

# **Voting with a Catholic Conscience**

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# “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”

- U.S. Bishops’ Statement on political responsibility issued every 4 years
- Highlights role of the Church in forming consciences and corresponding role of each person to act on this teaching
- Addresses four questions

# 1. Why does the Church teach about issues affecting public policy?

- We have an obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society because it is a basic part of the mission Jesus gave us.
  - “Christ’s love for us lets us see our human dignity in full clarity and compels us to love our neighbors as he has loved us.”
  - Deus Caritas Est*: “charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as social charity.”
- The obligation to teach about moral values that should shape our lives, including our public lives, is central to the mission given to the Church by Jesus Christ.
- The Catholic Church brings important assets to political dialogue: consistent moral framework and broad experience in serving those in need

## 2. Who in the Church Should Participate in Political Life?

EVERYONE!

- In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.
- Rooted in baptismal commitment to follow Jesus & bear Christian witness in all we do
- Catechism: all must participate according to position and role in promoting common good

# Clergy's Role

- Teach fundamental moral principles to help form correct consciences
- Provide guidance on moral dimensions of public decisions
- Encourage faithful to carry out their responsibilities in political life

# Laity's Role

## **Bringing Gospel values to public square**

- Running for office
- Working within political parties  
(transform parties not vice versa)
- Communicating concerns/ positions to elected officials (e.g. through diocesan advocacy networks)
- Guided by moral principles not attachment to political party or interest group

# 3. How Does the Church Help the Faithful Speak About Political and Social Questions?

## **A Well-Formed Conscience**

The Church equips her members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church.

# Conscience

IS NOT:

- Doing what we want
- A “feeling”

IS:

- “Voice of God resounding in the human heart revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil”

# Keys to Forming Conscience

- Willingness/Openness to seek the truth/what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and Church teaching
  - Examine the facts and background information about various choices
  - Prayerful reflection, examining conscience before the Cross essential to discern God's will
- Failing to form consciences leads to erroneous judgments

# The Virtue of Prudence

“Prudence enables us to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.”

--Catechism

Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively.

# Policy vs Principle

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.

## 4. What Does the Church Say About Catholic Social Teaching in the Public Square?

Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace...should [also] consider candidates' integrity, philosophy, and performance.

# 1. Right to Life/Dignity of Human Person

Human life is sacred. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Direct attacks on innocent persons are never morally acceptable, at any stage or in any condition. In our society, human life is especially under direct attack from abortion. Other direct threats to the sanctity of human life include euthanasia, human cloning, and the destruction of human embryos for research. Catholic teaching about the dignity of life calls us to oppose torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty; to prevent genocide and attacks against noncombatants; to oppose racism; and to overcome poverty and suffering.

## 2. Call to Family, Community and Participation

The human person is not only sacred but also social...The family—based on marriage between a man and a woman—is the first and fundamental unit of society and is a sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children. It should be defended and strengthened, not redefined or undermined by permitting same-sex unions or other distortions of marriage. Respect for the family should be reflected in every policy and program.

# 3. Rights and Responsibilities

Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access those things required for human decency—food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life...Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

## 4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst... including...unborn children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill, and victims of injustice and oppression.

# 5. Dignity of Work/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 creation.

Employers and employees have responsibilities

# 6. Solidarity

- We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be.
- Includes the Scriptural call to welcome the stranger among us...and to promote peace and pursue justice in a world marred by terrible violence and conflict.

# 7. Caring for God's Creation

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of God's creation. Care for the earth is a duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people.

# Living the Gospel of Life

Opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care.

Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas. Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life.

*But being 'right' in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community.

If we understand the human person as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" -- the living house of God -- then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. *All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house's foundation.* These directly and immediately violate the human person's most fundamental right -- the right to life. Neglect of these issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. Such attacks cannot help but lull the social conscience in ways ultimately destructive of other human rights.

# Resources

[www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)

Forming Consciences for Faithful  
Citizenship

[www.nebcathcon.org](http://www.nebcathcon.org)

Candidate Questionnaire