

PulledQuote: Following the teaching and example of Jesus, the Church has always advocated for the poor and the downtrodden, the elderly and the sick, the child and the immigrant, people of every race and nation. How we treat the most vulnerable in our society is key to understanding the place of faith in our decision-making. –Bishop John Folda

Headline: Voting as a Catholic

Election season is well underway, and the political campaigns are in full swing to get our votes. This year is different than most because of the coronavirus pandemic and the civil unrest that has roiled our nation for the last three months, so the election will have a different feel as well. But one thing that has not changed is our Catholic faith. Voting is a weighty responsibility for a citizen of this nation, but even more importantly, voting is a moral act. By voting, we put into action what we believe in, and our faith should shape those decisions.

The Church is wary of identifying herself with any one political faction, so we don't endorse particular candidates or parties. They might be partially in harmony with our Catholic faith, but none are entirely aligned with what the Church believes. This does not prevent us, however, from taking a position on public policy and even specific legislation. There are some who say the Church should stay out of politics, but the Church has a voice and a role to play in promoting the common good and addressing the needs of our society. Formed by divine Revelation, the Church as the Body of Christ in the world has every reason to weigh in on important issues that will profoundly influence the well-being, even the life or death, of millions of people.

In their latest edition of "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," the bishops of the United States reiterated their long-held position that the right to life is the preeminent issue of our time, and therefore should be considered by every Catholic as they prepare to vote in this year's election. In a conversation with a group of American bishops last January, Pope Francis reaffirmed his agreement with this same strong belief. Without protection of the right to life of every person, all other rights fall. This means that direct attacks on innocent human life, like abortion or euthanasia, may never be approved. This is non-negotiable. And in the arena of public policy, we should work actively to protect this most fundamental right.

Religious freedom is often called the "first freedom," because it was given pride of place in the Bill of Rights by the founders of our nation. They recognized the importance of protecting the right to practice one's faith openly, without fear of government interference or intimidation. Note well that we are not talking about a so-called "freedom of worship," which can easily be privatized by those who deny any place for religion in the public square. More and more do we see efforts to curtail religious freedom, or to subordinate that right to other "rights" that are not even mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. Some have even claimed that religious liberty is merely a front for bigotry. If we as believers want to be assured of the freedom of religion, then we must cast our votes in such a way that that freedom will be protected and strengthened. Our elected officials must see and understand that religious freedom is essential to who we are as a people, and we expect them to respect and protect it.

Another issue of paramount importance is support for marriage and the family. Recent court decisions and government regulations have gravely undermined the traditional understanding of marriage in our society, but we still have a responsibility to work for the defense of marriage and family rights in our public activity, especially in the way we vote. Many public officials are eager to enact a total redefinition of marriage and family in all aspects of public life. Laws and regulations are being pushed forward throughout our country that would marginalize the traditional understanding of marriage and family, and would penalize those who hold to these beliefs. There is a growing and concerted effort to mandate the acceptance of false gender ideologies, regardless of our Catholic beliefs about human nature and the logic of science and the natural law. As active members of this society, and as voters, we should not cave in to these threats but should actively work to strengthen the place of marriage and family as designed by God in the public life of our nation.

Following the teaching and example of Jesus, the Church has always advocated for the poor and the downtrodden, the elderly and the sick, the child and the immigrant, people of every race and nation. How we treat the most vulnerable in our society is key to understanding the place of faith in our decision-making. We are also called to care for creation as the common home of all humanity. These are issues of justice and care for the common good, and our Catholic belief in the inherent dignity of every human person requires that we respond to those in need. There are many possible ways to address these needs, and there is room for prudential judgment in determining which public policy strategies will best serve the most vulnerable among us. But our faith does not allow us to ignore them. Jesus tells us: “Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did it for me.”

For a more thorough consideration of election issues, I would suggest that you refer to the website of the North Dakota Catholic Conference (ndcatholic.org), and click on “Your Faith, Your Vote,” the conference’s voter education website. This resource offers questions to ask as we prepare to vote, and helps us understand the key public policy issues before us. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has also reissued its voting resource, called “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.” This resource, which is available at usccb.org, also helps to inform us as we prepare to cast our votes in November. It is important that we vote with an informed conscience, and not just based on whim or the talking points of different political campaigns. As Catholics, we have a rich body of social teaching to draw on as we make decisions that will set the course for our communities and our nation. Let us also pray to the Holy Spirit for the gift of wisdom, that we might discern and choose wisely when we enter the voting booth.