



Faithful Citizenship in Virginia: Issues for the 2007 Elections

During the general elections to be held on November 6th, Virginia voters will have the opportunity to choose who will represent them in the Virginia General Assembly. This year's elections will determine the occupants of all 140 seats in the state legislature (40 in the Senate and 100 in the House of Delegates).

To help Catholics preparing to vote connect the Church's social teaching to contemporary issues, and then apply that understanding to specific measures that have been debated by the General Assembly in prior sessions and that may be reconsidered in future years, the Virginia Catholic Conference has devised a six-part educational series, which follows. Virginia's two diocesan newspapers (Richmond's *Catholic Virginian* and the *Arlington Catholic Herald*) will also print the entire series in successive installments over a several-week period.



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Care for Pregnant Women and Unborn Children (Part 1 of a 6-part series)

Catholic social teaching proclaims that human life is sacred from the moment of conception. Because all human beings are created by God, all possess an inherent dignity and therefore have certain basic rights, including the right to life and to those things that make life truly human (e.g., food, shelter, clothing, religious freedom, health care, education, and a safe environment). The right to life is the foundation of all others. Without it, no other rights are possible.

Abortion, then, is a preeminent threat to human dignity, because it directly attacks the most fundamental human good (life itself) and the condition for all others. Abortion is “*always* a grave act of violence,” and laws permitting it are “profoundly unjust” because they fail to recognize equal rights for every child, born and unborn. *Living the Gospel of Life*, a Statement by the U.S. Catholic Bishops (1998). In addition, just as all children merit legal protection and care as members of our human family, so too do all women facing unexpected and difficult pregnancies. Laws and programs that provide the support they need are an essential element of a just and compassionate society.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and state Catholic conferences oppose any law that denies an unborn child’s right to life. Although federal law currently governs abortion’s legality, federal and state policies that restrict abortion and facilitate life-affirming alternatives to the greatest extent possible can save many lives and provide many pregnant women the assistance they need and desire. Key abortion and prenatal measures that were recently considered by the Virginia General Assembly include:

- Legislation requiring that, prior to receiving an abortion, a pregnant woman be given an opportunity to view an ultrasound image of her unborn child.
- Legislation requiring abortion clinics to be licensed by the state and subject to safety standards applicable to outpatient surgery centers.

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- A prohibition on the use of state funds for providing abortions.
- An increase in state funding for prenatal care for low-income pregnant women.

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The Death Penalty (Part 2 of a 6-part series)

Because each person is created in God's image and likeness, human dignity belongs equally to each person, including someone convicted of a heinous crime. While acknowledging the legitimate defense of individuals and society, the Church teaches that the death penalty cannot be justified when a government has other ways to adequately protect its people against an unjust aggressor: "[I]f non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person. Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm – without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself – the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2267).

Applying this teaching during his 1999 visit to the United States, the late Pope John Paul II told those who attended a Mass in St. Louis: "The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life – who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of Life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal . . . for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary."

In solidarity with this teaching, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a 2005 statement entitled *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death* that renewed the call they first made in 1980 for an end to the use of capital punishment in our nation. In this statement, they observed, "In Catholic teaching the state has the recourse to impose the death penalty upon criminals convicted of heinous crimes if this ultimate sanction is the only available means to protect society from a grave threat to human life. However, this right should

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not be exercised when other ways are available to punish criminals and to protect society that are more respectful of human life.”

The Virginia bishops have also consistently appealed for an end to executions. In an op-ed featured in the *Washington Post* on April 29th of this year, Arlington Bishop Paul Loverde and Richmond Bishop Francis DiLorenzo wrote, “No matter how horrendous the crime, if a society can protect itself without ending a human life, it should do so. With Virginia's life-without-parole sentence and modern incarceration system, that protection is provided. The life-sentence alternative is unique in its ability to protect state residents while upholding the dignity of every person, even the one convicted of a brutal crime. Accordingly, we are convinced that -- in our time and place -- the death penalty is unnecessary and inappropriate, and that death sentences should no longer be imposed or carried out in Virginia. Whenever an execution is scheduled in Virginia, we have called for a commutation of the death sentence to life without the possibility of parole.”

Among the 38 states that currently permit capital punishment, Virginia is second only to Texas in the number of executions (98) performed since 1976. Despite this alarming trend, lawmakers’ reactions are mixed. Some believe that executions are no longer needed, others favor keeping the death penalty but wish to reduce the possibility of errors in death-penalty cases, while still others even call for the expansion of capital punishment. Widely varying death-penalty-related measures recently considered by the Virginia General Assembly include:

- Legislation to abolish the death penalty in Virginia.
- Legislation to impose a moratorium on executions while flaws in the state’s death-penalty system (*e.g.*, possible racial, socioeconomic, and geographic disparities in death sentencing) are addressed.
- Legislation expanding application of the death penalty by eliminating the requirement that only a crime’s “triggerman” can receive a death sentence.

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Economic Concerns (Part 3 of a 6-part series)

All members of the human family (regardless of national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences) have basic human rights, including the right to life and to those things necessary to the proper development of life. Members of society share a common responsibility for guaranteeing the rights of all those who are defenseless and marginalized – born and unborn, young and elderly, native and immigrant, working and on welfare. Indeed, the command to love one’s neighbor knows no boundaries and invites each person to have special concern for those who need help the most. In other words, followers of Christ are called to respond to the needs of *all* of their brothers and sisters, *especially* those with the greatest needs. *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, U.S. Catholic Bishops (1998).

These principles of Catholic social teaching (*i.e.*, respect for human life and dignity, solidarity, and preferential option for the poor and vulnerable) mean that economic choices and institutions must be judged by whether they protect life and dignity, support the family, and serve the common good. In other words, an essential moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring. Society has a moral obligation, including governmental action where necessary, to ensure opportunity, meet basic needs, and pursue justice in economic life. *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life*, U.S. Catholic Bishops (1996). Although voluntary groups help many of the poorest in our communities, governments have an obligation to provide adequately funded “safety net” services, and to implement policies and programs that break cycles of poverty and ensure fair treatment for all workers.

In Virginia, many low-income families struggle just to afford basic necessities, such as housing, utilities, transportation, and child care. Sometimes, such households are even the targets of financial practices that trap them in cycles of debt. Economic policy proposals with particular impact on low-income families that were recently considered by the Virginia General Assembly include:

- Legislation establishing a Virginia Housing Trust Fund, which would earmark a dedicated source of state revenue for affordable housing developments for low-income households.

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- State funding for rental subsidies for low-income families whose wages do not enable them to afford housing.
- Legislation requiring Virginia’s payday-lending industry to operate under the same annual-percentage-rate cap on interest (36 percent) as other small-loan lenders operating in Virginia.
- Legislation establishing a “refundable” Virginia Earned Income Tax Credit program that would enable working families whose incomes are too low to pay state taxes to receive a state “refund” (*i.e.*, an income supplement from the state) for part of the credit amount.

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Education and Family Life (Part 4 of a 6-part series)

A particularly important contribution many families make to the common good of society is the education of children. Parents – the first and most important educators – have a fundamental right to choose the education best suited to their children’s needs, including public, private, and religious schools. Governments should help provide the resources required for all parents to exercise this basic right without discrimination, and for all children to access the educational opportunities most suitable to their needs. *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2003).

A primary part of parents’ responsibility as the “first teachers” of their children is providing them clear moral guidance and a positive, wholesome environment for their educational and social development. In fulfilling this duty, one challenge parents frequently encounter is protecting their children from pornographic or otherwise harmful material on the Internet. To address this challenge, policy decisions can play an instrumental role: “Free citizens have the right and the responsibility to form a culture that supports the life and the dignity and nobility of every person. Citizens should unite to demand laws which place reasonable restrictions on the depiction of the human body and human intimacy.” *Bought With a Price: Pornography and the Attack on the Living Temple of God*, A Pastoral Letter by Bishop Paul S. Loverde (Fall 2006).

In Virginia, measures recently considered by the Virginia General Assembly to support parents in the important moral and educational choices they make for their children’s benefit include:

- Legislation requiring state libraries to install Internet filtering technology to receive state funding. That technology is designed to ensure that children are protected from viewing pornographic, obscene, and otherwise harmful materials on the Internet.
- Legislation establishing income-tax credits for business entities and individuals who make contributions to scholarship foundations.

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- Legislation permitting local public-school districts to provide bus transportation to nonpublic-school students.

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Immigrant Families (Part 5 of a 6-part series)

“The Gospel mandate to love our neighbor and welcome the stranger leads the Church to care for and stand with immigrants, both documented and undocumented. While affirming the right and responsibility of sovereign nations to control their borders and to ensure the security of their citizens, especially in the wake of September 11, we seek basic protections for immigrants, including due process rights, access to basic public benefits, and fair naturalization and legalization opportunities. We oppose efforts to stem migration that do not effectively address its root causes and permit the continuation of the political, social, and economic inequities that contribute to it. We believe our nation must remain a place of refuge for those fleeing persecution and suffering exploitation -- refugees, asylum seekers, and victims of human trafficking.” *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2003).

Immigration issues evoke strong passions and spark heated legal, social, and national-security debates; they are indeed very complex. Many people with differing opinions do, however, share one basic observation: Our nation’s immigration system is broken and needs to be repaired. On a daily basis, many parishes and other Catholic institutions in various parts of our country witness firsthand some of the products of the current broken system -- families are separated, workers are exploited, and migrants are abused by smugglers and sometimes even die in the desert. In response to these sobering realities, the U.S. and Virginia Catholic bishops recognize that a sovereign nation has a right and a responsibility to secure its borders, but that an “enforcement only” approach is not the most effective or humane way to reform the U.S. immigration system.

In a global economy of growing prosperity for some and pervasive poverty for others, immigrants face particularly daunting challenges. Many immigrants who could not obtain employment in their countries of origin have found willing U.S. employers and perform jobs that help fuel our nation’s economy. Yet, too many of these workers who are undocumented are exploited because of their status by being denied safe housing and basic labor protections. In a culture that sometimes values workers only for their productivity, the Church teaches that “regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected Government

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policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.” *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, a Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States (2003). This pastoral letter also explains, “The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.”

Consistent with these principles, legislation debated (but not enacted) by the U.S. Congress earlier this year sought to provide opportunities for undocumented individuals currently in the U.S. to earn legal permanent-resident status (*e.g.*, by paying fines and taxes and waiting to enable those already “in line” for green cards to be processed first), and to reduce extremely long waiting times in the family-based visa system. [Due to backlogs in this system, legal immigrants wait as many as 22 years for family members to join them in the U.S.]

In Virginia, Congress’ failure over the last few years to enact comprehensive reforms to a broken immigration system has spawned divergent reactions among legislators and local governments. Widely varying measures considered recently at the state and local levels include:

- Proposals debated by the Virginia General Assembly that would have made undocumented immigrants ineligible for worker’s compensation benefits in the event of workplace injury or death, and that would have prohibited undocumented immigrant children who graduate from Virginia high schools from receiving in-state tuition at Virginia’s public colleges and universities.
- Resolutions debated by county and city boards seeking to increase enforcement of immigration laws by local police, investigate the immigration status of certain individuals who are arrested for other reasons, curb undocumented immigrants’ access to public services, and gather data on the number of undocumented immigrants living in Virginia localities.

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Ethical Research Standards (Part 6 of a 6-part series)

“All human beings . . . belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the ‘book of life’ (cf. Psalm 139: 1, 13-16).” *Evangelium Vitae*, para. 61 (1995).

This excerpt from John Paul II’s “Gospel of Life” encyclical reminds us that when we were embryos, God already had a unique plan for us. We were then, and are now, part of the human family. God calls us to treat all members of this family justly. “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life [S]ince the embryo must be treated as a person, it must also be defended in its integrity, tended and cared for, to the extent possible, in the same way as any other human being as far as medical assistance is concerned.” *Donum Vitae*, Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1987). In other words, “Whether we are adults, children, infants, or even tiny embryos, we share a common humanity and a fundamental right to life that must be protected from the very first moment of existence.” *Science at the Service of Life*, a Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops Serving Virginia (2006).

Within the last decade, contrary perspectives on the nature and value of human beings at the embryonic stage of development have garnered heightened attention. Some have said that embryonic human beings are nothing more than disposable sources of stem cells. To others, “spare” embryos in frozen storage are expendable for research because they might ultimately be “discarded” anyway. Still others even argue that new human embryos should be cloned and subsequently destroyed to enhance researchers’ stem-cell supplies. Each of these views “ . . . reduces human life to a commodity and places its perceived usefulness to others above its intrinsic dignity. In stark contrast to this perspective, the Church teaches that human embryos deserve respect and protection precisely because they are *human beings*, rather than raw material for research and experimentation. They are loved by God and are our brothers and sisters in the human family. The possibility that our family’s smallest members – considered by some to be

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the “least among us” -- might be “thrown away” in the future does not alter our obligation to protect them from harm in the present. In other words, their human dignity cannot be violated by some people now simply because it might be violated by others later.” *Science at the Service of Life*. Just as it would be gravely unjust to kill terminally ill patients, death-row inmates, and others who are judged to be close to death for experimental purposes, it is equally unjust to destroy human embryos for their stem cells.

Much of the political debate surrounding stem-cell research has focused on the scientific claim that research on stem cells derived by destroying human embryos will lead to the cure of many diseases. Even if this assertion were true, embryo-destructive research would not be morally justified. However, stem cells obtained by destroying embryos have not helped a single human patient despite over 25 years of research. On the other hand, stem-cell research that poses no ethical concern is already beginning to help patients with dozens of conditions in clinical trials. Research using stem cells from adult tissue, umbilical-cord blood, amniotic fluid and other sources is showing enormous promise and is likely to produce new treatments for patients now living. Nevertheless, many federal and state lawmakers across the country, with the backing of prominent researchers and foundations, have insisted that more government funds be used for embryonic stem-cell research, which several states are already financing with taxpayers’ money. In Virginia, no state funds are currently earmarked specifically for embryonic stem-cell research, but no law prohibits the use of money from the state budget for that purpose either. Widely varying proposals recently considered by the Virginia General Assembly include:

- Budget provisions prohibiting the use of state funds for research on (1) stem cells obtained from human embryos, and (2) cells or tissues derived from deliberately induced abortions.
- An increase in state funding earmarked exclusively for stem-cell research that poses no ethical problems and that has already demonstrated therapeutic benefit (*i.e.*, on stem cells that were not obtained by destroying or harming human embryos).
- Legislation that would have, for the first time in Virginia’s history, explicitly authorized state higher-education institutions to conduct embryonic stem-cell research as well as a form of research on aborted babies known as embryonic germ-cell research.

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