



Voting with a Well-Formed Conscience:

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

October 2008

Every four years, widespread interest in the U.S. Presidential election provides a special opportunity for Catholics across our nation to make essential connections between the principles of their faith and many critical issues under debate. Mindful of this teaching moment, we were especially pleased to join our brother U.S. bishops last November in adopting *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, a statement on the baptismal calling we all share to participate in the political life of our country. We encourage you to read the entire statement, which can be viewed either at www.faithfulcitizenship.org or on the website of the Virginia Catholic Conference (www.vacatholic.org).

Through the Virginia Catholic Conference, we have also joined together with one voice to offer a variety of additional resources on faithful citizenship for all parishes in our two dioceses, most notably a video in which we explain seven key themes of Catholic social teaching, the duty to vote with a well-formed conscience, and opportunities for Virginia Catholics to help shape policy decisions through prayer and action. We now wish to supplement those resources with some further reflections about the right and responsibility to vote with a well-formed conscience.

Paragraph 7 of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* states,

In this statement, we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.

As this paragraph makes clear, the Church's role is to teach the truth that is revealed to us by Christ in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. This teaching is what we endorse, rather than candidates or political parties. And it is this teaching that should serve as the yardstick by which to measure candidates and party platforms.

Equipped with the Church's timeless truths, it is the responsibility of each individual to make the best voting decisions that he or she can, with the recognition that we live in a culture that does not fully embrace our values and are faced with flawed party platforms and candidates who do not share all of our policy goals. To ground those choices in a rightly formed conscience, paragraphs 40 and 41 of the bishops' *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* statement offer an essential moral framework:

40. The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental moral obligation to respect the dignity of every person as a child of God. It unites us as a "people of life and for life" (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 6) pledged to build what Pope John Paul II called a "culture of life" (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 77). This culture of life begins with the preeminent obligation to protect innocent life from direct attack and extends to defending life whenever it is threatened or diminished.

41. Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace, and they 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" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 33).

This general framework makes clear that, to correctly form our consciences, we must recognize the importance of all issues affecting human rights and dignity – from the moment of conception until natural death and at every stage in between – and appreciate that such issues are not abstractions but rather realities that determine whether families thrive or struggle, whether individuals are respected or exploited, and even whether people live or die. At the same time, the proper formation of conscience also means discerning the differences in moral gravity among various issues. Disregarding the right to life

itself – the foundation upon which all other human rights are based and without which no other right could possibly exist – is more serious than any other human rights violation.

Once our consciences are correctly formed within this consistent and comprehensive moral framework, paragraphs 34 and 35 of the U.S. bishops' statement serve to provide specific guidance on evaluating candidates and weighing their many policy positions, especially when those positions involve intrinsically evil actions – that is, actions that are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor:

34. Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods. A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate's opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.

35. There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.

This guidance applies precisely to the question we hear most often from members of our two dioceses: "What if I reject a candidate's stance in favor of legalized abortion but wish to vote for that candidate for other reasons?" In assessing whether such reasons would justify such a decision, we first observe that such reasons would certainly need to be not only morally grave but also proportionately grave – that is, equally serious or even more serious than abortion. In other words, one would need to compare the gravity of abortion against the gravity of the other considerations. And making that comparison would necessarily involve examining just how serious abortion is in terms of its very nature and in terms of its impact on members of the human family. That means we must appreciate 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. As paragraph 37 of the U.S. bishops' statement explains, "[T]he moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions." Moreover, we must fully understand that so-called "abortion rights" deny the most fundamental human right (and hence all rights) to an entire class of people, and we must confront the almost incomprehensible fact that abortions extinguish the lives of nearly 4,000 children per day (and well over one million per year) in the United States alone.

In closing, we offer for your reflection one additional excerpt, from paragraph 38 of the November 2007 statement:

Pope Benedict XVI, in his recent reflection on the Eucharist as "the sacrament of charity," challenged all of us to adopt what he calls "a Eucharistic form of life." This means that the redeeming love we encounter in the Eucharist should shape our thoughts, our words, and our decisions, including those that pertain to the social order.

There is no more appropriate way to approach the formation of conscience and the many decisions we must make in our daily lives than by opening our mind and heart to the Lord in the Eucharist. When we receive Christ's Body and Blood with the proper disposition, we prepare the way for Him to transform us. Once we allow this transformation to take place, we are better able to discern the mind of Christ in all the moral judgments we must make.

As together we seek to exercise our civic responsibility as followers of Christ united in the Eucharist, let us pray for each other, for our Commonwealth, and for our country.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,

+ Paul S. Loverde

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