



Voting as Followers of Christ:

A Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Virginia to the Faithful of Their Dioceses

October 2007

Dear Friends in Christ:

With the November general elections around the corner, Virginians will soon determine the occupants of all 140 seats of the Virginia General Assembly, as well as of many other local offices. Throughout election season, we have observed candidates' competing claims in debates, ads, websites, and yard signs, often in the form of slogans and rhetoric. While there is no shortage of stimuli to remind us which individuals are running for office and how they characterize themselves or their opponents, it can be very difficult to gather the substantive information that is critically needed to make truly informed decisions.

To assist Catholic voters in our two dioceses in their fundamental right and duty to vote, we asked the Virginia Catholic Conference, which represents us in public-policy matters, to prepare a comprehensive array of voter-education resources for use in our parishes and diocesan newspapers. At our request, the Conference prepared a six-part series (*Faithful Citizenship in Virginia: Issues for the 2007 Elections*) to connect the Church's moral and social teaching to issues that are in contemporary news stories and are regularly debated during election cycles and General Assembly sessions. Our two diocesan newspapers – the *Arlington Catholic Herald* and the *Catholic Virginian* – both printed this series (addressing Church teaching and specific legislative proposals relating to abortion, the death penalty, economic justice, education and family life, immigrant families, and stem-cell research) in successive installments over September and early October. The Conference also sent all General Assembly candidates a 16-item questionnaire to assess their views on issues addressed in the *Faithful Citizenship in Virginia* series. The Conference received responses for publication from ninety-three candidates, and the two diocesan newspapers printed those responses during the week of October 21st. We invite all Catholics to consult the above Conference materials by visiting www.vacatholic.org and clicking on “November 6 Election Resources.”

We hope you have found these materials useful as you seek to understand the principles of Catholic social teaching and apply them to the choices you confront as citizens of our Commonwealth. We also wish to supplement these resources with the following reflections from a letter we issued recently on civic responsibility and the duty to vote:

In *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*...we joined our brother U.S. bishops in stating: “As bishops, we seek to form the consciences of our people. We do not wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing or opposing candidates. We hope that voters will examine the position of candidates on the full range of issues, as well as their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance. We are convinced that a consistent ethic of life should be the moral framework from which to address issues in the political arena.” *Faithful Citizenship* makes clear that, although the Church never tells its members to vote for any specific candidate, it does have the right and obligation to teach the truth about human rights and dignity and thereby inform the consciences of voters. The Church’s consistent teaching stands in sharp contrast to the fractious discourse that is so common in our country’s polarized electorate. Our Catholic perspective embraces the life and dignity of every member of the human family, without regard to the claims of any particular platform or interest group.

We must never abandon this moral framework in favor of divisive rhetoric that can cloud one’s ability to see each issue as Christ asks us to see it. But just as it would be wrong to reject a consistent ethic that values all human rights, it would also be a mistake to conclude that all issues are equal in moral gravity. In *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, the U.S. bishops explain why the right to life is the foundation of all others: “Respect for the dignity of the human person demands a commitment to human rights across a broad spectrum We live the Gospel of Life when we live in solidarity with the poor of the world, standing up for their lives and dignity. Yet abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental good and the condition for all others. They are committed against those who are weakest and most defenseless, those who are genuinely ‘the poorest of the poor.’” Later in the same document, we observe, “[T]he command never to kill establishes a minimum which we must respect and from which we must start out ‘in order to say yes over and over again, a yes which will gradually embrace the entire horizon of the good’ (*Evangelium Vitae*, 75).”

Viewed in tandem, *Faithful Citizenship* and *Living the Gospel of Life* provide useful guidance for political decisions in a culture that does not fully embrace our values. In casting ballots, we rarely find a candidate who supports each of the Church's positions on legislation impacting human life and dignity. Faced all too frequently with imperfect platforms and imperfect candidates, we are nevertheless called to make decisions rooted in a rightly formed conscience. When members of our dioceses ask us for guidance in making such challenging decisions in so many different races, the question we hear most often is whether protecting unborn life to the greatest extent possible must be the decisive factor in one's voting choices, when the candidates in question differ on that issue but also differ on many other important social issues. In addressing this question, the best analysis we can offer is the one expressed by Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) . . . during his dialogue with the U.S. bishops' Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians [in 2004]. Cardinal Ratzinger's comments to the Task Force included an explanation of Church teaching on cooperation in evil as it relates to individual voters. Making a clear distinction between the responsibilities of public officials and those of voters, he stated that a Catholic voter would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil (i.e., making the evil act one's own) only if he were deliberately to vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion. He further explained that when a Catholic does not share a candidate's position in favor of abortion, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted if there are proportionate reasons.

Assessing proportionality is a matter for the individual conscience. However, a conscience must be correctly formed before it can be properly followed. In other words, we must seek the "mind of Christ" in the voting judgments we make, just as we must do when contemplating any other moral decision in our lives. We urge each of you to inform your own consciences thoroughly, weighing all issues from the perspective of Church teaching and of their implications for our brothers and sisters in the human family. In doing so, it is important to recognize just how serious abortion is when considering whether there are proportionate (i.e., very serious) reasons for making other important issues the decisive factor in our voting choices. That means we must ponder the moral and philosophical reality that so-called "abortion rights" deny the most fundamental human right (and hence all rights) to an entire class of people; we must confront the almost incomprehensible fact that abortions extinguish the lives of 4,000 children per day (and well over one million per year) in the United States alone; and we must understand the difference in moral gravity between policies which are intrinsically unjust (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, and the

deliberate destruction of human embryos) and policies involving prudential judgments about which people of good will may disagree concerning various means of promoting economic justice, public safety, and fair opportunities for every person (*Faithful Citizenship in Our Commonwealth: A Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Virginia to the Faithful of Their Dioceses*, 2005).

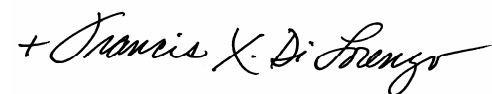
We hope that these reflections, together with the voter-education resources prepared by the Virginia Catholic Conference, will help parishioners throughout our two dioceses make essential connections between Church teaching and a wide range of contemporary issues impacting human life and dignity, and then apply this understanding to the choices they make on November 6th.

As together we seek to exercise our civic responsibility as followers of Christ and discern His will in all of the decisions we make, let us pray for each other, for our Commonwealth, and for our country.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+ Paul S. Loverde".

Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde
Bishop of Arlington

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+ Francis X. DiLorenzo".

Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo
Bishop of Richmond