



THE DIOCESE OF KALAMAZOO

Office of the Bishop

October 1, 2020
Feast of St. Therese of the Child Jesus

Letting Faith Form our Conscience

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As Catholic Christians, and as Americans we are members of two “realities”—the City of God and the City of Humanity (to borrow an image used by St. Augustine, our diocesan Patron). As faithful citizens of both realities, we are called by our Baptism to help build up the *City of God* by the ways we faithfully live in the *City of Humanity*, allowing the actions of our lives to be guided by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are invited, and challenged, to be “*in the world but not of it*” (John 17:13–16) and, therefore, to be responsible citizens, who work both to eradicate moral evils and social injustices wherever we find them, as well to advance the values of Christ which are summed up in the Beatitudes and summarized in the Church’s *Catholic Social Teachings*.

Over the course of the nearly seventy-five years that the Lord has allowed me to live in this world, and throughout the better part of the 50 years I have served as a priest, I have witnessed remarkable political changes and movements, including the tumultuous years of social unrest during the 1960’s: some for the better, but not all. As a Shepherd of Souls, it is my responsibility to teach the Truth of God’s Word, *in season and out* (Timothy 4:2). As we approach the time of the national election in November, and as we consider our solemn duty of voting to elect government leaders at all levels of our society, it is important for me as the Bishop of our Diocese to encourage everyone to prayerfully and seriously consider this responsibility from a faith perspective. The purpose of this Letter is not to endorse any individual running for office, or any particular political party; that is to be determined by each citizen according to the guidance of one’s well-formed conscience. My primary responsibilities as a Bishop are to *teach, lead and sanctify*; it is also incumbent on me to provide guidance in the formation of one’s good conscience, so that we are prepared to vote with a clear understanding of Catholic Teaching on the moral and social issues facing us.

Before anything else, however, we need to remember who we are as *citizens of the City of God* in the most important of all our relationships, namely, the relationship with Jesus. We need to remember that we are one with Him through Baptism, and united with all the members of the Body of Christ, the Church. This is our identity which has eternal dimensions, and not one that is confined to the winds of time and the whims of politics. We believe in Jesus as He revealed Himself to us: “*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*” (John 14:6); and we also take comfort in the fact that He is “*the same, yesterday, today and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8). We are vibrant members of the Church which Jesus founded, wherein we find the fullness of His unchanging teaching in faith and morals. Through our Catholic Faith, we have come to know that Jesus has conquered sin and death, and we have come to experience the love that God has for every human person—every immortal soul—made in His image and likeness, with the promise of Eternal Life with Him for those who open themselves to this promise. For this reason, we steadfastly affirm that belief in, and personal relationship with, Jesus is the best foundation possible for every human person. Therefore, we must constantly allow ourselves to be conformed to Him, if we are to be truly and fully human; similarly, we are called to help transform the world according to the ways Jesus teaches us to live through the Church He founded. Whatever our political affiliations or leanings are in the *City of Humanity*, they remain subject to the communion we share in the *City of God*, the Church, which always reminds us that our true and lasting Home is in Heaven.

With that as a starting point and context, it is possible for us to know with certainty what is truly right and morally good, and, by the grace of God, to choose what is right and good so that all may live in proper relationship with Him. When we examine the current political scene in our country, we must not be misled by those who would consider all moral values as equal. The same applies to what are evils, not all of which are of the same degree. Our country’s founding document, the revered Declaration of Independence, for good reason guarantees us the unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—and in that order—because “the pursuit of happiness” depends on the “liberty” to pursue it, and even more basically, it depends on having a “life” to live.

With this in mind, we must do all we can to protect *human life*, from the moment of conception until natural death, not for the sake of a political platform, ideology, or end, but because this truth comes from Jesus. Abortion is intrinsically evil and can never be a good, since the taking of human life strikes at

the very heart of our relationship with God and our shared human existence. The exercise of our vote must reflect the love and truth of Christ in every way, and be pleasing to Him. We should never consider casting a vote with the specific intention of supporting or advancing abortion, or any other intrinsically evil issue.* Quite simply, the protection and defense of human life is the most basic of all issues, and flows directly from Jesus' teaching on the sanctity of human life as a Gift from God. We must decide whether we stand with Jesus for life, or with evil for death. As we, the Bishops of the United States, have written, "*a Catholic, who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act, may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permitted only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences, or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.*" ("Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship", #34,35).

In addition, there are other very important issues that deal with *liberty* and the *pursuit of happiness*, but in their proper order and place. These can only be accurately assessed by understanding the profound dignity of each person. It is this understanding that helps to form our consciences, and gives us the vision to see the life and image of Christ in every man, woman and child, and the courage to act consonantly. Being formed by Christ's teaching, we can then clearly see the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, and the beauty of family life; we see the importance of preserving religious liberty for all; we see the poor, the marginalized, the immigrant, and those vulnerable and forgotten, all as members of our human family deserving of our love and concern; we see racism as an evil in regard to human dignity, to be abhorred and rooted out of our attitudes and social structures. We need to see the environment of our beautiful world as a gift from our heavenly Father which He intends for us to cherish and protect. Nevertheless, we must never forget that all along the hierarchy of importance, if the greatest "good"—human life—is not protected and valued, the lesser "goods" are in jeopardy.

As we approach our civic responsibility of voting, one vitally important step that we all need to take, as we try to have both an "informed and faith-formed conscience", is to read carefully the platforms for each of the political parties and candidates. Many times, significant policy proposals are detailed in writing, but do not get communicated in political ads or used as sound-bytes. If we want to know what a particular candidate or party stands for, we should take the time to "read the fine print" and do our homework. We should also realize that

there is no candidate or political party which fully or completely represents the heart of Jesus or the teaching of the Church.

With this in mind, I would like to offer some pastoral principles which will help our Catholic Faith to form our conscience. As we prepare to vote, please keep these principles in mind:

1. Issues of Life: any issue that is an intrinsic evil (abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, racism, abuses against human dignity, and other such evils) is clearly counter to God's Plan.
2. Issues of Liberty: protecting the liberties given to us by God: to have the right to worship; to practice our religion and be able to adhere to our religious convictions not just at church but in the marketplace; and the right to live in peace.
3. Issues of Pursuit of Happiness: the right to have the freedom to make a living; to raise our families; to educate our children; and for the protection of the poor, the vulnerable and those with special needs.

In these challenging times, let us pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance, both for our nation, and for each of us, as we fulfill our very important civic responsibility of voting for those who will lead us in this, our beloved country, the City of Humanity. As we do so, we also need to keep clearly in mind that as Catholics, we ultimately are citizens of the City of God. Let us turn to Mary, Mother of the Church and Patroness of the United States of America, the only person to have totally conformed her Immaculate Heart to that of her Son. Through her intercession may we keep making the effort to do the same, and may she assist us in being good and faithful citizens of both Cities in which we live, in imitation of her Son Jesus, Who is *"the same yesterday, today and forever"*.

Assuring you of my prayers for you in these challenging times, and asking for your prayers for me as well, so that we all may do our best to be faithful citizens and at the same time remain faith-filled followers of Jesus, I remain

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Paul J. Bradley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Bishop Paul J. Bradley

*see diocesan supplement and visit www.diokzoo.org/faithfulcitizenship