



Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

A call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

*The following are excerpts from the document **Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship***

To read the entire document go to www.usccb.org

Introductory Note

The Catholic Bishops of the United States are pleased to re-propose to our people *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, our teaching document on the political responsibility of Catholics. This statement, overwhelmingly adopted by the body of bishops in 2007, represents the continuing teaching of our bishops' Conference and our guidance for Catholics in the exercise of their rights and duties as participants in our democracy. We urge our Catholic pastors and people to continue to use this important statement to help them form their consciences, to contribute to civil and respectful public dialogue, and to shape their choices in the coming election in the light of Catholic teaching.

The statement lifts up our dual heritage as both faithful Catholics and American citizens. We are members of a community of faith with a long tradition of teaching and action on human life, and dignity, marriage and family, justice and peace, care for creation, and the common good. As Americans, we are also blessed with religious liberty which safeguards our right to bring our principles and moral convictions into the public arena. These Constitutional freedoms need to be both exercised and protected, as some seek to mute the voices or limit the freedoms of religious believers and religious institutions. Catholics have the same rights and duties as others

to participate fully in public life. The Church through its institutions must be free to carry out its mission and contribute to the common good without being pressured to sacrifice fundamental teachings and moral principles.

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship is widely used to share Catholic teaching on the role of faith and conscience in political life. Although it has at times been misused to present an incomplete or distorted view of the demands of faith in politics, this statement remains a faithful and challenging call to discipleship in the world of politics. It does not offer a voters' guide, scorecard of issues, or direction on how to vote. It applies Catholic moral principles to a range of important issues and warns against misguided appeals to "conscience" to ignore fundamental moral claims, to reduce Catholic moral concerns to one or two matters, or to justify choices simply to advance partisan, ideological, or personal interests. It does not offer a quantitative listing of issues for equal consideration, but outlines and makes important distinctions among moral issues acknowledging that some involve the clear obligation to oppose intrinsic evils which can never be justified and that others require action to pursue justice and promote the common good. In short, it calls Catholics to form their consciences in the light of their Catholic faith and to bring our moral principles to the debate and decisions about candidates and issues.

The moral and human challenges outlined in the second half of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* remain pressing national issues. In particular, our Conference is focused on several current and fundamental problems, some involving opposition to intrinsic evils and others raising serious moral questions:

- Continuing destruction of unborn children through abortion and other threats to the lives and dignity of others who are vulnerable, sick or unwanted;
- Renewed efforts to force Catholic ministries- in health care, education, and social services- to violate their consciences or stop serving those in need;
- Intensifying efforts to redefine marriage and enact measures which undermine marriage as the permanent, faithful, and fruitful union of one man and one woman and a fundamental moral and social institution essential to the common good;

- An economic crisis which has devastated lives and livelihoods, increasing national and global unemployment, poverty, and hunger; increasing deficits and debt and the duty to respond in ways which protect those who are poor and vulnerable as well as future generations;
- The failure to repair a broken immigration system with comprehensive measures that promote true respect for law, protect the human rights and dignity of immigrants and refugees, recognize their contributions to our nation, keep families together, and advance the common good;
- Wars, terror, and violence which raise serious moral questions on the use of force and its human and moral costs in a dangerous world, particularly the absence of justice, security, and peace in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East.

In this coming election and beyond, we urge leaders and all Catholics to share the message of faithful citizenship and to use this document in forming their own consciences, so we can act together to promote and protect human life and dignity, marriage and family, justice and peace in service to the common good. This kind of political responsibility is a requirement of our faith and duty as citizens.

What does the Church Say About Catholic Social Teaching in the Public Square?-- Seven Key Themes

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.

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).

As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. A candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support. Yet a candidate's position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may be legitimately lead to a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support.

As noted previously, the Catholic approach to faithful citizenship rests on moral principles found in Scripture and Catholic moral and social teaching as well as in the hearts of all people of good will. We now present central and enduring themes of the Catholic social tradition that can provide a moral framework for the decisions in public life.

The Right to Life and the Dignity of the Human Person

Human life is sacred. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Direct attacks on innocent persons are never morally acceptable, at any stage or in any condition. In our society, human life is especially under direct attack from abortion. Other direct threats to the sanctity of human life include euthanasia, human cloning, and the destruction of human embryos for research.

Catholic teaching about the dignity of life calls us to oppose torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty; to prevent genocide and attacks against noncombatants; to oppose racism; and to overcome poverty and suffering. Nations are called to protect the right to life by seeking effective ways to combat evil and terror without resorting to armed conflicts except as a last resort, always seeking first to resolve disputes by peaceful means. We revere the lives of children in the womb, the lives of persons dying in war and from starvation, and indeed the lives of all human beings as children of God.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The human person is not only sacred but also social. Full human development takes place in relationship with others. The family-based on marriage between a man and a woman- is the first and fundamental unit of society and is a sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children. It should be defended and strengthened, not redefined or undermined by permitting same-sex unions or other distortions of marriage. Respect for the family should be reflected in every policy and program. It is important to uphold parents' rights and responsibilities to care for their children, including the right to choose their children's education.

How we organize our society- in economics and politics, in law and policy- directly affects the common good and the capacity of individuals to develop their full potential. Every person and association has a right and a duty to participate actively in shaping society and to promote the well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

The principle of subsidiarity reminds us that larger institutions in society should not overwhelm or interfere with smaller or local institutions, yet larger institutions have essential responsibilities when the more local institutions cannot adequately protect human dignity, meet human needs, and advance the common good.

Rights and Responsibilities

Human dignity is respected and the common good is fostered only if human rights are protected and basic responsibilities are met. Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access to those things required for human decency- food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life. The right to exercise religious freedom publicly and privately by individuals and institutions along with freedom of conscience need to be constantly defended. In a fundamental way, the right to free expression of religious beliefs protects all other rights. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities- to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. Rights should be understood and exercised in a moral framework rooted in the dignity of the human person.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst. In a society marred by deepening disparities between rich and poor, Scripture gives us the story of the Last Judgment (see Mt 25:31-46) and reminds us that we will be judged by our response to the “least among us.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

Those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of *a preferential love* on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere. (no. 2448)

Pope Benedict XVI has taught that “love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 22). This preferential option for the poor and vulnerable includes all who are marginalized in our nation and beyond- unborn children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill, and victims of injustice and oppression.

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. Employers contribute to the common good through the services or products they provide and by creating jobs that uphold the dignity and rights of workers- to productive work, to decent and just wages, to adequate benefits and security in their old age, to the choice of whether to organize and join unions, to the opportunity for legal status for immigrant workers, to private property, and to economic initiative. Workers also have responsibilities- to provide a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay, to treat employers and co-workers with respect, and to carry out their work in ways that contribute to the common good. Workers, employers, and unions should not only advance their own interests, but also work together to advance economic justice and the well-being of all.

Solidarity

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions and requires us to eradicate racism and address the extreme poverty and disease plaguing so much of the world. Solidarity also includes the Scriptural call to welcome the stranger among us- including immigrants seeking work, a safe home, education for their children, and a decent life for their families. In light of the Gospel's invitation to be peacemakers, our commitment to solidarity with our neighbors- at home and abroad- also demands that we promote peace and pursue justice in a world marred by terrible violence and conflict. Decisions on the use of force should be guided by traditional moral criteria and undertaken only as a last resort. As Pope Paul VI taught, "If you want peace, work for justice." (*World' Day of Peace Message*, January 1, 1972)

Care for God's Creation

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of God's creation. Care for the earth is a duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people. We should strive to live simply to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. We have a moral obligation to protect the planet on which we live- to respect God's creation and to ensure a safe and hospitable environment for human beings, especially children at their most vulnerable stages of development. As stewards called by God to share the responsibility for the future of the earth, we should work for a world in which people respect and protect all of creation and seek to live simply in harmony with it for the sake of future generations.

These themes from Catholic social teaching provides a moral framework that does not easily fit ideologies "right" or "left," "liberal" or "conservative," or the platform of any political party. They are not partisan or sectarian, but reflect fundamental ethical principles that are common to all people.

Applying Catholic Teaching to Major Issues: A Summary of Policy Positions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Social Justice

Economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person. Social and economic policies should foster the creation of **jobs for all who can work** with decent working conditions and **just wages**. Barriers to equal pay and employment for women and those facing unjust **discrimination must be overcome**. Catholic social teaching supports the **right of workers to choose whether to organize**, join a union, and bargain collectively, and to exercise these rights without reprisal. It also affirms **economic freedom, initiative, and the right to private property**. Workers, owners, employers, and unions should work together to create decent jobs, build a more just economy, and advance the common good.

Welfare policy should reduce **poverty** and dependency, strengthen family life, and help families leave poverty through work, training, and assistance with child care, health care, housing, and transportation. It should also provide a safety net for those who cannot work. Improving the **Earned Income Tax Credit** and **child tax credits**, available as refunds to families in greatest need, will help lift low-income families out of poverty.

Faith-based groups deserve recognition and support, not as a substitute for government, but as responsive, effective partners, especially in the poorest communities and countries. The USCCB actively supports conscience clauses, opposes any effort to undermine the ability of faith-based groups to preserve their identity and integrity as partners with government, and is committed to protecting long-standing civil rights and other protections for both religious groups and the people they serve. Government bodies should not require Catholic institutions to compromise their moral convictions to participate in government health or human service programs.

Social Security should provide adequate, continuing, and reliable income in an equitable manner for low- and average-wage workers and their families when these workers retire or become disabled, and for the survivors when a wage-earner dies.

Affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right. With an estimated 47 million Americans lacking health care coverage, it is also an urgent national priority. Reform of the nation's health care system needs to be rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, and meet the needs of the poor and uninsured especially born and unborn children, pregnant women, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations. Religious groups should be able to provide health care without compromising their religious convictions. The USCCB supports measures to strengthen Medicare and Medicaid. Our Conference also advocates effective, compassionate care that reflects Catholic moral values for those suffering from HIV/AIDS and those coping with addictions.

The lack of safe, affordable **housing** requires a renewed commitment to increase the supply of quality housing and to preserve, maintain, and improve existing housing through public/private partnerships, especially with religious groups and community organizations. The USCCB continues to oppose unjust housing discrimination and to support measures to meet the credit needs of low-income and minority communities.

A first priority for **agriculture** policy should be **food security for all**. Because no one should face **hunger** in a land of plenty, Food Stamps, the Special Nutrition Program for women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and other nutrition programs need to be strong and effective. Farmers and farm workers who grow, harvest, and process food deserve a just return for their labor, with safe and just working conditions and adequate housing. Supporting rural communities sustains a way of life that enriches our nation. Careful stewardship of the earth and its natural resources demands policies that support **sustainable agriculture** as vital elements of agricultural policy.

The gospel mandate to “welcome the stranger” requires Catholics to care for and stand with **immigrants**, both documented and undocumented, including immigrant children. Comprehensive reform is urgently necessary to fix a broken immigration system and should include a temporary work program with worker protections and a path to permanent residency; family reunification policies; a broad and fair legalization program; access to legal protections, including due process and essential public programs; refuge for those fleeing persecution and

exploitation; and policies to address the root causes of migration. The rights and responsibility of nations to control their borders and to maintain the rule of law should be recognized.

All persons have a right to receive a quality **education**. Young people, including those who are poor and those with disabilities, need to have the opportunity to develop intellectually, morally, spiritually, and physically, allowing them to become good citizens who make socially and morally responsible decisions. This requires parental choice in education. It also requires educational institutions to have orderly, just, respectful, and non-violent environments where adequate professional and material resources are available. The USCCB strongly supports adequate funding, including scholarships, tax credits, and other means, to educate all persons no matter what their personal condition or what school they attend- public, private, or religious. All teachers and administrators deserve salaries and benefits that reflect principles of economic justice, as well as access to resources necessary for teachers to prepare for their important tasks. Services aimed at improving education- especially for those most at risk- that are available to students and teachers in public schools should also be available to students and teachers in **private and religious schools** as a matter of justice.

Promoting moral responsibility and effective responses to violent crime, curbing violence in media, supporting reasonable restrictions on access to assault weapons and handguns, and opposing the use of the **death penalty** are particularly important in light of a growing “culture of violence.” An ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration should be a foundation for the reform of our broken **criminal justice system**. A remedial, rather than a strictly punitive, approach to offenders should be developed.

It is important for our society to continue to combat **discrimination** based on race, religion, sex, ethnicity, disabling condition, or age, as these are grave injustices and affronts to human dignity. Where the effects of past discrimination persist, society has the obligation to take positive steps to overcome the legacy of injustice, including vigorous action to remove barriers to education and equal employment for women and minorities.

Care for the earth and for the environment is a moral issue. Protecting the land, water, and air we share is a religious duty of stewardship and reflects our responsibility to born and unborn children, who are most vulnerable to environmental assault. Effective initiatives are

required for energy conservation and the development of alternate, renewable, and clean-energy resources. Our Conference offers a distinctive call to seriously address **global climate change**, focusing on the virtue of prudence, pursuit of the common good, and the impact on the poor, particularly on vulnerable workers and the poorest nations. The United States should lead in contributing to the sustainable development of poorer nations and promoting greater justice in sharing the burden of environmental blight, neglect, and recovery.

Global Solidarity

A more just world will likely be a more peaceful world, a world less vulnerable to terrorism and other violence. The United States has the responsibility to take the lead in addressing the scandal of **poverty and underdevelopment**. Our nation should help to **humanize globalization**, addressing its negative consequences and spreading its benefits, especially among the world's poor. The United States also has a unique opportunity to sue its power in partnership with others to build a more just and peaceful world.

- The United States should take a leading role in helping to **alleviate global poverty** through substantially increased development aid for the poorest countries, more equitable trade policies, and continuing efforts to relieve the crushing burdens of debt and disease. Our nation's efforts to reduce poverty should not be associated with demeaning and sometimes coercive population control programs; instead, these efforts should focus on working with the poor to help them build a future of hope and opportunity for themselves and their children.
- U.S. policy should promote **religious liberty** and other basic **human rights**. The use of **torture** must be rejected as fundamentally incompatible with the dignity of the human person and ultimately counterproductive in the effort to combat terrorism.
- The United States should provide political and financial support for beneficial **United Nations** programs and reforms, for other **international bodies**, and for international law, so that together these institutions may become more responsible and responsive agents for addressing global problems.

- Asylum should be afforded to refugees who hold a well-founded fear of persecution in their homelands. Our country should support protection for **persons fleeing persecution** through safe haven in other countries, including the United States, especially for unaccompanied children, women, victims of human trafficking, and religious minorities.
- Our country should be a leader- in collaboration with the international community- in addressing **regional conflicts** in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Congo, Sudan, Colombia, and West Africa.
- Leadership on the **Israeli- Palestinian conflict** is an especially urgent priority. The United States should actively pursue comprehensive negotiations leading to a just and peaceful resolution that respects the legitimate claims and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians, ensuring security for Israel, a viable state for Palestinians, respect for Lebanon’s sovereignty, and peace in the region.
- While the Holy See and our Conference have raised serious moral questions regarding the war in Iraq, as bishops we urgently call on our country to work with the international community to seek a “responsible transition” in Iraq and to address the human consequences of war in **Iraq and Afghanistan.**

Defending human life, building peace, combating poverty and despair, and protecting freedom and human rights are not only moral imperatives- they are wise national priorities that will make our nation and world safer.