

FORMING A GOOD CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE FOR VOTING

ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK

OFFICE OF PUBLIC POLICY

This information is offered to the people of the Archdiocese of New York, to help them in forming a good Catholic conscience in order to vote. It is not intended to express or imply endorsement or opposition to any candidate or party, but is a guide to those who wish to make good moral decisions in the voting booth. The principal source is the document issued by the United States Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2015).

WHAT IS CONSCIENCE AND HOW DO WE FORM IT PROPERLY?

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." (*Faithful Citizenship* 17)

"The formation of conscience includes several elements. There is a desire to embrace goodness and truth. For Catholics this begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In addition, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. Catholics must also understand that if they fail to form their consciences they can make erroneous judgments." (*Faithful Citizenship* 18)

"A well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals." (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Participation of Catholics in Political Life* 4)

"The fact that much of our political rhetoric has become very negative and that political polarization seems to have grown should not dissuade us from the high calling to work for a world that allows everyone to thrive, a world in which all persons, all families, have what they need to fulfill their God-given destiny... While people of good will may sometimes choose different ways to apply and act on some of our principles, Catholics cannot ignore their inescapable moral challenges or simply dismiss the Church's guidance or policy directions that flow from these principles." (*Faithful Citizenship* 63)

WHAT PRINCIPLES DOES THE CHURCH WANT ME TO FOLLOW IN FORMING MY CONSCIENCE FOR VOTING?

The Bishops of the United States have outlined four principles from that are relevant to forming conscience for voting (*Faithful Citizenship* 43-56):

- **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". (44) These attacks include abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, cloning, in vitro fertilization, and the destruction of human embryos for research.
- **Subsidiarity** - "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." (46)
- **The Common Good** - "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." (49) The common good also requires that the economy serve people, and that we care for God's creation. (50-51)
- **Solidarity** - "We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences... 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... [A] special emphasis must be given to the Church's preferential option for the poor." (52, 54)

WHAT ISSUE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT?

While our Bishops have offered moral guidance for Catholics on many topics, they have been clear that one issue is the most important: "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." (*Faithful Citizenship* 28)

"The inalienable right to life of every innocent human person outweighs other concerns where Catholics may use prudential judgment, such as how best to meet the needs of the poor or to increase access to health care for all." (New York State Bishops, *Our Cherished Right, Our Solemn Duty*)

"... direct threats to the sanctity and dignity of human life, such as human cloning and destructive research on human embryos, are also intrinsically evil. These must always be opposed. Other direct assaults on innocent human life and violations of human dignity, such as genocide, torture, racism, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, can never be justified." (*Faithful Citizenship* 22-23)

"Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care... [But] 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." (United States Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life* 23)

HOW DO WE CHOOSE A CANDIDATE TO VOTE FOR?

"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. These decisions should take into account a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching." (*Faithful Citizenship* 37)

"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". (*Faithful Citizenship* 41)

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. (*Faithful Citizenship* 34)

"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 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." (*Faithful Citizenship* 42)

"There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may 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." (*Faithful Citizenship* 35)

"When all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, 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." (*Faithful Citizenship* 36)

FINAL WORDS

Our decisions about voting should be informed by prayer, seeking to understand God's will for ourselves and our country. "It is important to be clear that the political choices faced by citizens not only have an impact on general peace and prosperity but also may affect the individual's salvation. Similarly, the kinds of laws and policies supported by public officials affect their spiritual well-being." (*Faithful Citizenship* 38)

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

For more information on voting and elections, see our website: <http://www.archny.org/voting-responsibly>