



Participating Faithfully in the Political Process: ***A Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Virginia to the Faithful of Their Dioceses***

October 2009

Dear Friends in Christ:

With the November general elections approaching, Virginians will soon make their choices for Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, and representatives in the state House of Delegates. To assist Catholics in our two dioceses in exercising their right and duty to vote with a well-formed conscience, 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. The Conference prepared a five-part series (*Faithful Citizenship in Virginia: Issues for the 2009 Elections*) to connect the Church's moral and social teaching to contemporary issues that are regularly debated by our state legislature. This *Faithful Citizenship in Virginia* series – which includes pieces entitled Abortion and Embryonic Stem-Cell Research, Death Penalty, Marriage and Family Life, Economic Concerns and Health Care, and Education – was mailed to each of our parishes, with encouragement that it be distributed to parishioners. The Conference also sent all candidates for statewide office and for contested House seats a questionnaire to assess their views on many of the issues addressed in the *Faithful Citizenship in Virginia* series. Our diocesan newspapers have printed the responses submitted by candidates, and those responses were also mailed to parishes for distribution.

We invite all those in our dioceses who may not have seen these two important voter-education resources to view them at www.vacatholic.org. We also now wish to supplement these materials with some further reflections about the right and responsibility to vote, and the role that one's conscience plays in voting decisions.

In November 2007, we were pleased to join our brother U.S. bishops 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. In a letter we issued last year (“Voting with a Well-Formed Conscience”), we provided the following analysis of some key excerpts from this U.S. bishops' statement:

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 . . . [T]o 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.

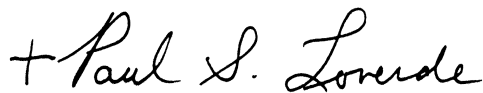
We must seek the "mind of Christ" in the voting judgments we make, just as we must when contemplating any other moral decision in our lives. The best way to begin the process of forming our consciences is to open our minds and hearts to the Lord in the Eucharist and in our daily prayer lives.

With prayer as our solid foundation, we can then receive the truth of Catholic moral and social teaching, understand the link between that teaching and many issues affecting the lives and dignity of our brothers and sisters in the human family, and seek to learn the positions candidates take on these issues. Then, and only then, can we cast our votes with the assurance that we are doing so with a well-formed conscience.

This conscience formation will also enable us to advocate for life-affirming and socially just policies in January, when our Commonwealth's elected leaders begin debating legislation. For while it is essential to vote, voting is only one part of our overall duty to be faithful citizens. That responsibility also includes advocacy, and we encourage every Catholic in our two dioceses to sign up for the Virginia Catholic Conference advocacy network, using the enrollment feature provided at www.vacatholic.org.

As together we seek to participate faithfully in the political process as voters, advocates, and followers of Christ, let us pray for each other, for our Commonwealth, and for our country.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde
Bishop of Arlington



Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo
Bishop of Richmond