



OUR CONSCIENCE AND OUR VOTE

A message from the Catholic Bishops of Illinois

The privilege and responsibility of citizenship

We citizens of the United States live in a country whose Declaration of Independence was founded on the conviction that every person has inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For centuries, as our forbears fought to uphold these God-given rights so essential to the makeup of our nation, they also exercised the responsibilities of citizenship with purpose and determination.

Christian faith teaches that our rights flow from our dignity as human persons made in the image and likeness of God, and that along with these rights come responsibilities. Each of us must be concerned in the present for the good of all and look responsibly to the future so that those who come after us will also enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

One of the rights shared by citizens of our nation is also a responsibility – to vote. Voting is not a small matter to be dealt with casually or carelessly. It calls upon all to reflect seriously and prayerfully on moral issues that reflect God’s design for the common good.

Catholics have contributed significantly to the growth and well-being of our country since its very foundation, and our moral tradition has been a consistent, positive influence on public life. That moral tradition is needed now more than ever to address serious challenges in our nation and our state. Illinois is faced with a growing culture of violence – over 46,000 lives were aborted in 2006, and the Chicago murder rate is 18% higher than last year. There is a declining respect for the role religious individuals and institutions play in the delivery of health care and social services. We need to look for creative ways to support Catholic schools and the families of Catholic schoolchildren.

Every four years, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issues a statement meant as a call to political responsibility for the Catholics of our country. We do not endorse political parties or candidates but offer guidance solidly rooted in our faith. We encourage you to read this year’s statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*; it can be found at www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

The document highlights the role of the Church in the formation of conscience as well as the responsibility of each Catholic to hear, receive, and act upon the Church’s teaching in forming his or her conscience. With a well-formed conscience, Catholics are better able to evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and the promises and actions of candidates.

We bishops of Illinois offer this brief reflection on *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* as part of our pastoral care for the people of our dioceses.

How do we “form” our conscience?

When we speak of “conscience,” what do we mean? Conscience is the voice of God’s law resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good and shun what is evil. As Pope John Paul II wrote, “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person, where we are alone with God. In the depths of our conscience, we detect a moral law, which does not impose itself on us, but which holds us to a higher obedience. This law is not an external human law, but the voice of God, calling us to free ourselves from the grip of evil desires and sin, and stimulating us to seek what is good and true in life.”

How do we Catholics properly form our conscience? First, we must desire to embrace goodness and truth. Since God is the source of all that is good and true, we begin by seeking his will in prayer. We study the Bible and the teachings of the Church. We seriously examine the situations we face to make sure we understand them and the ramifications of various choices. If we fail to form our consciences, we risk making erroneous and irresponsible judgments.

Because a well-formed conscience seeks to do the will of God, it is more than a “feeling” or an opinion. Forming our conscience is a humble act of faith in God through which we express our belief that God is the source of all wisdom. We have a responsibility both to form our conscience well and to act in accord with our conscience. When we act out of a well-formed conscience, we are praising God – and offering a gift to our families, our co-workers, and the community at large.

There are some things we must never do

There are some things we must never do, because they are so deeply flawed that they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such “intrinsically evil” actions can never be justified and must always be rejected and opposed; they must never be supported or condoned. Examples are the intentional taking of innocent life, as in abortion and euthanasia; direct threats to the sanctity and dignity of human life, such as human cloning and destructive research on human embryos; other assaults on innocent human life and violations of human dignity, such as genocide, torture, racism, and targeting noncombatants in acts of terror or war.

The fact that we must always oppose intrinsically evil acts should also open our eyes to the good we must do, that is, to our positive duty to contribute to the common good and to act in solidarity with those in need. The right to life, for example, is linked to all other human rights, and all life issues are connected. As Blessed Pope John XXIII wrote, “[Each of us] has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally, the necessary social services.” The moral imperative to respond to the needs of our neighbors is universally binding on our consciences. In preparing to vote with a well-formed conscience, it is important to avoid two temptations:

- The first temptation would be to consider all life issues morally equal and thus fail to see that there is a hierarchy among them. We must keep first in mind that the direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong. It is not just one issue among many and must always be opposed. Our support for the sanctity of human life is dishonest if it does not include opposition to abortion.
- The second temptation would be to fail to give proper attention to other issues that pose serious threats to human life, even as we uphold and defend as a priority the sanctity of life from the moment of conception. Issues such as racism, the use of the death penalty, unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, failure to attend to the needs of the poor, and unjust immigration policy also must be addressed because of our belief in the sanctity of human life.

The choices are not always simple

Decisions about political life and voting can be quite complex. Prudential judgment will be needed when applying moral principles to a variety of policy choices, and we urge the Catholic people of Illinois to listen carefully and prayerfully to Sacred Scripture and Church teaching when analyzing proposals and preparing to cast a vote.

For us Catholics, it is essential that we be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. Thus we cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if our intention is to support that position. In doing so we would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. By the same token, when we support a candidate who opposes an intrinsic evil, we must not ignore other important moral issues involving the dignity of human life.

When we find that all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, as conscientious voters we face a dilemma. We may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, we may decide to vote for the candidate less likely to advance the morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentically human goods. We should also take into account a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue.

How should we prepare to vote?

- Ask God's guidance in prayer.
- Take time to familiarize ourselves with Church teachings that affect political choices.
- Seriously examine the positions of candidates on important issues.
- Keep in mind the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person.
- Acknowledge that not all issues are of equal importance or urgency.
- Remember that there are absolute moral norms that can never be violated for any reason. The deliberate destruction of innocent human life must always be opposed.
- Recognize that we each have a responsibility to the common good, and that forming one's conscience well and voting accordingly is both a sacred and civic duty.

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resounding in the human heart, revealing
the truth to us and calling us to do what is
good and shun what is evil.”***

Our Catholic faith is a blessing to our country!

During his recent visit to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on the history of the Catholic Church in this country. In his homily at Yankee Stadium, he said:

“How many ‘spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God’ have been offered up in these two centuries! In this land of religious liberty Catholics found freedom not only to practice their faith but also to participate fully in civic life, bringing their deepest moral convictions to the public square and cooperating with their neighbors in shaping a vibrant, democratic society...”

“Praying fervently for the coming of the kingdom... also means rejecting a false dichotomy between faith and political life, since as the Second Vatican Council put it, ‘there is no human activity – even in secular affairs – which can be withdrawn from God’s dominion.’ It means working to enrich American society and culture with the beauty and truth of the gospel and never losing sight of that great hope which gives meaning and value to all the other hopes which inspire our lives.”

As the Catholic bishops of Illinois, we share with you a profound hope that God’s wisdom and God’s will become ever more securely the foundation of the hopes, dreams, and principles on which our nation rests.

His Eminence Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.

Most Reverend Thomas G. Doran

Most Reverend George J. Lucas

Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.

Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton

Most Reverend James Peter Sartain

Most Reverend Gustavo Garcia-Siller

Most Reverend Francis J. Kane

Most Reverend John R. Manz

Most Reverend Thomas J. Paprocki

Most Reverend Joseph N. Perry

Most Reverend George J. Rassas

Most Reverend Richard S. Seminack

Most Reverend Mar Jacob Angadiath