



Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 25, 2016 C

- **Forming our conscience before going into the voting booth**
- **Guidance from US bishops**

Prior to the Presidential Elections, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) published a booklet called *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship—a Call to Political Responsibility*. The purpose of the booklet is to help Catholics make an informed conscience decision. To vote without prayerfully considering the issues would be morally wrong. The booklet has three parts:

Part 1: Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: The US Bishops' Reflection on Catholic Teaching and Political Life

Part 2: Applying Catholic Teaching to Major Issues: A Summary of Policy Positions of US Conference of Bishops

Part 3: Goals for Political Life; Challenges for Citizens, Candidates, and Public Officials

The booklet is 42 pages long and can be found on the internet:

uscbb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship.

The following are some excerpts from Part 1. I am aware that the excerpts I have chosen may not be the same that another person would have chosen. I have done my best to be as fair as I can to the views expressed in the whole document. Prayerful meditation on the following, or better still on the whole document, will, I believe, help us to make a good conscience decision on November 8.

Political realities present us with opportunities and challenges

The political realities of our nation present us with opportunities and challenges. We are a nation founded on "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but the right to life itself is not fully protected, especially for unborn children, the terminally ill, and the elderly—the most vulnerable members of the American family. We are called to be peacemakers in a nation at war. We are a country pledged to pursue "liberty and justice for all," but we are too often divided across lines of race, ethnicity, and economic inequality. We are a nation of immigrants, struggling to address the challenges of many new immigrants in our midst. We are a society built on the

strength of our families, called to defend marriage and offer moral and economic support for family life. We are a powerful nation in a violent world, confronting terror and trying to build a safer, more just, more peaceful world. We are an affluent society where too many live in poverty and lack health care and other necessities of life. We are part of a global community charged with being good stewards of the earth's environment, what Pope Francis calls "our common home," which is being threatened. These challenges are at the heart of public life and at the center of the pursuit of the common good. They are intertwined and inseparable. As Pope Francis has insisted, "We are faced ... with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (Laudato Si', no. 139). (Paragraph 2)

Why does the Church teach about issues affecting public policy?

The Church's teachings concerning contingent situations are subject to new and further developments and can be open to discussion, yet we cannot help but be concrete—without presuming to enter into details—lest the great social principles remain mere generalities which challenge no one.... The Church's pastors, taking into account the contributions of the different sciences, have the right to offer opinions in all that affects people's lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being. (Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, no. 182)

Unfortunately, politics in our country often can be a contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites, and media hype.

The Church calls for a different kind of political engagement: one shaped by the moral convictions of well-formed consciences and focused on the dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good, and the protection of the weak and the vulnerable. As Pope Francis reminds us, "Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.... I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor!" (Evangelii Gaudium, no. 205). (Paragraph 14)

A well-formed conscience

The Church equips its 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 something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere “feeling” about what we should or should not do. Rather, 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. Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith. (Paragraph 17)

Good end does not justify an immoral means

Church’s teaching is clear that a good end does not justify an immoral means. As we all seek to advance the common good—by defending the inviolable sanctity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death, by promoting religious freedom, by defending marriage, by feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, by welcoming the immigrant and protecting the environment—it is important to recognize that not all possible courses of action are morally acceptable. We have a responsibility to discern carefully which public policies are morally sound. 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. (Paragraph 20)

Two temptations

Two temptations in public life can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity:

The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. 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.

The second temptation is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity. The current and projected extent of environmental degradation has become a moral crisis especially because it poses a risk to humanity in the future and threatens the lives of poor and vulnerable human persons here and now. Racism and the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care, pornography, redefining civil marriage, compromising religious liberty, or an unjust

immigration policy are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act. These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed. Catholics are urged to seriously consider Church teaching on these issues. Although choices about how best to respond to these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters for principled debate and decision, this does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues. Clearly not every Catholic can be actively involved on each of these concerns, but we need to support one another as our community of faith defends human life and dignity wherever it is threatened. We are not factions, but one family of faith fulfilling the mission of Jesus Christ. (Paragraphs 27, 28, 29)

Making moral choices

Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods. A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, 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.

There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably 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.

When all candidates hold a position that promotes an intrinsically evil act, 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.

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 policies promoting intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. (Paragraphs 34, 35, 36, 37)

Catholic politicians and legislators must recognize their grave responsibility in society to support laws shaped by these fundamental human values and oppose laws and policies that violate life and dignity at any stage from conception to natural death. This is not to bring a “Catholic interest” to the political sphere, it is to insist that the truth of the dignity of the human person, as discovered by reason and confirmed by revelation, be at the forefront of all political considerations. (Paragraph 39)

What does the Church say about Catholic social teaching in the public square? Four principles of Catholic social teaching

Principle One: The dignity of the 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, which some political actors mischaracterize as an issue of “women’s health.” Other direct threats to the sanctity of human life include euthanasia and assisted suicide (sometimes falsely labeled as “death with dignity”), human cloning, in vitro fertilization, and the destruction of human embryos for research.*

Principle Two: Subsidiarity

*The human person is not only sacred but also social. Full human development takes place in relationship with others. 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, undermined, or further distorted. Respect for the family should be reflected in every policy and program. It is important to uphold parents’ rights and responsibilities to care for their children, including the right to choose their children’s education.*

The principle of subsidiarity reminds us that larger institutions in society should not overwhelm or interfere with smaller or local institutions, yet larger institutions have essential responsibilities when the more local institutions cannot adequately protect human dignity, meet human needs, and advance the common good (Centesimus Annus, no. 48; Dignitatis Humanae, nos. 4-6). (Paragraphs 46, 48)

Principle Three: The common good

*Human dignity is respected and the common good is fostered only if **human rights are protected and basic responsibilities** are met. 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. The right to exercise religious freedom publicly and privately by individuals and institutions along with freedom of conscience need to be constantly defended. In a fundamental way, the right to free expression of religious beliefs protects all other rights. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. Rights should be understood and exercised in a moral framework rooted in the dignity of the human person. (Paragraph 49)

Principle Four: 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 and requires us to eradicate racism and address the extreme poverty and disease plaguing so much of the world. **Solidarity** also includes the scriptural call to welcome the stranger among us—including immigrants seeking work—by ensuring that they have opportunities for a safe home, education for their children, and a decent life for their families and by ending the practice of separating families through deportation. (Paragraph 52)*

Conclusion

Building a world of respect for human life and dignity, where justice and peace prevail, requires more than just political commitment. Individuals, families, businesses, community organizations, and governments all have a role to play. Participation in political life in light of fundamental moral principles is an essential duty for every Catholic and all people of good will.

The Church is involved in the political process but is not partisan. The Church cannot champion any candidate or party. Our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable. (Paragraphs 57, 58)

Next week—or it may be two weeks from now—we will share more excerpts from Part 2 & 3 of the Bishops’ document. Next week is Respect Life Sunday in our Church.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Sean