Please Vote November 3

October 2020

To the Clergy, Religious, and Laity of the Archdiocese of New Orleans:

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

As we approach the upcoming local, state, and national elections, I have received many emails, calls, and letters with questions from Catholics and other people of faith regarding how to vote. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify some important points, particularly for Catholics.

Let me start off by saying that no member of the Catholic bishops, priests, deacons, religious, or laity in church leadership may endorse or oppose any candidate for office. The US Catholic Bishops document “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” prohibits any endorsement of a candidate by church leadership but challenges Catholics to vote with a properly formed conscience. To quote the document, “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.”

It is in my role as bishop, charged with handing on the Church’s moral and social teaching that I write today. It is our right and responsibility to vote with a well-formed conscience. A well-formed conscience is formed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer, scripture, and reflecting and informing oneself about the moral teachings of the Catholic Church as guided by “Faithful Citizenship”. It is our responsibility as disciples of Jesus to look carefully at the platform of each candidate and compare these principles to the teaching of Christ and the Church.

There are many moral and social issues we must be aware of to form our conscience and decide how to vote. The issues of public policy concern for Catholics are listed below. Abortion and euthanasia are identified in the bishops’ document as being preeminent issues because it is upon the protection and sanctity of human life within the family unit that all other life issues are built. This does not mean we can dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity or caring for the vulnerable among us, but we must stand firm on issues that directly attack life itself, the most fundamental good and the condition for all others. We must emphasize the need to respect all human life regardless of race, religion, cultural, or social differences. To once again quote from “Faithful Citizenship”, “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.”
As Christians, we believe in the values handed on to us by Jesus and our tradition. I invite the faithful and all people of good will to study carefully the information from the bishops’ conference and, through prayer, make a responsible decision based on a well-formed conscience in the upcoming election.

Let us together pray for our country and for peace in our world.

Wishing you God’s blessings, I am,

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Gregory M. Aymond
Archbishop of New Orleans

Issues of Public Policy Concern for Catholics:

- Address the preeminent requirement to protect human life
- Protect the fundamental understanding of marriage as a life-long commitment between a man and a woman
- Achieve comprehensive immigration reform
- Help families and children overcome poverty and ensure access to education
- Ensure full conscience protection and religious freedom
- Provide healthcare that respects human life and dignity
- Oppose unjust discrimination
- Establish and comply with moral limits on military force
- Pursue peace, protect human rights and religious liberty, and advance economic justice and care for creation.

To find other helpful resources, visit https://nolacatholic.org/vote.

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Civilize It

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has launched a campaign inviting Catholics to model civility and love for neighbor throughout the year. Civilize It: Dignity Beyond the Debate asks Catholics to pledge civility, clarity, and compassion in their families, communities, and parishes, and call on others to do so as well. Find out more information and resources to share with your community at CivilizeIt.org.

The “Civilize It” campaign has also provided several “Tips for Engaging in Civil Dialogue”:

- Listen first and seek to understand the whole picture.
- Ask questions for clarification.
- Use ‘I’ statements; pay attention to body language.
- Listen to what feelings are present and pay attention to how you respond.
- Summarize what you’ve heard and ask for feedback.
The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

Part I of II: Our Call as Catholic Citizens
This brief document is Part I of a summary of the US bishops’ reflection, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, which complements the teaching of bishops in dioceses and states.

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship is the teaching document of the Catholic Bishops of the United States on the political responsibility of Catholics. It provides guidance for all who seek to exercise their rights and duties as citizens. As Catholics, we bring the richness of our faith to the public square. We draw from both faith and reason as we seek to affirm the dignity of the human person and the common good of all.

Everyone living in this country is called to participate in public life and contribute to the common good. In Rejoice and Be Glad [Gaudete et exsultate], Pope Francis writes:

Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace. . . . You cannot grow in holiness without committing yourself, body and soul, to giving your best to this endeavor.²

As Catholics, we are part of a community with profound teachings that help us consider challenges in public life, contribute to greater justice and peace for all people, and evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and candidates’ promises and actions in light of the Gospel in order to help build a better world.

Why Does the Church Teach About Issues Affecting Public Policy?
The Church’s obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith, a part of the mission given to us by Jesus Christ. As people of both faith and reason, Catholics are called to bring truth to political life and to practice Christ’s commandment to “love one another” (Jn 13:34).

The US Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to proclaim and live out their faith without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination. Civil law should recognize and protect the Church’s right to participate in society without abandoning its moral convictions. Our nation’s tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions into public life. The Catholic community brings to political dialogue a consistent moral framework and broad experience serving those in need.

Who in the Church Should Participate in Political Life?
In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to any political party or interest group. In today’s environment, Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party or candidate fully share our comprehensive commitment to human life and dignity. This should not discourage us. On the contrary, it makes our obligation to act all the more urgent. Catholic lay women and men need to act on the Church’s moral principles and become more involved: running for office, working within political parties, and communicating concerns to elected officials. Even those who cannot vote should raise their voices on matters that affect their lives and the common good. Faithful citizenship is an ongoing responsibility, not just an election year duty.

How Can Catholic Social Teaching Help Guide Our Participation?
In the words of Pope Francis, “progress in building a people in peace, justice and fraternity depends on four principles related to constant tensions present in every social reality. These derive from the pillars of the Church’s social doctrine, which serve as ‘primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomena.’³ The four principles include the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. Taken together, these principles provide a moral framework for Catholic engagement in advancing what we have called a “consistent ethic of life” (Living the Gospel of Life, no. 22).

Rightly understood, this ethic does not treat all issues as morally equivalent; nor does it reduce Catholic teaching to one or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life and other human rights, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental obligation to respect the dignity of every human being as a child of God.

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” (USCCB, Living the Gospel of Life, no. 33). The following summary of the four principles highlights several themes of Catholic social teaching for special consideration: these include human rights and responsibilities, respect for work and the rights of workers, care for God’s creation, and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.⁴

The Dignity of the Human Person
Human life is sacred because every person is created in the image and likeness of God. There is a rich and multifaceted Catholic teaching on human dignity summarized in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Every human being “must always be understood in his unrepeatable and inviolable uniqueness . . . This entails above all the requirement not only of simple respect on the part of others, especially political and social institutions and their leaders with regard to every man and woman on the earth, but even more, this means that the primary commitment of each person towards others, and particularly of these same institutions, must be for the promotion and integral development of the person” (no. 131). The Compendium continues, “It is necessary to consider every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 27).
Subsidiarity
It is impossible to promote the dignity of the person without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, and local realities—in short, for those economic, social, cultural, recreational, professional, and political communities to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth. The family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, is the fundamental unit of society. This sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children must not be redefined, undermined, or neglected. Supporting families should be a priority for economic and social policies. How our society is organized—in economics and politics, in law and public policy—affects the well-being of individuals and of society. Every person and association has a right and a duty to participate in shaping society to promote the well-being of individuals and the common good.

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.

The Common Good
The common good is comprised of “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.”

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, a right to religious freedom, and the right to have access to those things required for human decency—food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to ourselves, to our families, and to the larger society.

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. An economic system must serve the dignity of the human person and the common good by respecting the dignity of work and protecting the rights of workers. Economic justice calls for decent work at fair, living wages, a broad and fair legalization program with a path to citizenship for immigrant workers, and the opportunity for all people to work together for the common good through their work, ownership, enterprise, investment, participation in unions, and other forms of economic activity. Workers also have responsibilities—to provide a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay, to treat employers and coworkers with respect, and to carry out their work in ways that contribute to the common good. Workers, employers, and unions should not only advance their own interests but also work together to advance economic justice and the well-being of all.

We have a duty to care for God’s creation, which Pope Francis refers to in Laudato Si’ as “our common home.” We are all called to be careful stewards of God’s creation and to ensure a safe and hospitable environment for vulnerable human beings now and in the future. Pope Francis, consistent with St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (World Day of Peace Message, 1990 and 2010), has lifted up pollution, climate change, lack of access to clean water, and the loss of biodiversity as particular challenges. Pope Francis speaks of an “ecological debt” (no. 51) owed by wealthier nations to developing nations. And he calls all of us to an “ecological conversion” (no. 219), by which “the effects of [our] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us]”.

Indeed, this concern with “natural ecology” is an indispensable part of the broader “human ecology,” which encompasses not only material but moral and social dimensions as well.

Solidarity
Solidarity is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to . . . the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” It is found in “a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to ‘serve him’ instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage.”

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Our Catholic commitment to solidarity requires that we pursue justice, eliminate racism, end human trafficking, protect human rights, seek peace, and avoid the use of force except as a necessary last resort.

In a special way, our solidarity must find expression in the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. A moral test for society is how we treat the weakest among us—the unborn, those dealing with disabilities or terminal illness, the poor, and the marginalized.

Conclusion
In light of Catholic teaching, the bishops vigorously repeat their call for a renewed politics that focuses on moral principles, the promotion of human life and dignity, and the pursuit of the common good. Political participation in this spirit reflects not only the social teaching of our Church but the best traditions of our nation.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

Notes
2. Gaudete et Exsultate, no. 25.
3. Evangelii Gaudium, no. 221.
4. These principles are drawn from a rich tradition more fully described in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), no. 160. For more information on these principles, see Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, 2016, nos. 40ff.
5. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 132. This summary represents only a few highlights from the fuller treatment of the human person in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. For the fuller treatment, see especially nos. 124-159 where many other important aspects of human dignity are treated.
6. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 185.
7. Centesimus Annus, no. 48; Dignitatis Humanae, nos. 4-6.
8. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 164.
9. Laudato Si’, no. 77.
10. Laudato Si’, no. 217.
The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

Part II of II: Making Moral Choices and Applying Our Principles

This brief document is Part II of a summary of the US bishops' reflection, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, which complements the teaching of bishops in dioceses and states.

Part I of the summary of the US bishops' reflection, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, considered the core principles that underlie Catholic engagement in the political realm. Part II is a consideration of the process by which these principles are applied to the act of voting and taking positions on policy issues. It begins with the general consideration of the nature of conscience and the role of prudence. The application of prudential judgment does not mean that all choices are equally valid or that the bishops' guidance and that of other church leaders is just another political opinion or policy preference among many others. Rather, Catholics are urged to listen carefully to the Church's teachers when they apply Catholic social teaching to specific proposals and situations.

How Does the Church Help the Catholic Faithful to Speak About Political and Social Questions?

A Well-Formed Conscience

The Church equips its members to address political questions by helping them develop well-formed consciences. “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act... [Every person] is obliged to follow faithfully what he [or she] knows to be just and right” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1778). We Catholics have a lifelong obligation to form our consciences in accord with human reason, enlightened by the teaching of Christ as it comes to us through the Church.

The Virtue of Prudence

The Church also encourages Catholics to develop the virtue of prudence, which enables us “to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1806). Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act. Prudence must be accompanied by courage, which calls us to act. As Catholics seek to advance the common good, we must carefully discern which public policies are morally sound. At times, Catholics may choose different ways to respond to social problems, but we cannot differ on our obligation to protect human life and dignity and help build, through moral means, a more just and peaceful world.

Doing Good and Avoiding Evil

There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. These intrinsically evil acts must always be rejected and never supported. A preeminent example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion. Similarly, human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, and other acts that directly violate the sanctity and dignity of human life including genocide, torture, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, can never be justified. Nor can violations of human dignity, such as acts of racism, treating workers as mere means to an end, deliberately subjecting workers to subhuman living conditions, treating the poor as disposable, or redefining marriage to deny its essential meaning, ever be justified.

Opposition to intrinsically evil acts also prompts us to recognize our positive duty to contribute to the common good and act in solidarity with those in need. Both opposing evil and doing good are essential. As St. John Paul II said, “The fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment.” The basic right to life implies and is linked to other human rights such as a right to the goods that every person needs to live and thrive—including food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work.

Avoiding 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 is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, environmental degradation, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care or housing, pornography, human trafficking, redefining civil marriage, compromising religious liberty,
or unjust immigration policies are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act.

Making Moral Choices
The bishops do not tell Catholics how to vote; the responsibility to make political choices rests with each person and his or her properly formed conscience, aided by prudence. This exercise of conscience begins with always opposing policies that violate human life or weaken its protection.

When morally flawed laws already exist, prudential judgment is needed to determine how to do what is possible to restore justice—even if partially or gradually—without ever abandoning a moral commitment to full protection for all human life from conception to natural death (see St. John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, no. 73).

Prudential judgment is also needed to determine the best way to promote the common good in areas such as housing, health care, and immigration. When church leaders make judgments about how to apply Catholic teaching to specific policies, this may not carry the same binding authority as universal moral principles but cannot be dismissed as one political opinion among others. These moral applications should inform the consciences and guide the actions of Catholics.

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 a 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.¹

What Public Policies Should Concern Catholics Most?
As Catholics, we are led to raise questions about political life other than those that concentrate on individual, material well-being. We focus more broadly on what protects or restores the dignity of every human life. Catholic teaching challenges voters and candidates, citizens and elected officials, to consider the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues. In light of ethical principles, we bishops offer the following policy goals that we hope will guide Catholics as they form their consciences and reflect on the moral dimensions of their public choices:

• Address the preeminent requirement to protect human life—by restricting and bringing to an end the destruction of unborn children through abortion and providing women in crisis pregnancies with the supports they need. End the following practices: the use of euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of illness and disability; the destruction of human embryos in the name of research; the use of the death penalty to combat crime; and the imprudent resort to war to address international disputes.

• Protect the fundamental understanding of marriage as the life-long and faithful union of one man and one woman as the central institution of society; promote the complementarity of the sexes and reject false “gender” ideologies; provide better support for family life morally, socially, and economically, so that our nation helps parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values, and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility.

• Achieve comprehensive immigration reform that offers a path to citizenship, treats immigrant workers fairly, prevents the separation of families, maintains the integrity of our borders, respects the rule of law, and addresses the factors that compel people to leave their own countries.

• Help families and children overcome poverty and ensure access to and choice in education, as well as decent work at fair, living wages and adequate assistance for the vulnerable in our nation, while also helping to overcome widespread hunger and poverty around the world, especially in the policy areas of development assistance, debt relief, and international trade.

• Ensure full conscience protection and religious freedom for individuals and groups to meet social needs, and so enable families, community groups, economic structures, and government to work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, and care for creation.

• Provide health care while respecting human life, human dignity, and religious freedom in our health care system.

• Continue to oppose policies that reflect racism, hostility toward immigrants, religious bigotry, and other forms of unjust discrimination.

• Establish and comply with moral limits on the use of military force—examining for what purposes it may be used, under what authority, and at what human cost—with a special view to seeking a responsible and effective response for ending the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

• Join with others around the world to pursue peace, protect human rights and religious liberty, and advance economic justice and care for creation.

Notes
1. Veritatis Splendor, no. 52.

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What does it mean to form my conscience?

Catholics have a long tradition of engagement in the public square. Sometimes that engagement requires making difficult moral decisions that impact our own lives and those of others. Our conscience can help guide the decisions we make. The Second Vatican Council guides us: “Always summoning [one] to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to [one’s] heart more specifically: do this, shun that” (Gaudium et Spes 16). However, our conscience doesn’t just come to us when we are born. We must work throughout our lives to form it through prayer, learning, and conversation.

How do I form my conscience?

It takes time to form our consciences so that we can make well-reasoned judgments about particular, real-life situations. The Church teaches that it is important to work continually on conscience formation so we can be prepared to make decisions whenever the opportunity arises. Some specific ideas to form your conscience are:

1) Begin by being open to the truth and what is right.
2) Study Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church.
3) Examine the facts and background information about various choices and be discerning in where we gather information.
4) Prayerfully reflect to discern the will of God (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, no. 18).

Additionally, it is important to consider how our community of faith can help us form good consciences through some of these steps:

1) Seek the prudent advice and good example of trusted leaders and others to support and enlighten our conscience.
2) Learn about the authoritative teaching of the Church.
3) Pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to help us develop our conscience.
4) Regularly partake in an examination of conscience to hear God’s voice in your life.\

Doing the work of forming our consciences can seem daunting. Fortunately, we have many church teachings that can help us in this important task. Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship is an important resource for U.S. Catholics and helps us prayerfully reflect on how we can apply Church teaching in our civic life. “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.”\

Here are some questions for further reflection:

1. When has my conscience guided me to “do good and avoid evil”?
2. What are some key resources I can use to form my conscience?
3. Forming conscience is a “lifelong task.” What do I do to regularly form my conscience? What more should I do?

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Prayer for Conscience Formation

I praise you Lord for creating me in your divine image. Thank you for giving me a free will to know you and love you. Open my heart to your teachings and help me to form my conscience according to your will. Please strengthen me with the virtues of faith, hope, love, and especially prudence. Grant me your loving guidance each day and send me the graces to always do your will, even when most difficult.

Amen.

Prayer for Our Nation

Loving God, you chose Mary as the fairest of your daughters; Holy Spirit, you overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation; God the Son, you became incarnate in the womb of Mary, your Mother. In union with Mary, we adore you, the Most Holy Trinity and acknowledge that you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, hold eternal dominion and authority over all nations. Most Holy Trinity, we place the United States of America into the hands of Mary Immaculate in order that she may present our country to you. Through her we wish to praise and thank you for the great resources of our land and for the freedom, which has been our heritage. Through the intercession of Mary, guide the Catholic Church in the United States.

Grant us peace. Inspire all the officers of our government. Grant us a fruitful economy born of justice and charity. Raise up and protect all of our families. Through the intercession of our Mother, bless the sick, the poor, the tempted, sinners and all who are in need. Above all, we ask Mary to intercede on our behalf that you would protect our conscience rights and religious freedom, upon which our country was founded. Mary, Immaculate Virgin, Our Mother, Patroness of our land, we honor you and give ourselves to you. Wrap your mantel of protection around each of us and all our fellow citizens. Protect us from all evil and harm. Pray for us, that acting always according to your will and the Will of your Divine Son, we may live and die pleasing to God.

Adapted from a Marian consecration by Patrick Cardinal O’Boyle, Archbishop of Washington, prayed in parishes throughout the United States in November of 1959.

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