrusted to us. Our use of it must be directed by God's plan for creation, not simply for our own benefit. Our stewardship of the Earth is a form of participation in God's act of creating and sustaining the world. In our use of creation, we must be guided by a concern for generations to come. We show our respect for the Creator by our care for creation.

Promote sustainable farming. Agriculture is not just another economic activity; it is vital to human existence. What is grown and how it is grown affects everyone's health and the future of humanity. Wisconsin must promote sustainable farming that provides fair prices so that farmers can make a decent living, raise animals ethically, and maintain sound management practices. For the sake of food security and healthy diets, Wisconsin should also promote the production and consumption of local foods.

Support clean land, air, and water. Environmental toxins, such as lead, PCBs, and endocrine-disrupting chemicals are especially a problem for children, born and unborn. Wisconsin must make additional efforts to reduce toxins from our ground and water supply, as well as reduce carbon emissions. Mining activity should reflect sound stewardship of natural resources and the environment.

Encourage conservation and sustainable energy. State policies must continue to promote the conservation of our natural resources and the development of alternative sources of energy. Wisconsin must promote the responsible development of wind and solar energy, along with biodiesel (in a manner that does not contribute to rising food costs).

The development of public policy is an ongoing process. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference will monitor and address new issues as they develop. The seven themes outlined in this document provide the guidance, focus, and foundation upon which the WCC will engage new issues.

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January 2021