



Faithful Citizenship in Virginia: Issues for the 2009 Elections

During the general elections to be held on November 3rd, Virginia voters will have the opportunity to choose candidates in various state races. This year's elections will determine the next Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Attorney General, as well as the occupants of all 100 seats in the Virginia House of Delegates.

To help Catholics preparing to vote connect the Church's social teaching to contemporary issues, the Virginia Catholic Conference has devised a five-part educational series. The first part, entitled "Abortion and Embryonic Stem-Cell Research," appears below. Other parts of the series address the Death Penalty, Marriage and Family Life, Economic Concerns and Health Care, and Education.

Abortion and Embryonic Stem-Cell Research

"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. "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).

Indeed, 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 and the destruction of human embryos for research are, therefore, preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack the most fundamental human good (life itself) and the condition for all others. We are called to counter these threats by supporting “laws and policies to protect human life to the maximum degree possible.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, U.S. Catholic Bishops (2007).

In Virginia, measures that have been debated by the General Assembly in recent years, and that are expected to receive continued consideration, include:

- A proposal to stop Virginia’s current practice of using state Medicaid funds for abortions.
- Legislation requiring that, prior to receiving an abortion, a pregnant woman be given an opportunity to view an ultrasound image of her unborn child.
- A proposal to prohibit the use of any state funds for research on (1) stem cells obtained from human embryos and (2) cells or tissues derived from deliberately induced abortions.

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The Death Penalty (Part 2 of a 5-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 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 29, 2007, 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 all states, Virginia is second only to Texas in the number of executions (103) performed since 1976. Despite this trend, the following death-penalty expansion proposals have recently been considered by the Virginia General Assembly and are expected to surface again:

- Legislation to expand the circumstances under which accomplices could receive death sentences by eliminating the “triggerman rule” (which limits capital punishment to the actual perpetrator of a murder with few exceptions).
- Legislation to allow the death penalty to be imposed for the murder of a fire marshal or assistant fire marshal with law enforcement powers.
- Legislation to permit the death penalty for the murder of an auxiliary police officer or an auxiliary deputy sheriff.

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Marriage and Family Life (Part 3 of a 5-part series)

“The family is the basic cell of human society. The role, responsibilities, and needs of families should be central national priorities. Marriage must be defined, recognized, and protected as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, and as the source of the next generation and the protective haven for children.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, U.S. Catholic Bishops (2007).

“Though regulated by civil laws and church laws, marriage did not originate from either church or state, but from God. The only authentic understanding of marriage, therefore, is the one that God inscribed in our human nature. No religion, government, or individual has the right or the legitimate authority to alter the basic meaning and structure of marriage that has existed ever since the first man and woman were created. Because God designed the marital union as part of our intrinsic nature and established it as the foundation of our civilization, the proper role of both church and state is one of stewardship, to preserve our Creator’s great gift of marriage from one generation to the next.”

“[M]arriage as the lifelong union of a man and a woman is not one ‘model’ among many options of equal public significance. Rather, it is the very building block of the family and of society. Civil laws make a just and necessary distinction when they recognize the unique role the institution of marriage has in society, rather than reducing this institution to nothing more than one of many alternative kinds of voluntary relationships.”

The above two excerpts were taken from *The Institution of Marriage and the Common Good: A Pastoral Letter of the Virginia Catholic Bishops* (September 2006).

“We oppose contraceptive mandates in public programs and health plans, which endanger rights of conscience and can interfere with parents’ right to guide the moral formation of their children.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, U.S. Catholic Bishops (2007).

The following measures affecting marriage and family-life education have been examined by the Virginia General Assembly and are expected to be subjects on ongoing debate:

- A proposal to repeal the marriage-protection provision that was added to Virginia's constitution via a ballot initiative in November 2006. [This constitutional provision – approved by Virginia's voters in 2006 – affirms marriage as “a union between one man and one woman” and draws a clear distinction between the public institution of marriage and other voluntary relationships.]
- Legislation to require public schools to include teaching on contraceptive methods within their curriculum guidelines.
- A proposal to ensure that state taxpayers' money would not be provided to Planned Parenthood.

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Economic Concerns and Health Care (Part 4 of a 5-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, child care, and health 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, and are anticipated to receive consideration again next year, include:

- Legislation establishing a Virginia Housing Trust Fund, which would earmark a dedicated source of state revenue for the development of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income households.
- State funding for rental subsidies for low-income families whose wages do not enable them to afford housing.
- A proposal to make a cost-of-living adjustment for payments to low-income families under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program. [Payments have not been increased in nine years.]
- Legislation requiring car-title lenders operating in Virginia to conduct business under the same annual interest cap (36 percent) as most other types of small-loan lenders operating in Virginia.
- A proposal to require Virginia to permit Medicaid eligibility for immigrants who have legally resided in the U.S. for five years and who meet the income criteria. [Currently, in most cases Virginia bars Medicaid coverage for legal immigrants who are not U.S. citizens unless they arrived in the U.S. before August 22, 1996. The federal government, however, gives states permission to grant eligibility to those who have legally resided in the U.S. for five years.]

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Education (Part 5 of a 5-part series)

“Parents – the first and most important educators – have a fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, including public, private, and religious schools. Government, through means such as tax credits and publicly funded scholarships, should help provide resources required for parents, especially those of modest means, to exercise this basic right without discrimination.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, U.S. Catholic Bishops (2007).

All parents with school-aged children contribute to Virginia’s education system—regardless of what schools their children attend. Enabling all parents to realize a return on this investment would enable Virginia to promote equity in the services it provides children. Especially at a time when many families face economic hardship, providing assistance would reduce the financial strain that many parents face even to afford school supplies for the new school year. In Virginia, education-related measures recently considered by the General Assembly, and expected to surface again, include:

- Legislation to establish income-tax credits for businesses and individuals who donate to scholarship foundations or public-school foundations.
- Legislation to establish tax credits for school supplies (available to parents of children who attend public or nonpublic schools or who are home schooled, with a limit of \$125 for individual taxpayers, and \$250 for taxpayers filing jointly).

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