

FORMING A GOOD CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE FOR VOTING

FAMILY LIFE/RESPECT LIFE OFFICE

ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK

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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*" (2007).

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; see also *Catechism* 1786 ff)

"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)

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

The essential principle of making good moral decisions is "to do what is good and to avoid evil" (*Catechism* 1976). Also, "some rules apply in every case: One may never do evil so that good may result from it; the Golden Rule: 'Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.'" (*Catechism* 1789).

FIND ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS

- What is conscience and how do you properly form it?
- What principles does the Church believe on issues of social teaching such as marriage, the dignity of the human person, religious freedom, and rights of individuals?
- What issues are the most important?
- How do you decide on which candidate to vote for?

The Bishops of the United States have outlined principles from the social teaching of the Church that are relevant to forming conscience for voting (Faithful Citizenship 40-56):

- The Right to Life and the Dignity of the Human Person -- Human life is sacred; direct attacks on innocent human beings must be opposed.
- Call to Family, Community and Participation -- The family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, is the fundamental unit of society, and must not be re-defined.
- Rights and Responsibilities -- Every person has the right to life, to religious freedom, and to those things required for decent living (housing, education, etc.); we also have duties to each other and to society.
- Option for the Poor and Vulnerable -- While the common good embraces all, those who are in greatest need, the poor and vulnerable, deserve preferential concern.
- Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers -- The economy must serve people.
- Solidarity -- There is one human family, despite national, economic and ideological differences.
- Caring for God's Creation -- We all are called to be careful stewards of God's creation.

WHAT ISSUES ARE 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 right 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*)

"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... 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)

"... 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, quoting *Living the Gospel of Life* 5)

Those who knowingly, willingly, and directly support public policies or legislation that undermine fundamental moral principles cooperate with evil." (*Faithful Citizenship* 38)

HOW DO WE DECIDE WHICH CANDIDATE TO VOTE FOR?

"Decisions about political life are complex and require the exercise of a well-formed conscience aided by prudence. This exercise of conscience begins with outright opposition to laws and other policies that violate human life or weaken its protection." (*Faithful Citizenship* 31)

"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 Summary*, quoting *Living the Gospel of Life* 33)

"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)

"A Catholic cannot 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. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil." (*Faithful Citizenship* 34)

"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

"The real purpose of civil law is to guarantee an ordered social coexistence in true justice, so that all may "lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way" (1 Tim 2:2). Civil law must ensure that all members of society enjoy respect for certain fundamental rights which innately belong to the person. First and fundamental among these is the inviolable right to life of every innocent human being." (Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* 71)

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

For more information, including links to all the documents cited above, see the Family Life/Respect Life Office website: www.flrl.org/Voter_Education.htm.