

CONSCIENCE AND THE CATHOLIC VOTER

“In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.”

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, 13

In the current environment of extraordinary polarization and having been prompted by many Catholics of good will for guidance in this election year, I am pleased to present to you “Conscience and the Catholic Voter,” a series of eight outlines with a view to the upcoming election, prepared by the Director of the Office for Life and Justice of Catholic Charities, Peter Range. These outlines are offered in a spirit of encouragement to provide insight into Catholic Social Teaching regarding issues of consequence in this year’s election. I am asking that these outlines together with this introduction be broadly distributed and be made available for placing in parishes bulletins and on parish and diocesan websites.

As these outlines examine the many life issues affecting the dignity of the human person in this upcoming election, we are committed to defending and protecting life in the full spectrum of areas of intense disagreement including Euthanasia, Religious Freedom, Marriage and Family, Human Trafficking, Immigration, Prisoners, Racism, Socialism and the Environment. That said, it is critical for Catholics to recall that the destruction of innocent human life through abortion is not simply one among many issues but the foundational and preeminent life issue facing our nation. “No human law can validly contradict the Commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.”” (USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics [1998], no. 31*).

In this election year, there is no doubt that we are faced with a choice between two deeply flawed candidates, and that neither party perfectly aligns with our Gospel values. As Catholics, we do not cast votes based on whether we like or dislike the personality of the candidates; we do not cast votes based on whether the candidate does or does not have the same color of skin as us; we do not cast votes based on the age or gender of the candidates; we do not cast votes based on the political party a family has or has not endorsed in the past; we do not cast votes based on whether the person does or does not share our religious affiliation.

Instead, as Catholics, we need to ask ourselves which party platform, which evident actions and voting records of candidates are more closely aligned to what we hold to be true and just, and whether any of these are directly opposed to the consistent fundamental moral teachings of the Church. With the Democratic and Republican Conventions now in the rear view mirror, their candidates endorsed and their platforms published, it now falls to us to realize that, no matter whether we are affiliated with this or that political party or no party at all, it is our responsibility as Catholic citizens of our nation to exercise our civic duty to vote - for the sake of the common good of society - and that we do so with minds and hearts informed by what the Church herself teaches, not what this or that person says the Church teaches or what this or that person holds, mindful that ultimately we are called first to be citizens of heaven.

As Catholics, it is imperative that we form our consciences from the heart of the Church. I pray these outlines will aid in helping you to form your conscience through understanding Catholic teaching and I encourage you to approach these issues with prayer, charity and fidelity. Please share these outlines broadly in your parishes and schools and invite discussion using these documents. May the Lord guide us and our nation at this critical time.

Sincerely yours in Christ Jesus,



Most Reverend Daniel E. Thomas

CONSCIENCE AND THE CATHOLIC VOTER – 1ST OF 8

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Since participation in political life is a moral obligation, Catholics need to form their conscience with the mind and heart of the Church on issues of consequence. This outline is the first of eight, which will examine important moral and political issues. This first outline will provide a framework to examine all the other issues effecting the human person by answering the question: what is Catholic Social Teaching?

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) “Is built on the foundation handed on by the apostles to the Fathers of the Church and then received and further explored by the great Christian doctors. It is attested to by the saints and by those who gave their lives for Christ.” Specifically, “It is an expression of the prophetic task of the supreme pontiffs to give apostolic guidance to the church of Christ and to discern the new demands of evangelization.” (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 12)

This prophetic teaching from the heart of the church, “Rests on the threefold cornerstone of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity.” (Saint John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 55) Along with the idea that we should search for the “common good” these are the preeminent themes of Catholic Social Teaching:

1. **Human Dignity:** Every human person conceived is made in the image and likeness of God and is thus deserving of fundamental rights and respect, including first and foremost, the right to life.
2. **Solidarity:** As Pope Francis has said we have a ‘common father’ and thus we all belong to one family. Being a part of one family we have a responsibility to care for one another.
3. **Subsidiarity:** The belief that problems are best handled at the level in which they arise. Subsidiarity then insists on limits to State’s intervention in the affairs of the family and society.

It is from the dignity of the human person that all of Catholic Social Teaching flows. Being made in God’s image and likeness, Catholic’s must defend the dignity of each human life especially when life is in its most vulnerable state. This is why in their 2020 introductory letter to “*Faithful Citizenship*” the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote:

The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed. (<https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-introductory-letter>)

Beyond the threat of abortion, Catholic Social Teaching communicates that the key to addressing issues of justice and the serious destruction of our society begins with the family. CST defines the family as “Founded on marriage, in which the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment in which children can be born and develop their potentialities, become aware of their dignity and prepare to face their unique and individual destiny.” (Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 39) Indeed, it is the family, “In which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person.” (CA, 39)

In summation, as we form our conscience, build a culture of life and love, and vote; it is imperative that we direct our minds and hearts, those whom we love, and those we encounter every day to the Church’s fruitful vision for the sanctity of life and the sacredness of the family. For it is from the family that “citizens come to birth” for the “development of society itself.” (Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 42)

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CONSCIENCE AND THE CATHOLIC VOTER – 2ND OF 8

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Abortion

Every single human life is valuable and possesses a dignity beyond our imagination. As 4th century Church Father St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

God did not make the heavens in his image, nor the moon, the sun, the beauty of the stars, nor anything else which you can see... You alone are made in the image and likeness of that nature which surpasses all understanding... Nothing in all creation can equal your grandeur. (Kyriaki FitzGerald, *Persons in Communion*, p. 72)

This is why the Church has unequivocally taught that abortion is an intrinsic evil, which must be opposed. It violates the fifth commandment of ‘thou shalt not kill’ as it destroys an innocent human life. No circumstance warrants any person, let alone a mother of a child, to end the life of another human person. This is why Archbishop Jose Gomez, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) once remarked,

Abortion is not a “Catholic” issue. It is a matter of fundamental human rights. In fact, I believe it is the foundational issue of our time. Because it is so important, the church has spoken clearly about it and believes it is an essential aspect of the Catholic faith. (Today's Catholic, Newspaper of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, 10 October 2008)

Because the opposition to abortion is an essential aspect of the Catholic faith, Catholics cannot support politicians who advocate for abortion or ‘abortion rights.’ While this does not mean Catholics should only care about the abortion issue, it does mean Catholics cannot excuse or dismiss this grave error in judgment concerning politicians political positioning on this issue. As the USCCB has written:

*Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care ... **But being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community.** If we understand the human person as the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ — the living house of God — then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house’s foundation. These directly and immediately violate the human person’s most fundamental right — the right to life. Neglect of these issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. Such attacks cannot help but lull the social conscience in ways ultimately destructive of other human rights.* (1998 Pastoral Letter of the USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life*, 22)

In summation, abortion is not just one issue among many. It is the human rights issue of our time and the preeminent issue of life and importance in this election. As Catholics, it is our duty to protect the most fundamental right of the human person: the right to life. The intentional destruction of innocent human life is intrinsically evil. It must always be opposed.

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Marriage and the Family

The family is the foundational cell of society. That is why the Church teaches what Pope Saint John Paul II wrote in 1981:

The future of humanity passes by way of the family. It is therefore indispensable and urgent that every person of good will should endeavor to save and foster the values and requirements of the family. I feel that I must ask for a particular effort in this field from the sons and daughters of the Church... They must show the family special love. This is an injunction that calls for concrete action. (Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio, On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, 86)

If the future of humanity passes by the way of the family, Catholics should pay special attention to the political approaches of candidates to the family. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has written, Catholics are called to:

Protect the fundamental understanding of marriage as the life-long and faithful union of one man and one woman as the central institution of society; promote the complementarity of the sexes and reject false “gender” ideologies; provide better support for family life morally, socially, and economically, so that our nation helps parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values, and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility. (*The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, Handout Part II*)

Yet today, we find the family in crisis. As Pope Francis has pointed out:

The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis (which) is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another, it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 66)

This crisis arises from a general lack of openness to life, the use of contraception, absentee fatherhood, and the destruction of what marriage actually is. The Church has always taught that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman that brings them together as husband and wife to be father and mother to any children their union produces.

Marriage is a covenant “by which man and woman establish themselves a partnership of the whole of life that is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1601)

In summation, marriage is the building block of families, and therefore of all human civilization. Marriage then has public, not just private, purposes. The Church recognizes then that marriage is based on the truth that men and women are distinct and complimentary, that having children requires a man and a woman, and that every child deserves both a mom and a dad. Catholics therefore should pay special attention to where candidates stand on the crucial role of the family, that is founded on God’s design for love, between a man and a woman in marriage.

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Religious Freedom

Catholics in America have long enjoyed the fact that in the Bill of Rights, religious liberty, with its rights of conscience, is the first freedom that is protected in our Constitution. Yet today, religious freedom, even in the United States, is consistently being challenged. As Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami, the acting chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty has pointed out:

Religious freedom is under stress throughout the world. Even in our Western liberal democracies, discrimination against religion in general and Catholic Christianity, in particular, is growing... “Yet, just as freedom of speech depends not only on one’s right to say what’s on one’s mind but also on the existence of institutions like newspapers, universities, libraries, political parties and other associations that make up what we call ‘civil society,’ so too freedom of religion ‘for the good of all’ must also encompass protecting those institutions that nourish the individual’s free exercise of religion. (Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami, <http://www.usccb.org/news/20-100.cfm>)

We can see this stress and hostility towards religion from cases against the Little Sisters of the Poor to faith-based adoption agencies, the accreditation of religious educational institutions, the grants and contracts of faith-based charities and small businesses, and the licensing of religious professions. Our cherished religious liberties are now at stake by our political choices. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has written:

In the United States, religious freedom generally enjoys strong protection in our law and culture, but those protections are now in doubt. For example, the longstanding tax exemption of the Church has been explicitly called into question at the highest levels of government, precisely because of her teachings on marriage. Catholics have a particular duty to make sure that protections like these do not weaken but instead grow in strength. This is not only to secure the just freedom of the Church and the faithful here but also to offer hope and an encouraging witness to those who suffer direct and even violent religious persecution in countries where the protection is far weaker. (The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, P. 30)

It is imperative then as Catholics that we defend religious liberty and the rights of conscience in our political choices. For religious liberty has its foundation in the dignity of the human person. As Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami points out:

The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person. Religious freedom is the human right that guarantees all other rights — peace and creative living together will only be possible if freedom of religion is fully respected. (<http://www.usccb.org/news/20-100.cfm>)

In summation, it is the duty of every Catholic to fight for religious liberty to ensure not only the right of conscience in the workplace, but so that families, Churches, and peoples of all faiths can work in accordance with their religious beliefs while they care for the common good, the poor and vulnerable, and God’s creation.

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Immigration

The first principle of Catholic Social Teaching is the dignity of the human person. From the moment of conception, each person is made in the image and likeness of God. This principle teaches us then that every immigrant, documented or undocumented, is made in God’s image and deserves our love and respect as a child of God.

As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has written:

The Church supports the human rights of all people and offers them pastoral care, education, and social services, no matter what the circumstances of entry into this country, and it works for the respect of the human dignity of all especially those who find themselves in desperate circumstances. (Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity, A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2000)

Thus our starting point in discussing the immigration issue is one of mutual respect and the recognition of the dignity of our fellow man, especially the immigrant among us. One who has traveled to Latin American countries in particular can understand some of the desperate circumstances which drive migrants to our border seeking a better life.

Of course, the Church recognizes that a sovereign nation has a right and a responsibility to protect its own borders. As Pope Francis has stated:

Can borders be controlled? Yes, each country has a right to control its borders, who enters and who leaves, and countries that are in danger—of terrorism or the like—have more right to control them more . . . (Pope Francis, Interview with the Spanish newspaper El País on January 22, 2017)

The sovereignty of nations is consistent thought in Catholic Social Teaching as is further explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2241:

Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants’ duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws, and to assist in carrying civic burdens.

In summation, Catholics approaching the immigration issue must maintain a balance between caring for the dignity of every human person, be they documented or undocumented in our nation, while appreciating the necessity of each nation state to regulate its borders for the common good. Given the prosperity in the United States of America, it is also important for our nation to strive to seek to help, as best as we are able, those seeking a better life:

The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2241)

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Racism

In their November 2018 Pastoral Letter Against Racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*, the U.S. Catholic bishops wrote, “Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that ... all [humans are] equally made in the image of God.” (p.4) Racism fails to acknowledge the dignity with which God creates each person, and it contributes to a culture of death.

Since the Civil Rights Movement in our nation, the country has moved forward in many positive ways past racial discrimination. Nevertheless, the nation still has a long way to go to reach reconciliation on race, as evident by the nightly news. Thus, it is imperative that especially as members of the body of Christ, we seek to reach out and listen to those whose race and ethnicity is different from our own to create a culture of communication, which may then lead to a culture of communion. As the USSCB states:

We cannot, therefore, look upon the progress against racism in recent decades and conclude that our current situation meets the standard of justice. In fact, God demands what is right and just. As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice. Many groups, such as the Irish, Italians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Poles, Jews, Chinese, and Japanese, can attest to having been the target of racial and ethnic prejudice in this country. It is also true that many groups are still experiencing prejudice, including rising anti-Semitism, the discrimination many Hispanics face today, and anti-Muslim sentiment. Especially instructive at this moment, however, are the historical and contemporary experiences of Native and African Americans. (Open Wide Our Hearts, p.10)

It is therefore incumbent upon Catholic Christians to reach outside of our comfort zones to communities different from our own to help rebuild a fractured human family. For while we may not be hurting from the scars of racism, members of our Church and the human family are. Racism ultimately then is an attack on human life and the human family, thus we are called to respond forcefully to it because of its broad range of effects into other areas which effect the dignity of the human person. As the USSCB has written:

The injustice and harm racism causes are an attack on human life. The Church in the United States has spoken out consistently and forcefully against abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, the death penalty, and other forms of violence that threaten human life. It is not a secret that these attacks on human life have severely affected people of color, who are disproportionately affected by poverty, targeted for abortion, have less access to healthcare, have the greatest numbers on death row, and are most likely to feel pressure to end their lives when facing serious illness. (Open Wide Our Hearts, p.30)

In summation, racism is an issue that still exists in our society. As Catholic faithful, we must lead the way in how we speak, act and love each member of our human family. Correspondingly, we should desire candidates that uphold the dignity of every human person, no matter their race or ethnicity.

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ELECTION YEAR SPECIAL REPORT 2020 – 7TH OF 8

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Socialism

Pope John XXIII stated in *Mater et Magistra* (“On Christianity and Social Progress”) that “No Catholic could subscribe even to moderate socialism.” (Saint John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 34)

The Church believes that socialism is a grave threat to the social order. Socialism violates the third major principle of Catholic Social Teaching: subsidiarity, or the belief that problems are best handled at the level in which they arise. Subsidiarity insists on limits to States intervention in the affairs of the family and society. As St. John Paul II wrote in *Centesimus Annus*, Subsidiarity “insists on necessary limits to the State’s intervention... inasmuch as the individual, the family and society are prior to the state, and inasmuch as the State exists in order to protect their rights and not stifle them.” (Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 11)

Socialism, on the other hand, puts ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange of wealth exercised through the government and its officials. This type of power should not reside in the State. As Pope Benedict has taught:

We do not need a state which regulates and controls everything, but a State which, in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 28)

That much power in the hands of the State dispossesses individuals and families of their autonomy. As Pope Francis has commented: “No actual or established power has the right to deprive peoples of the full exercise of their sovereignty.” (Pope Francis, *Address to the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, Bolivia, 9 July 2015*)

Furthermore, socialism treats people as groups, not individuals, including denying man his natural law right to private property for the common good. Saint Pope John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus* (“The Hundredth Year”), wrote that this error is:

Anthropological in nature. Socialism considers the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socio-economic mechanism. (Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 12)

This is why every Supreme Pontiff, from Pius IX in 1849 through Pope Francis, has opposed socialism. Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (“On Reconstruction of the Social Order”), went so far as to say that socialism is “Irreconcilable with true Christianity,” and thus “No one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist.” (Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 120)

In summation, if socialism is called ‘democratic socialism’ or ‘Christian socialism’ it remains, socialism – something the Catholic Church has clearly and forcefully spoken against as it deprives the individual of personal responsibility and attributes power to the State which belong in the hands of families and communities. A Catholic when voting, at every turn, must reject socialism as a legitimate principle of change.

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Environment

As Catholic Christians, we are tremendously blessed to receive from God our Father the gift of this earth, what Pope Francis has called our ‘common home.’ Thus, from the first man, Adam, down to our day, we are called to work, revere and protect the great gift of our environment. Therefore, as our ‘common home’ is received as gift, protecting our environment is not ‘optional to the Christian experience.’ As Pope Francis remarked in *Laudato Si*:

Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience. (Pope Francis, Laudato Si, 257)

To live out our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork it is essential that we have an adequate anthropology to appreciate the importance of our ecology. In other words, if we more deeply appreciate the human person, and the human relationships we engage in, the better our relationship can be with nature and creation. Again, quoting Pope Francis:

When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. (LS, 117)

There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. When the human person is considered as simply one being among others, the product of chance or physical determinism, then “our overall sense of responsibility wanes”. (LS, 118)

The human person, the crown of God’s creation, must then be respected, cherished and loved if we are to in turn respect and cherish our environment. When we fail to respect the human person, we fail to respect our environment:

If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships. Christian thought sees human beings as possessing a particular dignity above other creatures; it thus inculcates esteem for each person and respect for others. (LS, 119)

Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties? “If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of the new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away”. (LS, 120)

In summation, when we vote as Catholics approaching the issue of the environment, we recognize that our care for creation flows from the centrality of the dignity of the human person. Because God has made us in his image and likeness, the environment in which he has deposited us is a great gift to help us flourish and create a culture of life and love. When we fail to see God in each other, we fail to see the gift God has given us in our ‘common home’: A home that we must protect, cultivate and revere for future generations and for the common good of all.

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