

# Conscience and the Catholic Voter

by the Most Reverend William E. Lori



As this election year proceeds, politics bombards us from all sides. If we wish, we can know every campaign tactic and antic instantaneously. Yet the issues facing our nation and world go far beyond campaign theatrics. That is why it is especially important for us to be informed about the issues which confront us in national, state, and local elections, and understand how they pertain to the common good and to the human dignity of each person.

In other words, a well-formed conscience is “standard operating equipment” for participating well in the political process. This is the main point of the U.S. bishops’ document on political responsibility issued in November 2007, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

We’ve all heard the saying, “let your conscience be your guide.” This is true, as far as it goes. Yet, as *Faithful Citizenship* makes clear, “conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere ‘feeling’ about what we should or should not do” (no. 17). Instead, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us, conscience is “a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act” (CCC, no. 1796). The human conscience does not create right and wrong but rather perceives it.

Conscience has to be properly formed, and what really forms our consciences is truth—above all, the truth about the human person of whom, by whom, and for whom governments exist and function. In our contemporary world, many doubt all claims of truth. Yet, in the absence of shared truth and values, the views of prominent opinion leaders dominate our society, often at the expense of the vulnerable. If no one has the truth, politics becomes a matter of who has the most power. Power politics devoid of truth—“the dictatorship of relativism,” in the words of Pope Benedict XVI—cannot unify the nation or protect the common good. History offers us many examples of its failures.

Pope Benedict XVI reminded us during his recent visit to the United States that “America’s quest for freedom has been guided by the conviction that the principles governing political and social life are intimately linked to a moral order based on the dominion of God the Creator.” This conviction is at the heart of our democracy. It allows us to recognize the self-evident truth that all men and women are created equal and that the source of our human rights is not the government but the Creator. The Declaration of Independence sketches these rights as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” at the heart of which is the human person, created in the image of God and endowed with inviolable dignity. The moral order protects and fosters human dignity. In turn, human freedom is given us so we may choose what is true and good.



The Church’s teaching on faith and morals sheds great light on the moral order established by the Creator. *Faithful Citizenship* teaches that “Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church” (no. 17). To fulfill this obligation, one must desire to seek what is true and good and be willing to study Scripture and the teachings of the Church from an authentic source, such as *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. One must also accept the God-given authority of what the Church teaches. All of this aids the process of moral reasoning as we study the issues of the day, party platforms, proposed legislation, and government policy.

Pope Benedict has called upon us to build what he and Pope John Paul II have called “a civilization of love,” a civilization where the rights and dignity of each person—especially those who are most vulnerable, the unborn and the frail elderly—are respected from the moment of conception until natural death; where the family, based on the love of husband and wife,

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welcomes children into the world and imparts to them the truths and values that make good citizens; where the hungry and homeless are assisted, the immigrant welcomed, the environment protected, and all legitimate paths to peace are pursued. It is in light of that task of ours that we evaluate the moral quality of what is proposed by candidates and public officials, and work proactively for the ongoing transformation of our society.

Thus, we can see clearly that “there are some things we can never do or cooperate with because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called ‘intrinsically evil’ actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned” (*Faithful Citizenship*, no. 22). In our nation, abortion is at the forefront of these intrinsically evil actions. Since 1973, the year abortion was legalized by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*, nearly 49 million innocent human lives have been taken. Abortion has helped create what Pope John Paul II called “a culture of death” in which human life is cheapened. We can see this in legislation that provides public funding for destructive embryonic stem cell research and in efforts to legalize euthanasia.



It is sometimes alleged that the Church is only concerned about abortion. Nothing could be further from the truth. No other non-governmental institution provides more educational, charitable, and social services—including relief services—than the Church. We should add to this the immense range of pastoral services provided on a daily basis. Because of direct service to those in need, the Church sees clearly that “the right to life implies and is linked to other human rights—to the basic goods that every human person needs to live and thrive” (*Faithful Citizenship*, no. 25). She sees how diminishing respect for the lives of the vulnerable threatens all life.

It is because faith and reason lead us to respect human life at all its stages that we seek to address in morally sound and effective ways other serious threats to human life and dignity.

*Faithful Citizenship* cites racism, use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, failure to help those suffering from hunger, homelessness, or lack of health care, as well as unjust immigration policies. These are serious matters, and if we are serious about building a civilization of love we will address them.

It would be refreshing if we could find candidates whose records, party platforms, and personal commitments embody the full range of the Church’s social teaching, reasonable as that teaching is. Unfortunately that seldom happens. That is why we must have a well-formed conscience capable of giving each issue its proper moral weight and making other important distinctions and judgments. For example, a Catholic may never vote for candidates precisely because they advocate and advance intrinsic moral evils like abortion; to do so is to cooperate formally (intentionally) with a grave evil. And while *Faithful Citizenship* acknowledges that one may vote for a politician who supports pro-abortion policies “only for truly grave moral reasons,” a conscientious voter must question what grave moral issue rises to the level of nearly 49 million lives lost to the evil of abortion. On the other hand, a politician who opposes abortion should not go unchallenged if he or she adopts positions that undermine human dignity in other ways.

Sometimes voters face two “anti-life” candidates and find they are unable to vote for either. Or after careful reflection, a voter may decide to vote for the candidate less likely to pursue a morally flawed position and more likely to advance other authentic human goods (*Faithful Citizenship*, no. 36).

When he visited us, Pope Benedict praised Americans for their generosity and optimism and for the role which religion continues to play in our society. He called us to be true to our founding ideals and principles and to maintain the truths and values that flow from faith and reason into the public square. Now is the time to respond to his challenge.

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*Bishop Lori is Bishop of the Diocese of Bridgeport (Connecticut) and Chair of the USCCB Committee on Doctrine.*