

Faithful Citizenship Study Guide
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Cornell Catholic Community

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Magisterium

Vatican II

“Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city. ... Since they have an active role to play in the whole life of the Church, laymen are not only bound to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit, but are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society.”

Gaudium et Spes, no. 43.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

“Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right.”

CCC, no. 1778.

“Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; ‘the prudent man looks where he is going.’ ‘Keep sane and sober for your prayers.’ Prudence is ‘right reason in action,’ writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle. It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues); it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid.”

CCC, no. 1806.

USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (1995) [FCFC]

“We [U.S.] bishops 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.”

FCFC, no. 7.

“13. In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. ‘People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 220). The obligation to participate in political life is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, ‘It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life’ (nos. 1913-1915).

14. 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). The Catholic call to faithful citizenship affirms the importance of political participation and insists that public service is a worthy vocation. As citizens, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help transform the party to which we belong; we should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths or approve intrinsically evil acts. We are called to bring together our principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a civilization of truth and love.”

FCFC, nos. 13-14.

“The formation of conscience includes several elements. First, 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. It is also important to examine the facts and background information about various choices. Finally, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. Catholics must also understand that if they fail to form their consciences in the light of the truths of the faith and the moral teachings of the Church they can make erroneous judgments.”

FCFC, no. 18.

Major Issues in U.S. Political Life
(Synopsis of USCCB document *FCFC*, Part II.)

1. Human Life

- a. The following are “always wrong” (no. 63):
 - i. **Abortion**
 - ii. **Euthanasia**
 - iii. **Human cloning**
 - iv. **Destruction of human embryos**
 - v. **Assisted suicide**
 - vi. **Genocide**
 - vii. **Torture**
 - viii. **Direct and intention targeting of noncombatants in war**
 - ix. **Terrorism**
- b. “Laws that legitimize any of these practices are profoundly unjust and immoral.” (no. 64)
- c. “Policies and decisions regarding **biotechnology** and human experimentation should respect the inherent dignity of human life from its very beginning, regardless of the circumstances of its origin.” (no. 66).
- d. “Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good. Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption. Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that ‘**the death penalty is inadmissible** because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person’, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.” (CCC, no. 2267 [revised; cf. CDF, Letter to the Bishops, 1 August 2018])

2. Promoting Peace

- a. “Catholics must also work to **avoid war** and to **promote peace**.” (no. 68)
- b. “The use of **torture must be rejected** as fundamentally incompatible with the dignity of the human person.” (no. 68)
- c. “The Church has raised **fundamental moral concerns about preventive use of military force**.” (no. 68)
- d. “Even when military force can be justified as a last resort, it should not be indiscriminate or disproportionate.” (no. 69)
 - i. “Direct and intentional attacks on **noncombatants** in war and terrorist acts are never morally acceptable.”
 - ii. “The use of **weapons of mass destruction**[,] or other means of warfare that do not distinguish between civilians and soldiers[,], is fundamentally immoral.”

- iii. “The United States has a responsibility to work to reverse the spread of **nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons**, and to reduce its own reliance on weapons of mass destruction by pursuing **progressive nuclear disarmament**. It also must end its use of **anti-personnel landmines** and reduce its predominant role in the **global arms trade**.”
- 3. **Marriage and Family Life**
 - a. “The family founded upon **marriage** is the **basic cell of human society**.” (no. 70)
 - b. “‘The **reciprocity between male and female** is an expression of the beauty of nature willed by the Creator’ (Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, 19 January 2013).” (no. 70)
 - c. “This affirmation in no way compromises the Church’s opposition to unjust discrimination[.]” (no. 70)
 - d. “Wages should allow workers to support their families, and public assistance should be available to help poor families to live in dignity.” (no. 70)
 - e. “**Children**, in particular, are to be valued, protected, and nurtured.” (no. 71)
- 4. **Religious Freedom** (no. 72)
- 5. **Preferential Option for the Poor and Economic Justice**
 - a. “Social and economic policies should foster the **creation of jobs** for all who can work with decent working conditions and **just wages**.” (no. 73)
 - b. “Catholic social teaching supports the right of workers to choose whether to organize, join a **union**, and bargain collectively, and to exercise these rights without reprisal.” (no. 73)
 - c. “**Welfare policy** should reduce poverty and dependency, strengthen family life, and help families leave poverty through work, training, and assistance with child care, health care, housing, and transportation.” (no. 75)
 - d. “Improving the **Earned Income Tax Credit** and **child tax credits**, available as refunds to families in greatest need, will help lift low-income families out of poverty.” (no. 75)
 - e. “**Social Security** should provide adequate, continuing, and reliable income in an equitable manner for low- and average-wage workers and their families when these workers retire or become disabled, and for the survivors when a wage-earner dies.” (no. 77)
 - f. “A first priority for agriculture policy should be **food security for all**. Because no one should face **hunger** in a land of plenty, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (**SNAP** or **Food Stamps**), the Special Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (**WIC**), and other nutrition programs need to be strong and effective.” (no. 79)
 - g. “Careful stewardship of the earth and its natural resources demands policies that support **sustainable agriculture** as vital elements of agricultural policy.” (no. 79)
- 6. **Health Care** (no. 80)
 - a. “Affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right.”
 - b. “The nation’s health care system needs to ... meet the needs of the poor and uninsured, especially born and unborn children, pregnant women, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations.”
 - c. “The USCCB supports measures to strengthen Medicare and Medicaid.”

- d. “Our conference also advocates effective, compassionate care that reflects Catholic moral values for those suffering from HIV/AIDS and those coping with addictions.”
7. **Migration**
- a. The Gospel mandate to ‘welcome the stranger’ **requires Catholics to care for and stand with newcomers**, authorized and unauthorized, including unaccompanied immigrant children, refugees and asylum-seekers, those unnecessarily detained, and victims of human trafficking.” (no. 81)
8. **Catholic Education**
- a. “Parents—the first and most important educators—have a fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children.” (no. 82)
 - b. “All persons have a right to receive a quality education.” (no. 83)
9. **Promoting Justice and Countering Violence**
- a. Combat “a growing ‘culture of violence’” by: (no. 84)
 - i. **“Promoting moral responsibility”**
 - ii. **“Responding to violent crime”**
 - iii. **“Curbing violence in media”**
 - iv. **“Supporting reasonable restrictions on access to assault weapons and handguns”**
 - v. **“Opposing the use of the death penalty”**
 - b. “An ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration should be a foundation for the reform of our broken **criminal justice system.**” (no. 84)
10. **Combatting Unjust Discrimination**
- a. “Discrimination, whether based on race, religion, sex, ethnicity, disabling condition, or age, ... are grave injustices and affronts to human dignity.” (no. 85)
11. **Care for Our Common Home**
- a. “Care for Creation is a moral issue.” (no. 86)
 - b. We must “seriously address **global climate change**, focusing on the virtue of prudence, pursuit of the common good, and the impact on the poor, particularly on vulnerable workers and the poorest nations.” (no. 86)
 - c. The U. S. should lead in “contributing to the sustainable **development of poorer nations.**” (no. 86)
12. **Communications, Media, and Culture**
- a. “[R]esponsible regulation is needed that respects freedom of speech yet also addresses policies that have lowered standards [and] permitted increasingly offensive material....” (no. 87)
 - b. “Regulation should limit concentration of media control, resist management that is primarily focused on profit, and encourage a variety of program sources, including religious programming.” (no. 88)
 - c. “Because access to **pornographic and violent material** is becoming easier, vigorous enforcement of obscenity and child pornography laws is necessary.” (no. 89)
13. **Global Solidarity**
- a. “Solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.” (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38)

- b. To address the “**scandal of poverty and underdevelopment,**” we must (*FCFC*, no. 90):
- i. “**Humanize globalization**”
 - ii. “**Alleviate global poverty**”
 - iii. Promote “**basic human rights**”
 - iv. “**Promote religious liberty** [globally]”
 - v. “Promote and defend the rights of **religious minorities**”
 - vi. “Provide political and financial support for beneficial **United Nations** programs and reforms, for other **international bodies**, and for **international law.**”
 - vii. “**Asylum should be afforded to refugees.**”
 - viii. Lead comprehensive negotiations on the **Israel-Palestinian conflict** and other **regional conflicts**

Moral Decision-Making Principles

Every Catholic has the duty and the freedom to direct their engagement in civic life, including deciding how to vote (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43). Each Catholic, therefore, has a **moral duty to form his or her conscience** in light of the Gospel. This is accomplished through prayer, the practice of the faith by participation in the life of the Church, and adherence to and application of the Church's authoritative moral teachings (*CCC*, nos. 1783-1785).

Voting for a candidate or party entails voting for a policy platform that encompasses a broad range of issues. A candidate's or party's platform is seldom, if ever, uniformly bad and immoral or uniformly good and moral (cf. *FCFC*, Part II). Therefore, a Catholic voter is ordinarily faced with a moral dilemma in deciding how to cast his or her vote.

A **moral dilemma** is defined as a practical choice in which:

- Either doing what is morally right results in a bad outcome (good means, bad ends)
- Or doing what is morally wrong results in a good, or at least better outcome (bad means, good ends).

Preliminary conditions for moral decision-making:

- Charity (= love, willing the good of another) and the intention to further the **common good** by promoting life, truth, peace, and justice over and above one's individual interests
- Factual knowledge of the issues
- Faithful understanding of Church teaching and its applicability to the issues

Yet even assuming perfect virtue and goodwill, knowledge of the issues, and a well-formed conscience, the moral dilemma often remains. So how is a faithful Catholic to decide?

1. **Promote the good and oppose evil.** We have a responsibility to do *both*, not just one.
2. **The Golden Rule.** "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Mt 7:12)
3. **Avoid scandal.** "It is not good ... to do anything that causes your brother to stumble," (Rom 14:21) even if it is licit in itself (cf. 1 Cor 8:12; *CCC* no. 1789).
4. **The ends can never justify the means.** It is never permissible to act in a way that is *intrinsically* immoral, even for the purpose of obtain good outcomes.
5. **Principle of the Double Effect.** If an action has several mixed outcomes – such as the act of voting having both good and bad policy outcomes – the bad/immoral outcome(s) can be licitly *tolerated* (not condoned) and the action can be pursued if *all* of the following conditions are met:
 - i) The action is itself morally good or morally neutral. – *Voting is never immoral in itself, and it is usually good and virtuous (cf. Gaudium et Spes, no. 43). Most other forms of peaceful political action are likewise good in themselves.*
 - ii) The bad outcome must not be willed or intended. – *It is not permissible to desire the bad outcome. What is immoral must always be opposed by the will, even if it is prudently tolerated.*
 - iii) The bad outcome must not be instrumental (i.e., necessary) in obtaining the good outcome. – *This requirement is subtle, because in a double-effect scenario good and bad outcomes are always linked. One must look beyond the sheer fact of the linkage*

to consider whether the bad is directly and fundamentally required to obtain the good, not just accidentally and tragically linked in reality.

- iv) **Principle of Proportionality.** The bad outcome must not outweigh the good outcome. – *The practical activity of weighing the two outcomes is done deliberatively within the heart and mind of each Catholic in the light of objective truth, according to his or her well-formed conscience. The fact that faithful Catholics in full communion can reasonably, legitimately, and licitly judge and vote differently does not mean that the morality of the choices is subjective or relative in any way (cf. CCC, nos. 1790-1794).*

Reflection Questions

(All citations are to USCCB teaching document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.)

General Questions

1. What is the connection between our faith and the desire to change the world for the better? (For help, see excerpts from Pope Francis in *FCFC*, Part I.)
2. What kinds of leaders does our society need? For what should they stand and how should they lead? (For help, see no. 14.)
3. Why do the bishops encourage all Catholics, whether able to vote or not, to be involved in political life? What are other ways, in addition to voting, that you can be involved in advocacy for important issues? (For help, see no. 16.)
4. How might public policies and laws be different if the moral principles from Faithful Citizenship were used as a basis for political decisions?
5. What is conscience? What is prudence? How does one develop a well-formed conscience and the virtue of prudence? What role should they play in our decisions about who we vote for and how we advocate for change? (For help, see nos. 17-20.)

Going Deeper

1. What do the bishops mean when they say, “Both opposing evil and doing good are essential obligations” (no. 24)? Why are both (not just one or the other) important for Catholics? What are examples of intrinsically evil acts and why must they always be opposed? What are examples of the basic needs of our neighbors which we must ensure are fulfilled? (For help, see nos. 21-25.) What might your own actions to avoid evil and to do good look like?
2. Some people question whether religion and politics should ever interact. What do the bishops say in response to this criticism? What is the role of the Church in political life? (For help, see nos. 1, 5 and 9-12.)
3. Name the four principles and seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching. How can these principles and themes help us to think about policies and laws? Name some of the issues discussed in the statement and describe how the principles and themes relate to these issues. (See nos. 43-56.)
4. What advice might you give to a friend who is trying to decide between two candidates, neither of which fully share the Church's commitment to the dignity of the human person? (For help, see nos. 34-39.)
5. The bishops describe two “temptations in public life” that voters can fall into: first, “moral equivalence” which “makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity,” and second, the misuse of moral distinctions “as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity.” (See nos. 27-30.) Describe a situation in which you witnessed one or both of these lines of thought. Why are they both distortions of the Church’s teaching?

Source: USCCB, Department of Justice, Peace & Human Development
<https://www.usccb.org/resources/questions-reflection-and-discussion-faithful-citizenship>