



IN THE VOTING BOOTH – A CATHOLIC GUIDE

Not all the so called “Catholic Guides to Voting” are acceptable because they do not give the *fullness* of the Catholic perspective as outlined by our Catholic bishop’s conference and because they tilt towards one party over another. The following guide produced by *Our Sunday Visitor* does faithfully represent the mind of our Catholic bishops. Next week I will share with you the Statement by the Florida Catholic Bishops and the Three Amendments which they favor. The *Our Sunday Visitor* leaflet opens with a statement by Pope Benedict.

Why should I vote? Voting: It is one of our most important responsibilities as citizens. Indeed, the Church teaches that there are three primary responsibilities of all citizens: To pay taxes, to defend their country, to vote (*Catechism #2240*).

Each of these responsibilities asks us to put the good of society and our fellow citizens above our immediate desires and needs. As Catholic voters, the question we must answer is not whether we are better off than four years ago, but whether the needs of the weakest and most defenseless among us are being addressed. In the voting booth, we have a privileged opportunity to contribute to our nation and promote the common good by bringing the values and teachings of our faith to bear on the issues facing our society.

So does the Church tell me whom I should vote for?

No, the Church does not tell us whom to vote for when we enter the voting booth. It does not endorse an official list of candidates or tell us which party Catholics should join.

Instead, Catholics are to use their judgment and follow their consciences as they apply the teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the core values of their faith to the choices they make in the voting booth.

As Catholics, we need to evaluate the issues and candidates in the light of our Catholic faith. Then, we are challenged to live our faith by getting actively involved—by voting and engaging in other civic activities.

How does my Catholic faith help me to make these choices? We are taught from an early age to form our consciences in the light of our Catholic teaching. “To follow one’s conscience” is often misunderstood as

something that allows us to do whatever we want, or as the “feeling” we have that something is right or wrong.

But our faith teaches us that “conscience is the 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” (from the U.S. bishops’ 2007 document, *Forming Citizens for Faithful Citizenship*, #17, hereafter referred to as *FC*).

It is our responsibility as Catholics to form our consciences.

- By studying Scripture and Church teaching
- By using our reason to study key issues in light of this teaching
- By prayerfully seeking to understand the will of God.

What about the separation of church and state? Can the Church ask me to vote according to my Catholic principles? Our nation’s founders sought to “separate church and state” in the sense of prohibiting the establishment of any particular denomination as the official religious body of the nation— not in the sense of forbidding religious organizations to address matters of grave importance to human welfare.

Building upon Scripture and the teachings of the popes and saints for centuries, our faith has clear principles for how best to achieve justice, peace, and human dignity for all men and women. Moreover, the Catholic moral tradition rests firmly on the natural law binding upon everyone, not just Catholics.

We are not single-issue voters

“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” (FC 42).

So what are the key principles that should be guiding us as we enter the voting booth? First, we are obliged as Catholics to “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” (FC 20). This states in the most positive terms what is asked of us as followers of Christ.

When we consider the issues in light of this obligation, our faith reminds us that, first and foremost,

we are not allowed to support “intrinsically evil” actions of any sort, such as the taking of innocent human life. This is why the Church so strongly opposes abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. In each case, the lives of the weak and the vulnerable are endangered, and there can be no good reason to allow the taking of these innocent lives, or to vote for legislation that would allow these evils to result.

Likewise, our Church opposes other actions that both violate human dignity and are destructive of life, such as the cloning of human beings or the destruction of human embryos, as in embryonic stem cell research.

It also condemns genocide, torture, and racism, for they too are severe violations of human rights and human dignity, as well as unjust discrimination or the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war.

The moral teaching of our Church is about more than prohibitions, however. We Catholics are encouraged to respond to the basic needs of human beings—food, shelter, health care, education, and employment. We are called to defend marriage, welcome the immigrant, and protect the environment. These are all goods to be sought as we go about the work of building a more peaceful and just world.

If all of these are priorities, what is most important?

All of these issues are important, but they are not all morally equivalent: “The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed” (FC 28).

Yet this does not mean other concerns, from war and the death penalty to racism and care for the poor and the immigrant, are not hugely important. “These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed” (FC 29).

But if we must keep all of these principles in mind, is there going to be anyone who we can vote for?

Unfortunately, in our polarized society, we are often forced to choose between two inadequate and flawed political agendas. It can be quite difficult to find candidates who agree with our faith on all of the key moral issues.

This is why the *virtue of prudence* is necessary when approaching the voting booth. This virtue can help us deliberate over the choices before us—to determine, in light of Church teaching and our correctly formed consciences, who is most deserving of our support. In other words, in a world of imperfect choices, we must strive to make the best choice possible.

In a world of prudential judgments, it is quite possible that well-formed and educated Catholics may differ on what is the best choice to make in the voting booth. But we are called to draw upon the teachings of

our faith in coming to our decisions, not party loyalty, self-interest, or political slogans.

Where Catholics must be in agreement is that fundamental moral obligation we share: To “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” (FC 20).

If no single party or candidate in a given election conforms to our key Catholic principles, what are we to do? It is clear that one absolutely may not 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*” (FC 34, emphasis added). But neither can one use a candidate’s opposition to such evils “to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life or dignity” (FC 34).

There may be times when a voter selects a candidate who holds an unacceptable position, but this can be done only for “truly grace moral reasons,” not just for partisan or personal interests. It may involve the prudential judgment that one candidate seems likely to do less harm or is more likely to pursue other positive priorities.

If, for a grave reason, we do vote for a candidate who holds positions contrary to fundamental moral goods, we have a duty to make our opposition to those positions heard. Writing letters, speaking up at forums, and participating in local party political activities are ways to steadfastly assert our Catholic values.

There may even be occasions when some Catholic voters feel that they must take “the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate” (FC 36). This, too, is a serious decision that must be guided by one’s conscience and the moral teaching of our faith.

The Church challenges us to vote what is best for society and all of its members, particularly those least able to speak up for or defend themselves. The great privilege of democracy is that we can have a voice in the direction of our country by voting for the common good. The great privilege of being Catholic is that we have a body of teaching, going back to Christ himself, which can help us make the right decisions in the voting booth.

Where can I find out more?

Our bishops have issued a detailed reflection on Catholic teaching and political life, called *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*: www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

Four steps to take before you enter the booth.

1. Inform yourself about the Church's teachings. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a great place to start. Consider gathering a small group to discuss them in relation to the candidates.

2. Inform yourself about the issues. Read the Catholic press and listen to the candidates. See where the candidates stand on critical moral and social issues.

3. Seek input from Catholics you respect.

4. Pray. Take your concerns, worries, and confusion to the Lord and ask for His guidance.

Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

The following is a summary of Catholic Social Teaching published by the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and Episcopal documents. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents. In these brief reflections, we highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person. The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and euthanasia. Human life is threatened by cloning, embryonic stem cell research, and the use of the death penalty. The intentional targeting of civilians in war or terrorist attacks is always wrong. Catholic teaching calls on us to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation. The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. Marriage and family are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in

society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Rights and Responsibilities. The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. 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. A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

The 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 creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

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. 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 promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict.

Care for God's Creation. We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

Have a blessed week,

