



# CONSCIENCE AND THE CATHOLIC VOTER

by Most Reverend William E. Lori

As this election year proceeds, politics bombards us from all sides. The 24-hour news cycle and the Internet tend to produce an information overload. 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.

Not everyone is an expert in law and government policy. But all of us have a duty to understand, as best we can, how the issues of the day pertain to the common good and to the human dignity of each person. To do so, we must focus our attention beyond narrow self-interest or party affiliation. 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*. This statement is posted on the USCCB website, and we invite all to read and reflect on it.

We’ve all heard the saying, “let your conscience be your guide.” This is true, as far as it goes. We are obliged to follow our conscience. 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 Church also reminds us that “man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary.”<sup>1</sup> In short, the human conscience does not create right and wrong but rather perceives it. Conscience has to be properly formed.

What forms the conscience? Is it mere opinion or preference? Is it civil law? Is it peer pressure or what’s advocated in the media? We can’t deny that these things influence our consciences to some extent. Yet 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. This kind of truth rises above ordinary political discourse, especially the images and sound bites of the campaign trail. Furthermore, it requires us to confront a fundamental question so that we can deal adequately with the many important issues about which “we, the people” must decide.

That fundamental question is whether or not it is possible for us, as individual citizens and as a nation, to attain the truth about the human person. In our contemporary world, many doubt all truth claims—whether they arise from faith or reason. In our very practical world, it is know-how and tangible results that seem to count most. Searching for “truth” seems very abstract and far removed from the rough and tumble world of politics. Yet, in the absence of

shared truth and values, the views of prominent opinion leaders and trend setters 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. Truth has consequences, and so does its absence.

And truth is available to people of faith and good will. It's interesting that the Church, by holding fast to her doctrine, has become the great defender of human reason and its capacity for knowing truth. *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson recently wrote: "despite charges of dogmatism, the church is the main defender of reason in the modern world. It teaches the possibility that moral truth can be known through reflection and argument."<sup>2</sup> The Church holds that, despite human weakness and sinfulness, the law of God is written on the human heart. It is possible for human beings to reason toward moral truth. Far from impeding this process, the light of faith helps to clarify moral reasoning. As Pope Benedict put it during his recent visit to the United States: "I am confident that the American people will find in their religious beliefs a precious source of insight and inspiration to pursue reasoned, responsible, and respectful dialogue in the effort to build a more humane and free society."<sup>3</sup>

In this same address, Pope Benedict XVI also reminded us 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. It also allows us to recognize that the source of our human rights is

not the government but rather the Creator. The Declaration of Independence famously sketches these rights as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In another time and context, the range of human freedom was summed up as freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship God, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. At the heart of these declarations of freedom is the human person, created in the image of God and endowed with inviolable dignity. Morality—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. Thus *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 have a desire to seek what is true and good, coupled with a willingness to study Scripture and the teachings of the Church from an authentic source, such as *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. One must also acknowledge and accept the God-given authority of what the Church believes and 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.

Conscience is formed by truth as it is ascertained by reason enlightened by faith. Conscience then judges the moral quality of our actions. In the area of political responsibility, it judges what we as citizens do or fail to do to help create a more just and humane society. So while it is important for us to seek the truth for the sake of truth, in the political process we should be seeking the truth for the sake of protecting human dignity and the common good of all in society.

Our consciences are aided in this task by the virtue of prudence. In common parlance, “prudence” is thought to mean “caution.” In fact, however, “prudence enables us ‘to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it’” (CCC, no. 1806; *Faithful Citizenship*, no. 19). As we make moral decisions, this virtue helps us to analyze the possible courses of action open to us in a specific situation and to choose the one that best corresponds to what is true and good. Prudence never takes the moral shortcut of condoning immoral measures on the pretext that they will bring about good results. We are obliged always to seek what is good in morally sound ways. We also need to draw upon the virtue of courage, so we may have the strength of character to act on the good choices we have made.

Enlightened by faith and bolstered by prudence and courage, our conscience can see more clearly the task that lies before us. It is not simply to make the best of flawed choices. Pope Benedict has called upon us to be “a leaven of evangelical hope in American society, to point the way to that vast horizon of hope which God is opening up to the Church and indeed to all humanity: the vision of a world renewed and reconciled in Christ Jesus our Savior.” We are seeking to build what John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI 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, 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, as believers and citizens, that we evaluate the moral quality of what is proposed to the

electorate by candidates and public officials, and work proactively for the ongoing transformation of our society.

Inspired by the task that is before us, we can see all the more 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 and it is deeply embedded in laws, court decisions and government policies. Since 1973, the year abortion was legalized by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*, it is estimated that nearly 49 million innocent human lives have been taken. The annual number of abortions recently has decreased, yet some 1.2 million babies were aborted in 2005, the last year for which statistics are available. 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 in untold proportions to those in need, the Church sees even more 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. As Pope John Paul II said so clearly: “the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination” (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 38, quoted by *Faithful Citizenship*, no. 26).

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.<sup>4</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16; see U.S. Adult Catholic Catechism, p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gerson, “The Indispensable Church” *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2008, p. A27.

<sup>3</sup> Address at White House Welcoming Ceremony, April 16, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life; Faithful Citizenship*, no. 34 & 35.

## Resources

### Teaching Documents

Pope John Paul II. Encyclical Letter *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)*, Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1995. Also available at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/index.htm).

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* (November 24, 2002). Available at: [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20021124\\_politica\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html).

USCCB. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007. For a copy of this document and related program materials, see [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org).

USCCB. *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998. Available at [www.usccb.org/prolife/gospel.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/gospel.shtml).

USCCB. *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2001. Available at [www.usccb.org/prolife/pastoralplan.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/pastoralplan.shtml).

### Print

O'Connor, John Cardinal, "The Question of Imperfect Legislation," *Respect Life Program*, 2003. Available at [www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/rhp0304.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/rhp0304.shtml).

Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal (Pope Benedict XVI). *On Conscience*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007 (reprint).

Taylor, Michael A., "The Virtue of Rugged Hope," *Respect Life Program*, 2003. Available at [www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/rhp0304.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/rhp0304.shtml).

Williams, Rev. Thomas D., LC, "Abortion and Catholic Social Teaching," *Respect Life Program*, 2007. Available at [www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/rhp0708.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/rhp0708.shtml).

### Internet

[www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org) – contains a wealth of resource material, including downloads, podcasts and video to accompany the bishops' 2007 statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

[www.nchla.org](http://www.nchla.org) – The National Committee for a Human Life Amendment publishes program information on pro-life issues in Congress: legislative reports, fact sheets, legislative briefing pages, and the like. A vote-tracking feature allows you to quickly access the voting record on life issues of your senators and member of congress.

[www.usccb.org/prolife](http://www.usccb.org/prolife) – The Bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities is the prime source for the bishops' policy and teaching statements on pro-life issues, including public policy information.

[www.usccb.org/depts.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/depts.shtml) – The departments of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops produce program information on a broad range of public policy issues of concern to the bishops.

[www.clerk.house.gov/members/index.php](http://www.clerk.house.gov/members/index.php) – For contact information for Members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

[www.senate.gov/general/contact\\_information/senators\\_cfm.cfm](http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm) – For contact information for Members of the U.S. Senate.

[www.thomas.loc.gov](http://www.thomas.loc.gov) – Maintained by the Library of Congress, the Thomas website offers a searchable database of congressional activity from 1969 to the present.

### State

[www.nasccd.org](http://www.nasccd.org) – The National Association of State Catholic Conference Directors' website offers links to state Catholic conferences or their equivalents in 41 states. Many state conferences maintain full web pages with up-to-date information on state legislation.

[www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org) – The National Conference of State Legislators provides a listing of Internet sites for all state legislatures, many of which offer searchable databases of past and current legislation.