

# Catholics Vote: ‘Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship’

A message from Bishop David M. O’Connell, C.M.

Sept. 18, 2020

Baptized Catholic citizens of the United States of America have a “dual citizenship,” one within the nation and one within the Catholic Church. Although distinct, they exist jointly in each baptized American Catholic citizen.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops reminds American Catholics that, as citizens of this country, we vote and, as Catholic American citizens, we vote conscientiously because we are people of faith.

*The Church’s obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith (USCCB, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States,” 2020, no. 9).*

*In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue and participation is a moral obligation ... rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do (ibid., no. 13).*

Earlier this year, Pope Francis spoke to a gathering of American bishops in Rome and advised them:

*Teach your people discernment by you stepping back from the “sheer politics” of it. If you try to step back and say “but here are the major moral issues that we face,” that is what is most important (Pope Francis to USCCB Region X, **Ad Limina**, Jan. 20, 2020).*

That advice is certainly consistent with the Catholic Church’s Code of Canon Law and with Church practice in the United States. Bishops and ordained clergy clearly have a right to their own personal opinions in political matters and a right to express them. They should not preach their *opinions* from the pulpit, however, or any other *official* forum and should refrain from taking an active part in political parties which includes the public endorsement of particular candidates for political office.

So, what is the role of the ordained clergy as election time rolls around?

*... bishops (and ordained clergy) do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election (USCCB, “Forming Consciences . . .,” 2020, no.7).*

Bishops and ordained clergy as their collaborators participate in the three-fold mission of the Catholic Church “to teach, to govern and to sanctify” the People of God. Insofar as political

matters or issues concern aspects of faith, morals and the common good, bishops and ordained clergy have a proper responsibility to exercise their teaching office in their regard both in the Church and “in the public square.” That is not the same as participating in political activity or endorsing particular candidates for political office “in the name of the Church.”

Since, as noted above, American Catholic citizens --- bishops, ordained clergy and lay faithful --- are called to “vote conscientiously because we are people of faith,” and since bishops and ordained clergy participate in the Church’s teaching mission, it is their proper role to help Catholics develop their consciences and understand what the Church teaches in matters of faith, morals and the common good so that they can make decisions consistent with their Catholic faith.

*Clergy and lay people have complementary roles in public life. We bishops have the primary responsibility to hand on the Church's moral and social teaching. Together with priests and deacons, assisted by religious and lay leaders of the Church, we are to teach fundamental moral principles that help Catholics form their consciences correctly, to provide guidance on the moral dimensions of public decisions, and to encourage the faithful to carry out their responsibilities in political life. In fulfilling these responsibilities, the Church's leaders avoid endorsing or opposing candidates. As Pope Benedict XVI stated in **Deus Caritas Est** (no. 28):*

*“The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.*

*“The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the **political** battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice” (no. 15).*

Our consciences do not simply **appear** when we are born. They need to develop, grow, mature and be **formed** as an individual goes through life. For the Catholic, such formation is a lifelong process and the Church’s official teachers play a critical part in that process. It takes time, learning, prayer, experience and conversation so that Catholics can make well-reasoned judgments about real-life situations and be prepared to make good decisions with well-formed consciences when opportunities present themselves.

For Catholics, such preparation begins with a desire to know the truth about what is right and wrong. “Do good and avoid evil” is a fundamental human moral principle that should undergird decisions and actions for all human beings and not only Catholics. Combined with the revelation of Sacred Scripture and authoritative Catholic teaching, Catholics specifically form their consciences so that, while examining facts and information in life’s situations as they confront them, they can then prayerfully discern the will of God “in the public square.”

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offers guidance to American Catholics --- again, including all the baptized (ordained clergy as well as the lay faithful) --- in its document

“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States” (“FCFC”), which is updated and published regularly before every national election. It is a “voters’ guide” only in the sense of presenting rational human and doctrinal principles inherent in Catholic moral and social teaching while not in any way endorsing political parties, political platforms or agendas, or particular candidates for political office.

While there are many human moral issues before us and that surface especially in every election cycle, it is important to note that not every moral issue is of equal significance. Using “FCFC” as source material, here are some of the most important moral issues that the Church believes and teaches and that, in accordance with a good and well-formed conscience, every Catholic should seriously consider and take into account in decisions they make:

- 1. Issues that directly affect human life.** Every human life is sacred, from conception to natural death. That has been and remains firm Catholic teaching based upon sound human reasoning and is, therefore, our most basic principle as Catholics. “FCFC” asserts that “The threat of abortion remains our **preeminent priority** because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed. At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty. Our efforts to protect the unborn remain as important as ever, for just as the Supreme Court may allow greater latitude for state laws restricting abortion, state legislators have passed statutes not only keeping abortion legal through all nine months of pregnancy but opening the door to infanticide. Additionally, abortion contaminates many other important issues by being inserted into legislation regarding euthanasia and assisted suicide, embryonic stem-cell research, immigration, care for the poor, and health care reform (*Introductory Letter*). The Catholic Church teaches that all these practices have profound moral consequences.
- 2. Religious liberty.** The United States Constitution protects religious liberty in its First Amendment. It includes not only our freedom to worship but also our freedom to believe in and practice our faith as Americans ... or not to believe! The Church teaches that every effort should be made to preserve and support religious liberty. Individuals and communities of faith should not be subject to religious persecution.
- 3. Traditional marriage and family life.** There has been and continues to be a growing movement in our country to “redefine marriage.” The Church teaches that the faithful union of one man and one woman is the foundation of the family and, as an essential core element of a flourishing society and Church, traditional marriage and family life must be protected and preserved.
- 4. The disparity between rich and poor.** Most of the world’s resources are in the hands of a small percentage of its people. Federal budgets have moral implications and should prioritize the poorest and most vulnerable among us. Unemployment, homelessness and

inadequate housing are evident throughout our nation, especially in major population centers, and need to be confronted and addressed to ensure economic justice for all.

5. **Immigration reform.** Undocumented persons in the United States deserve respect and human compassion. There has been and remains an ongoing immigration problem in our country that requires a humane solution by our elected government leaders.
6. **Racism and inequality.** The Declaration of Independence affirms that “all men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The Church opposes “all oppression and all injustice.” The elimination of racism, bigotry, discrimination and inequality is a goal to be achieved in our lifetimes.
7. **Violence, hatred and crime.** Society has a duty to protect and defend its members against violence, hatred and crime. “Violence cannot be overcome by violence. Violence is overcome by peace! By peace, by working with dignity to help your homeland move forward (Pope Francis, “Remarks” at Phoenix Center, Bethlehem, May 26, 2014).”
8. **Protection of the Environment.** Pope Francis has declared stewardship of the earth, our “common home,” a contemporary moral imperative. “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last 200 years. We are not God. The earth was here before us and was given to us. The idea of unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology ... is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods and leads to the planets being squeezed dry at every limit. Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good and making a new start (Pope Francis, encyclical “*Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*,” 2015, no. 53).” Progress in protecting the environment lies in our hands but especially in the hands of those who govern us.

The preceding headings do not represent an exhaustive list of moral issues of major concern to the Catholic Church in our country, clergy and lay faithful alike. War and peace, international relations, educational choice, health care reform, use of print, broadcast and electronic media and a host of other moral and social concerns warrant our attention as Catholics. Careful study, civil dialogue and prayerful reflection should accompany our decision making as we consider our support for political parties and candidates for political office.

As American Catholics, we look to the Church and its official teachers for clear, careful and consistent presentation and application of **principles** that undergird, support and protect our Catholic moral and social teachings so that the common good, truth, justice and peace are enhanced, preserved and advanced in American society. We should not expect bishops, ordained clergy or other Church leaders to tell us for whom or against whom to vote.

May God in whom we trust bless the United States of America, and may we, as Catholics, form our consciences for the exercise of faithful citizenship!

**FOR FURTHER REFERENCE AND STUDY:**

*United States Conference for Catholic Bishops, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States," USCCB: Washington, 2020 (digital: usccb.org).*

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church, second edition, **Libreria Editrice Vaticana**, USCCB: Washington, 2016 (digital: usccb.org).*

*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, **Libreria Editrice Vaticana**, USCCB: Washington, 2005 (digital: vatican.va).*

*Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, **Libreria Editrice Vaticana**, 2004 (digital: vatican.va).*

*National Catholic Bioethics Center, Handbook on Critical Life Issues, third edition, National Catholic Bioethics Center: Philadelphia, 2010.*