

Frequently Asked Questions Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

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Our Call as Catholic Citizens

“If indeed ‘the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics,’ the Church ‘cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice’.”ⁱ So writes Pope Francis, quoting Pope Benedict XVI.

Our nation faces many political challenges that demand well-informed moral choices: the ongoing destruction of a million innocent human lives each year by abortion; physician-assisted suicide; the redefinition of marriage; the excessive consumption of material goods and destruction of natural resources, harming the environment as well as the poor; deadly attacks on Christians and other religious minorities throughout the world; efforts to narrow the definition and exercise of religious freedom; economic policies that fail to prioritize the needs of poor people, at home and abroad; a broken immigration system and a worldwide refugee crisis; and wars, terror, and violence that threaten every aspect of human life and dignity.ⁱⁱ

As Catholics, we are part of a community with profound teachings that help us consider challenges in public life, contribute to greater justice and peace for all people, and evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and candidates’ promises and actions in light of the Gospel in order to help build a better world.

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Why does the Church teach about issues affecting public policy?

The Church’s obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith, a part of the mission given to us by Jesus Christ. As people of both faith and reason, Catholics are called to bring truth to political life and to practice Christ’s commandment to “love one another” (Jn 13:34).

The United States Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to proclaim and to live out their faith without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination. Civil law should recognize and protect the Church’s right and responsibility to participate in society without abandoning our moral convictions. Our nation’s tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions into public life. The Catholic community brings to political dialogue a consistent moral framework, and broad experience serving those in need.

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Who in the Church should participate in public life?

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to any political party or interest group. In today’s environment, Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party and few candidates fully share our comprehensive commitment to human life and dignity. This should not discourage us. On the contrary, it makes our obligation to act



all the more urgent. Catholic lay women and men need to act on the Church’s moral principles and become more involved: running for office, working within political parties, and communicating concerns to elected officials. Even those who cannot vote should raise their voices on matters that affect their lives and the common good. Faithful citizenship is an ongoing responsibility, not just during election years.

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How can Catholic social teaching help guide our participation?

In the words of Pope Francis, “progress in building a people in peace, justice and fraternity depends on four principles related to constant tensions present in every social reality. These derive from the pillars of the Church’s social doctrine, which serve as ‘primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomena’.”ⁱⁱⁱ The four principles include the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. Taken together, these principles provide a moral framework for Catholic engagement in advancing what we have called a “consistent ethic of life” (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 22).

Rightly understood, this ethic does not treat all issues as morally equivalent; nor does it reduce Catholic teaching to one or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life and other human rights, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental obligation to respect the dignity of every human being as a child of God.

Catholic voters should use Catholic teaching to examine candidates’ positions on issues and 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” (USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 33). The following summary of the four principles highlights as well several themes of Catholic Social Teaching for special consideration: these include **human rights and responsibilities, respect for work and the rights of workers, care for God’s creation, and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.**^{iv}

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The Dignity of the Human Person

Human life is sacred because every person is created in the image and likeness of God. There is a rich and multi-faceted Catholic teaching on human dignity summarized in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Every human being “must always be understood in his unrepeatable and inviolable uniqueness . . . This entails above all the requirement not only of simple respect on the part of others, especially political and social institutions and their leaders with regard to every man and woman on the earth, but even more, this means that the primary commitment of each person towards others, and particularly of these same institutions, must be for the promotion and integral development of the person.” The *Compendium* continues: “It is necessary to ‘consider every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27). Every political, economic, social, scientific and cultural program must be inspired by the awareness of the primacy of each human being over society.” (v)



Subsidiarity

It is impossible to promote the dignity of the person without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, and local realities -- in short, for those economic, social, cultural, recreational, professional and political communities to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth.^{vi} The family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, is the fundamental unit of society. This sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children must not be redefined, undermined, or neglected. Supporting families should be a priority for economic and social policies. How our society is organized—in economics and politics, in law and public policy—affects the well-being of individuals and of society. Every person and association has a right and a duty to participate in shaping society to promote the well-being of individuals and the common good.

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.^{vii}

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The Common Good

The common good is comprised of “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily”.^{viii}

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, a right to religious freedom, and a right to access to those things required for human decency— food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities— to ourselves, to our families, and to the larger society.

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. An economic system must serve the dignity of the human person and the common good by **respecting the dignity of work and protecting the rights of workers**. Economic justice calls for decent work at fair, living wages, a broad and fair legalization program with a path to citizenship for immigrant workers, and the opportunity for all people to work together for the common good through their work, ownership, enterprise, investment, participation in unions, and other forms of economic activity. 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.

We have a duty to **care for God’s creation**, which Pope Francis refers to in *Laudato Si’* as “our common home.” (ix) We all are called to be careful stewards of God’s creation and to ensure a safe and hospitable environment for vulnerable human beings now and in the future. Pope Francis, consistent with St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (World Day of Peace messages in 1990 and 2010), has lifted up pollution, climate change, lack of access to clean water, and the loss of biodiversity as particular challenges. Pope Francis speaks of an “ecological debt” (no. 51) owed by wealthier nations to



developing nations. And he calls all of us to an “ecological conversion” (no. 219), by which “the effects of [our] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us]”.(x) Indeed, this concern with “natural ecology” is an indispensable part of the broader “human ecology,” which encompasses not only material, but moral and social dimensions as well.

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Solidarity

Solidarity is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to . . . the good of all and of each individual, because we are *all* really responsible *for all*.” It is found in “a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to ‘serve him’ instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage.”^{xi}

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Our Catholic commitment to solidarity requires that we pursue justice, eliminate racism, end human trafficking, protect human rights, seek peace, and avoid the use of force except as a necessary last resort.

In a special way our solidarity must find expression in **preferential option for the poor and vulnerable**. A moral test for society is how we treat the weakest among us—the unborn, those dealing with disabilities or terminal illness, the poor, and the marginalized.

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Part 1: Conclusion

In light of Catholic teaching, the bishops vigorously repeat their call for a renewed politics that focuses on moral principles, the promotion of human life and dignity, and the pursuit of the common good.

Political participation in this spirit reflects not only the social teaching of our Church, but the best traditions of our nation.

ⁱ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 183.

ⁱⁱ This specific list of issues is taken from the introductory note to *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2016. For a fuller consideration see the second document in this series, the “Challenge of FCFC Part II: From Principles to Prudential Action” (2016), and the full statement of the bishops’ *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 221.

^{iv} These principles are drawn from a rich tradition more fully described in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), no. 160. For more information on these principles see *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2016, nos. 40ff.

^v This summary represents only a few highlights from the fuller treatment of the human person in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. For the fuller treatment see especially nos. 124-159 where many other important aspects of human dignity are treated.



^{vi} *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 185. ^{vii} *Centesimus Annus*, no. 48; *Dignitatis Humanae*, nos. 4-6. ^{viii} *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 164 ^{ix} *Laudato Si'*, no. 77. ^x *Laudato Si'*, nos. 219 and 217. ^{xi} *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 193. (cf. *Mt* 10:40-42, 20:25; *Mk* 10:42-45; *Lk* 22:25-27)

Part II: Making Moral Choices and Applying Our Principles

How does the Church help the Catholic faithful speak about political and social questions?

A Well-Formed Conscience

The Church equips its members to address political questions by helping them develop well-formed consciences. “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act. . . . [Every person] is obliged to follow faithfully what he [or she] knows to be just and right” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778). We Catholics have a lifelong obligation to form our consciences in accord with human reason, enlightened by the teaching of Christ as it comes to us through the Church.

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The Virtue of Prudence

The Church also encourages Catholics to develop the virtue of prudence, which enables us “to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806). Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act. Prudence must be accompanied by courage, which calls us to act. As Catholics seek to advance the common good, we must carefully discern which public policies are morally sound. At times Catholics may choose different ways to respond to social problems, but we cannot differ on our obligation to protect human life and dignity and help build, through moral means, a more just and peaceful world.

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Doing Good and Avoiding Evil

There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. These intrinsically evil acts must always be rejected and never supported. A preeminent example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion. Similarly, human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, and other acts that directly violate the sanctity and dignity of human life including genocide, torture, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, can never be justified. Nor can violations of human dignity, such as acts of racism, treating workers as mere means to an end, deliberately subjecting workers to subhuman living conditions, treating the poor as disposable, or redefining marriage to deny its essential meaning, ever be justified.



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Opposition to intrinsically evil acts also prompts us to recognize our positive duty to contribute to the common good and act in solidarity with those in need. Both opposing evil and doing good are essential. As Pope John Paul II said, “the fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment”.⁽ⁱ⁾ The basic right to life implies and is linked to other human rights such as a right to the goods that every person needs to live and thrive—including food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work.

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Avoiding Two Temptations

Two temptations in public life can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity: The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed. The second is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, environmental degradation, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care or housing, pornography, human trafficking, redefining civil marriage, compromising religious liberty, or unjust immigration policies are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act.

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Making Moral Choices

The bishops do not tell Catholics how to vote; the responsibility to make political choices rests with each person and his or her properly formed conscience, aided by prudence. This exercise of conscience begins with always opposing policies that violate human life or weaken its protection.

When morally flawed laws already exist, prudential judgment is needed to determine how to do what is possible to restore justice—even if partially or gradually—without ever abandoning a moral commitment to full protection for all human life from conception to natural death (see Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 73).

Prudential judgment is also needed to determine the best way to promote the common good in areas such as housing, health care, and immigration. When Church leaders make judgments about how to apply Catholic teaching to specific policies, this may not carry the same binding authority as universal moral principles but cannot be dismissed as one political opinion among others. These moral applications should inform the consciences and guide the actions of Catholics.

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 legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support.ⁱ

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What public policies should concern Catholics most?

As Catholics, we are led to raise questions for political life other than those that concentrate on individual, material well-being. We focus more broadly on what protects or threatens the dignity of every human life. Catholic teaching challenges voters and candidates, citizens and elected officials, to consider the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues. In light of ethical principles, we bishops offer the following policy goals that we hope will guide Catholics as they form their consciences and reflect on the moral dimensions of their public choices:

- Address the preeminent requirement to protect **human life**—by restricting and bringing to an end the destruction of unborn children through abortion and providing women in crisis pregnancies with the supports they need. End the use of euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of illness and disability; the destruction of human embryos in the name of research; the use of the death penalty to combat crime; and imprudent resort to war to address international disputes.
- 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.
- Achieve comprehensive **immigration** reform that offers a path to citizenship, treats immigrant workers fairly, prevents the separation of families, maintains the integrity of our borders, respects the rule of law, and addresses the factors that compel people to leave their own countries.
- Help families and children overcome **poverty** and ensure access to and choice in **education**, as well as decent work at fair, living wages and adequate assistance for the vulnerable in our nation, while also helping to overcome widespread hunger and poverty around the world, especially in the policy areas of development assistance, debt relief, and international trade.
- Ensure full conscience protection and **religious freedom** for individuals and groups to meet social needs, and so enable families, community groups, economic structures, and government to work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, and care for creation.
- Provide **health care** while respecting human life, human dignity, and religious freedom in our health care system.
- Continue to oppose policies that reflect racism, hostility toward immigrants, religious bigotry, and other forms of **unjust discrimination**.
- Establish and comply with moral limits on the use of **military force**—examining for what purposes it may be used, under what authority, and at what human cost—with a special view to seeking a responsible and effective response for ending the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Join with others **around the world** to pursue peace, protect human rights and religious liberty, and advance economic justice and care for creation.



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ⁱ *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 52.



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Church in Politics

Isn't the Church supposed to stay out of politics?

It is quite the opposite. Humans are political by nature. We need to work with one another to flourish, not only in our families, our neighborhoods and communities, but in all of our relationships. Our faith calls us to be concerned both for the good of this world and for our eternal salvation, which are intimately connected. We will find our way to heaven only by finding our journey of faith in this world.

Pope Francis writes of an "integral ecology" (*Laudato Si'*, nos. 137-55) and the U.S. bishops note in *Forming Consciences for a Faithful Citizenship* that "Without the proper ordering of relationships of persons with each other, with creation, and ultimately with God himself, sin takes hold. Pope Francis reminds us that all individuals, nations and members of the global community have the duty to place the needs of others ahead of selfish desires to possess and exploit the good things that come from God's hand." (*Introductory Note*) It is our moral duty as Catholics to be involved in all aspects of society, including its civic and political dimensions.

"Our redemption has a social dimension because 'God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also ... social relations.' To believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds... Accepting the first proclamation, which invites us to receive God's love and to love him in return with the very love which is his gift, brings forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek and protect the good of others" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 178).

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What about the separation of church and state?

The phrase "separation of church and state" is not in the U.S. Constitution or the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment contains two statements regarding the relationship between organized religion and the U.S. Congress:

- The Establishment Clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."
- The Free Exercise Clause: "...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Having lived under governments and monarchs which endorsed a single religion – sometimes with force - the framers of the Constitution wrote laws that precluded a similar situation in the fledgling United States of America. There is no constitutional restriction on people of faith or on religious organizations in bringing their views into the political forum.

The Catholic Church's teachings assume that States and the Church each have essential, but clearly different, roles in shaping public life. Pope Benedict explained in *Deus Caritas Est*:

"The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest. ... The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not

replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. (Pope Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28)”

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Does the Church jeopardize its tax exempt status by becoming involved in politics? Is it afraid to lose its status?

The Church’s teaching on how we should function in society and civic life stems from its teaching, not from the tax code of any one nation. Nonetheless, there are considerations as to tax status, our pluralistic society, practical situations and common civic practices which ought to be kept in mind.

The Internal Revenue Service code provides that organizations exempt from federal income tax under section 501(a) and described in section 501(c)(3), may not “participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.” These organizations are also restricted from devoting a substantial part of their activities to attempting to influence legislation (Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended).

These restrictions are not based on whether an organization is a religious organization or church, but whether it is exempt from paying federal income tax.

The restriction on non-profits regarding involvement for a political candidate or campaign is absolute and can include a wide range of activities, from voter guides to taking pictures with candidates. The restriction regarding the amount of lobbying that constitutes “a substantial part of their activities” is determined on a case-by-case basis by the IRS.

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What types of civic activities are permissible for non-profits?

The California Catholic Conference of Bishops has prepared instruction on political advocacy for use by Catholic clergy and parishioners. Download an [English](#) or [Spanish](#) brochure that describes acceptable activities such as voter registration drives and issue-oriented forums.

The Church can engage in some activities and still adhere to the IRS’ tax-exempt guidelines. “Catholic organizations may lobby and attempt to influence legislation at the federal, state and local levels without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status, as long as those activities are not a substantial (as defined by the IRS) part of the organization’s total activities,” according to the USCCB Office of General Counsel (www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/upload/USCCB-PACI-Guide-2015.pdf).

Churches and Catholic organizations can educate candidates about particular issues and educate voters about issues, as long as these activities are conducted in an unbiased manner. Their campuses may also serve as polling places and they may sponsor voter registration and “get-out-the-vote” drives. Again, the IRS’ caveat in all these instances is that there is no bias toward or against any particular candidate or political party.

“Churches and religious organizations may involve themselves in issues of public policy without the activity being considered as lobbying. For example, churches may conduct educational meetings, prepare and distribute educational materials, or otherwise consider public policy issues in an

educational manner without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status” (<https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p1828.pdf>).

Because the tax-exempt status allows the Church to be more effective in its stewardship of the donations provided to its organizations, it is always wise to consult with your diocesan legal counsel before engaging in political activity of any kind.

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Where can I find resources and information to assist individuals in voting according to the teachings of the Church?

The California Catholic Conference provides [summaries of major social encyclicals and letters](#), [statements from the Bishops of California](#), [information on specific legislation](#) and [details of the important policy debates current in the Golden State](#). Visit www.cacatholic.org for this information and more.

The full body of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship>) in November 2015. It is the seminal resource for U.S. Catholics in preparing themselves to vote and otherwise participate in the political process in this country.

See also – [Helpful Resources](#)

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How do the bishops choose which issues related to Catholic social teaching to address officially?

Nationally – The Bishops of the United States develop a strategic plan on a regular basis (typically every four years), facilitated by the USCCB’s Office of Strategic Planning. This plan attempts to review the “signs of the times” in light of the Church’s mandate from Christ to proclaim the Good News of salvation. The plan for 2013-2016 is themed “Faith | Worship | Witness” and is defined as follows:

- Faith: Inviting Catholics to a deeper relationship with Christ, and a deeper understanding of and relationship with his Church, and knowledge of the faith.
- Worship: Inspiring confidence in the Gospel and the teachings of the faith expressed in a vibrant community and sacramental life, most intensively in the Eucharist and Penance, but also through Marriage and greater appreciation of the family as the domestic church.
- Witness: Strengthening of our understanding of the Christian vocation lived through a public witness to Jesus Christ and to the life and dignity of the human person where believers, living out their vocation to be witnesses, affirm the freedom of religion and work to transform society through living and sharing their faith in Jesus Christ and giving recognition to the life and dignity of the human person

See also - *2013-2016 USCCB Strategic Plan: The New Evangelization Journey with Christ: Faith | Worship | Witness* (<http://www.usccb.org/about/strategic-plan.cfm>)

California – The California Catholic Conference is the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in California. The Conference advocates with policy makers and the public to advance the Catholic vision

of human life and dignity, the good society, and concern for those who are poor and vulnerable. It also educates Catholics and the general public and empowers Catholics to put their faith into action consistent with Catholic teaching.

All Bishops in California are members of the Conference. They meet regularly to discuss priorities and provide direction to a small staff in Sacramento. The Conference has several standing committees, including ones devoted to Education, Public Policy, Restorative Justice and Institutional Concerns. Ad hoc committees are organized as needed. Finally, the Conference maintains an on-going partnership with the Alliance of Catholic Health Care, Catholic Charities of California and various ministries in California dioceses.

The Conference's website – www.cacatholic.org - has extensive resources on all facets of civic life, including extensive coverage of policy debates in the State. The discussions are grouped in the following areas:

- [Reverence for Life](#)
- [Human Dignity](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Restorative Justice](#)
- [Marriage and Family Life](#)
- [Faith in the Public Square](#)

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Civic Participation

What is faithful citizenship?

The term “faithful citizenship” recognizes our dual heritage as both faithful Catholics and citizens in a democratic society. We hold rights and duties, both in participating in the civic order but also as “citizens of the heavenly Kingdom. It is as citizens faithful to the Lord Jesus that we contribute most effectively to the civil order.” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, Introductory Note*)

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship is an ever-evolving document first issued in 1976. Every four years, the U.S. bishops revisit the document, considering current societal concerns and the civic and political environments. The current version, approved in November 2015, was developed by the chairmen, in consultation with the membership, of the USCCB Committees on Catholic Education, Communications, Cultural Diversity in the Church, Doctrine, Domestic Justice and Human Development, Evangelization and Catechesis, International Justice and Peace, Migration, Pro-Life Activities; the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage; and the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty.

The document is updated every four years to take account of developments in the United States in both domestic and foreign policy issues such as:

- The ongoing destruction of over one million innocent human lives each year by abortion
- Physician-assisted suicide

- The redefinition of marriage—the vital cell of society—by the courts, political bodies, and increasingly by American culture itself
- The excessive consumption of material goods and the destruction of natural resources, which harm both the environment and the poor
- The deadly attacks on fellow Christians and religious minorities throughout the world
- The narrowing redefinition of religious freedom, which threatens both individual conscience and the freedom of the Church to serve
- Economic policies that fail to prioritize the poor, at home or abroad
- A broken immigration system and a worldwide refugee crisis
- Wars, terror, and violence that threaten every aspect of human life and dignity.”
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Who has a right to be engaged in civic discussions?

Everyone, since each of us has not just a right but also an obligation to improve the moral fabric of our society. (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 13) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. ... As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life" (nos. 1913-1915).

See also - [Participation](#)

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According to Church teaching, what are the principles we should apply to questions of civic engagement?

There are four principles of Catholic social teaching that should be applied to civic engagement (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, nos. 44-56) (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 160). These are:

- [The dignity of the human person](#) is the foundation of our moral vision for society. We stand opposed to all activities that contribute to what Pope Francis has called “a throwaway culture.”
- [Subsidiarity](#) calls for every person and association to have a right and a duty to participate actively in shaping society. 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. (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 48; *Dignitatis Humanae*, nos. 4-6). The family, as the first and fundamental unit of society, is a sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children. Parents have a right and responsibility to care for their children.
- “[The common good](#) indicates ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26). ... The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 164). Every human

being has a right to life, therefore a right to access those things required for human decency: food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life. The economy must serve people, not the other way around. This principle also recognizes that we have a duty to care for God's creation, as outlined in Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*.

- [Solidarity](#) recognizes that we are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. In the heat of political campaigns, it is essential that we remind ourselves and others that mercy is a core virtue. Love for our neighbor includes a responsibility to welcome the stranger among us and emphasizing the Church's preferential option for the poor.

See also – [How can Catholic social teaching help guide our participation?](#)

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Besides voting, what other activities should I be involved in to improve my community? What does the Church teach regarding our civic accountability as individuals and as responsible voters?

In this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis, it might be helpful to go back to the Church's ancient tradition of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, which can be incorporated into any number of community activities. Traditionally, these are defined as:

Corporal Works of Mercy

feed the hungry
give drink to the thirsty
clothe the naked
shelter the homeless
visit the sick
visit the imprisoned
bury the dead

Spiritual Works of Mercy

counsel the doubtful
instruct the ignorant
admonish sinners
comfort the afflicted
forgive offenses
bear wrongs patiently
pray for the living and the dead

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Even though I would never participate in certain activities, why should I tell others how to live their lives?

As Catholics, we do believe that there are objective truths that help each of us to live healthy, happy and holy lives. We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values.” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 64)

As Catholics we are called to evangelize in the world. Those we are speaking with may not accept our views, and we should not try to force them to, but we should not hesitate to boldly state our beliefs.

Presenting objective truths, however, does not give us the right to be uncharitable or disrespectful. Pope Francis reminds us again and again that by engaging people in civil dialogue and “a culture of encounter” we are more apt to best represent the Church’s teachings, and to enable others to experience a “conversion of mind and heart.”

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What is the best way to express our point of view?

Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, DC, offers the following seven ground rules for engaging in a civic dialogue:

- Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak.
- Share your personal experience, not someone else’s.
- Listen carefully and respectfully. Speak carefully and respectfully. Do not play the role of know-it-all, convincer or corrector. Remember that a dialogue is not a debate.
- Don’t interrupt unless for clarification or time keeping.
- Accept that no group or viewpoint has a complete monopoly on the truth.
- “Be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another’s statement than condemn it” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2478, quoting St. Ignatius of Loyola).
- Be cautious about assigning motives to another person.

(“Civil Discourse: Speaking Truth in Love”, 2011. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/parishes-and-schools/upload/Civil-Dialogue-bulletin-insert.pdf>)

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Voting

For whom should I vote?

You have to make up your own mind using a [well-formed conscience](#) and a mature understanding of the teachings of the faith while also taking the time to understand candidates, issues and current realities.

See also – [How can Catholic social teaching help guide our participation?](#) and [Making Moral Choices](#)

For instance, consider candidates whose public lives and public work most fully embrace the core principles of the Church’s teachings. They should, by word and deed, exhibit a respect for human life and dignity, honor the principle of subsidiarity, strive to contribute to the common good and understand that those in service to others must embrace God’s call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

“It is not the Church’s task to set forth specific political solutions – and even less to propose a single solution as the acceptable one – to temporal questions that God has left to the free and responsible judgment of each person. It is, however, the Church’s right and duty to provide a moral judgment on temporal matters when this is required by faith or the moral law.” (*Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*)

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Are there “non-negotiable” issues in politics?

When the subject of “moral principles that do not admit of exception, compromise or derogation” was raised before Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he wrote the following:

When political activity comes up against moral principles that do not admit of exception, compromise or derogation, the Catholic commitment becomes more evident and laden with responsibility. In the face of fundamental and inalienable ethical demands, Christians must recognize that what is at stake is the essence of the moral law, which concerns the integral good of the human person. This is the case with laws concerning abortion and euthanasia (not to be confused with the decision to forgo extraordinary treatments, which is morally legitimate). Such laws must defend the basic right to life from conception to natural death. In the same way, it is necessary to recall the duty to respect and protect the rights of the human embryo. Analogously, the family needs to be safeguarded and promoted, based on monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, and protected in its unity and stability in the face of modern laws on divorce: in no way can other forms of cohabitation be placed on the same level as marriage, nor can they receive legal recognition as such. The same is true for the freedom of parents regarding the education of their children; it is an inalienable right recognized also by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In the same way, one must consider society’s protection of minors and freedom from modern forms of slavery (drug abuse and prostitution, for example). In addition, there is the right to religious freedom and the development of an economy that is at the service of the human person and of the common good, with respect for social justice, the principles of human solidarity and subsidiarity,

according to which «the rights of all individuals, families, and organizations and their practical implementation must be acknowledged”. Finally, the question of peace must be mentioned. Certain pacifistic and ideological visions tend at times to secularize the value of peace, while, in other cases, there is the problem of summary ethical judgments which forget the complexity of the issues involved. Peace is always «the work of justice and the effect of charity”. It demands the absolute and radical rejection of violence and terrorism and requires a constant and vigilant commitment on the part of all political leaders. ([Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](#), 4.)

For a Catholic, living out his or her faith, these principles are not open to “negotiation.” They are basic truths and moral principles that must be followed without exception. Not all of them are equal, but all of them must be considered in voting decisions. People of good will may have legitimate differences of opinion on how policy initiatives advance these principles. (See: [The Two Temptations](#).) Applying them in civic participation is a matter for [prudential judgment](#) based on a [well-formed conscience](#).

Our faith tradition has many examples of people who demonstrated great courage and perseverance in the face of extreme pressure to compromise basic principles:

Among the saints, the Church venerates many men and women who served God through their generous commitment to politics and government. Among these, Saint Thomas More, who was proclaimed Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, gave witness by his martyrdom to “the inalienable dignity of the human conscience”. Though subjected to various forms of psychological pressure, Saint Thomas More refused to compromise, never forsaking the «constant fidelity to legitimate authority and institutions» which distinguished him; he taught by his life and his death that “man cannot be separated from God, nor politics from morality.” ([Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](#), 1.)

As voters and as elected officials we are called to be just as courageous as people like St. Thomas More.

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As long as I vote for the pro-life candidate, is it true I can ignore other issues?

Faithful Citizenship states clearly:

Above all, 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 fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination. (Christifideles Laici, no. 38)

Labels, however, can be deceiving and overlook too many factors. There are an entire range of life and dignity issues to consider in any voting decision. Elected officials and candidates will fall somewhere on a spectrum between the two extremes and voters will want to take that into account. It is also good to consider not only expressed stances but also the ability of a candidate to influence an issue, his or her integrity and character and what concrete actions he or she may have taken with regard to important issues.

As Richard Doerflinger, former Associate Director of Pro-Life Activities at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has pointed out: “There are also some theological and pastoral arguments for not linking the Church’s moral authority to our highly fallible expectations regarding the performance of particular individuals. The list of disappointments in this regard throughout history would be a long one.”

“As Catholics we are not single-issue voters” (USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 42). The Catholic faith is not built upon one single element just as our individual journey to salvation is not made on one single act.

(See also - [The Participation of Catholics in Political Life, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.](#))

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How should Catholics weigh issues when no candidate reflects Catholic morals and ethics?

We often face choices in which none of the candidates is fully aligned with our Church’s teachings. Too often, voter choices seem to fall into the “lesser-of-two-evils” category. The bishops address this dilemma in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*:

“Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a [well-formed conscience](#) that perceives the proper relationship among [moral goods](#). A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an [intrinsically evil act](#), such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, if the voter’s intent is to support that position. In such cases, a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate’s opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.

“There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.

“When all candidates hold a position that promotes an intrinsically evil act, the conscientious voter faces a dilemma. The voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods.

“In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose policies promoting intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. These decisions should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, nos. 34-37).

Moral, Ethical and Theological Questions

What are the most fundamental moral issues for the Church?

The most fundamental moral issues for us, as members of the Catholic Church, are rooted in the fundamental moral code provided by Jesus Christ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1953). “It is the work of Christ and is expressed particularly in the Sermon on the Mount.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1965) (Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7)

The *US Catholic Catechism for Adults* adds that “The most basic principle of the Christian moral life is the awareness that every person bears the dignity of being made in the image of God.”

See – [Making Moral Choices](#) and [What public policies should concern Catholics the most?](#)

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What is a well-formed conscience? How do I develop my conscience?

“Conscience is a judgement of practical reason that helps us to recognize and seek what is good and to reject what is evil” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778, 1796).

A well-formed conscience is an ongoing exercise (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1784). The Church offers the following process in forming one’s conscience:

- When examining any issue or situation, we must begin by being open to the truth and what is right.
- We must study Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church.
- We must examine the facts and background information about various choices.
- We must prayerfully reflect to discern the will of God (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 18).

The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* adds:

- The prudent advice and good example of others support and enlighten our conscience.
- The authoritative teaching of the Church is an essential element.
- The gifts of the Holy Spirit help us develop our conscience.
- Regular examination of conscience is important as well (p. 314).
- (“What is Conscience?” <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/parishes-and-schools/upload/Conscience-Formation-bulletin-insert.pdf>)

See also – [A Well-Formed Conscience](#)

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What is an intrinsic evil?

[Intrinsic evil](#) is something which is always evil, no matter the circumstances or rationale. If an act is intrinsically evil, it cannot be justified by the intention or by the circumstances (the environment, social pressure, emergency situation, etc.)

See – [Doing Good and Avoiding Evil](#)

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What is prudential judgment?

[Prudential judgment](#) is the application of moral principles to a particular case in order to [do good and avoid evil](#). It is a recognition that we live in an imperfect world, in which achieving pure goodness is not always possible, but the Christian must constantly strive to move toward a more perfect world (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806).

Prudential judgment is not a way to rationalize a political calculation, avoid rocking the boat or justifying one's own interest. Nor is it a pretext to ignore Church teaching. If a Catholic finds herself in conflict with the Church's teaching on an issue, she must give [serious](#) consideration to the teaching and work to understand the conflict. It is important that we put aside any personal motives, including partisan preference or individual gain that might cloud our judgment.

"The Church fosters well-formed consciences not only by teaching moral truth but also by encouraging its members to develop the virtue of prudence, which St. Ambrose described as 'the charioteer of the virtues.'" (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, No. 19)

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Practical Issues

How do I register to vote in California? Can I organize a voter registration drive in my parish?

A new law in California will automatically register to vote all citizens receiving a California Drivers' License. The law is in the process of being implemented and many of the policy and procedures are now being developed.

You are eligible to vote if you meet the following requirements:

- A citizen of the United States.
- A California resident.
- 18 years old or older on Election Day.
- Not in prison, on parole, serving a state sentence in county jail, serving a sentence for a felony pursuant to subdivision (h) of Penal Code section 1170, or on post-release community supervision.

- Not found to be mentally incompetent by a court.

While the State and the Department of Motor Vehicles are implementing the new law, you can [download a voter registration form and complete it](#). If the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) has your signature on file, you may register online. It's best to [follow the instructions on the DMV website](#).

Voter registration drives are encouraged because they increase civic participation. Discuss your idea with your local diocese and with your County Registrar of Voters.

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How can I find out a candidate's voting record?

Votes on all legislation tracked by the California Catholic Conference are available on the [Legislation](#) page of www.cacatholic.org. There you will find bills, the Conference's position and voting records for committee and floor votes. You can see all bills or focus on an area you are particularly interested in exploring such as [Reverence for Life](#), [Immigration](#), [Restorative Justice](#), etc.

See also – [Voter Guides](#)

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Where can I find the Church's teaching on Faithful Citizenship, Faith and Public Life?

The California Catholic Conference is the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in California. The Conference advocates with policy makers and the public to advance the Catholic vision of human life and dignity, the good society, and concern for those who are poor and vulnerable. The Conference also educates Catholics and the general public and empowers Catholics to put their faith into action consistent with Catholic teaching. To fulfill this responsibility the California Catholic Conference has an extensive website www.cacatholic.org – to deal this all aspects of public and civic life.

The [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops \(USCCB\)](#) is an assembly of the hierarchy of the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands who jointly exercise certain pastoral functions on behalf of the Christian faithful of the United States. The purpose of the Conference is to promote the greater good which the Church offers humankind, especially through forms and programs of the apostolate fittingly adapted to the circumstances of time and place. This purpose is drawn from the universal law of the Church and applies to the episcopal conferences which are established all over the world for the same purpose. Again, the USCCB website - www.usccb.org – has extensive resources for dealing with public and civic issues.

See also – [Helpful Resources](#)

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Are parishioners able to distribute legislative information in their parishes? When is it okay to conduct politically related activities on church property?

The California Catholic Conference of Bishops has prepared instruction on political advocacy for use by Catholic clergy and parishioners.

In a 2013 reflection entitled Pray for Politicians that They Govern Us Well, Pope Francis, wrote:

“We need to participate for the common good. Sometimes we hear: a good Catholic is not interested in politics. This is not true: good Catholics immerse themselves in politics by offering the best of themselves so that the leader[s] can govern.”

Along those same lines, in 2007 the U. S. Catholic Bishops wrote in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* saying:

“Some question whether it is appropriate for the Church to play a role in political life. However, the obligation to teach about moral values that should shape our lives, including our public lives, is central to the mission given to the Church by Jesus Christ...The Catholic community brings important assets to the political dialogue about our nation’s future.”

Download an [English](#) or [Spanish](#) brochure that describes acceptable activities such as voter registration guides and issue-oriented forums.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops also provides a 43-page *Political Activity and Lobby Guidelines for Catholic Parishes* (<http://www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/upload/USCCB-PACI-Guide-2015.pdf>).

Pastors and parish leaders should read both these documents, consult with local diocesan legal counsel and appropriate diocesan/state conference leadership before determining what kind of activity might occur at their parish.

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Voter Guides

Why does the Catholic Church not issue Voter Guides?

“In this statement, we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God’s truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.”

- Forming Conscience for Faithful Citizenship, 2015¹

Many organizations publish voter guides that are intended to point voters toward favored candidates, particular issues or officials who support a certain constituency. They contend to offer voters a shortcut approach to ballot decisions without expending the effort to research or understand candidates or issues in depth. Neither the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops nor the California Catholic Conference publishes a voter guide nor are parishes throughout California permitted to distribute guides without the approval of the local Bishop or the California Catholic Conference.

Why not? Aside from the legal implications of avoiding thinly veiled partisan endorsements and pushing the political regulations for not-for-profit organizations, the Bishops of the United States are following precepts firmly rooted in our Catholic faith:

Catholic social teaching is broad, covering an incredible array of how individuals relate to each other in society. Starting with the core message of life and dignity, for instance, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church encompasses topics ranging from our basic human rights to how we participate in civic affairs to economic life to war and peace.

“Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic social 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).” - Faithful Citizenship, 2015

“Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. It is not a means of changing the world ideologically, and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present here and now the love which man always needs.” - Pope Emeritus Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*

Many guides oversimplify complicated issues. For instance, guides often ask voters a series of questions – one for life, one for environment, one for labor, etc. – and attempt to determine a voter’s preferences with a few clicks of a button. Such a process is questionable at best. At worse it can be deceitful.

“But there is another temptation which we must especially guard against: the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners. The contemporary world, with its open wounds which affect so many of our brothers and sisters, demands that we confront every form of polarization which would divide it into these two camps.” - Pope Francis Address to the U.S. Congress, 2015

Candidates process a range of positions during campaigns and often promise “immediate results” but a voter’s discernment must also be based on concrete actions. Officials and parties are often content to continue using an issue to attack the opposition and have little ability to or intention of making any concrete changes.

“Unfortunately, politics in our country often can be a contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites, and media hype. The Church calls for a different kind of political engagement: one shaped by the moral convictions of well-formed consciences and focused on the dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good, and the protection of the weak and the vulnerable.” - Faithful Citizenship, 2015

“In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose policies promoting intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. These decisions should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character,

integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching.” - Faithful Citizenship, 2015

Our faith teaches that we must follow our “properly formed conscience.” No one can decide that for us or has the right to question our faith if we do not agree with them on a political strategy or candidate.

“The Church equips its members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church. 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. Rather, conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith. As stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right” (no. 1778).” - Faithful Citizenship, 2015

Voting is only one part of being a faithful citizen. To change hearts and minds takes far more than a trip to the polling place. The Catholic Church endeavors to bring the truth of her teaching to the society through constant engagement, rational arguments and civil discourse.

“The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.” - Pope Emeritus Benedict, Deus Caritas Est

We encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate in building the culture of life. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts. Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power. We must exercise that power in ways that defend human life, especially those of God's children who are unborn, disabled or otherwise vulnerable. We get the public officials we deserve. Their virtue -- or lack thereof -- is a judgment not only on them, but on us. Because of this, we urge our fellow 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. - *The Gospel of Life*, USCCB, 33

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Helpful Resources

Complete text - [Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#) (USCCB)

- [Summary Bulletin Insert | en Español \(2016 version, coming soon\)](#)
- [Parish Guidelines for Advocacy, Lobbying and Political Action](#)

Backgrounders & Bulletin Inserts

- [Reverence for Life](#)
- [What the Catholic Church Teaches about End of Life](#)
- [La enseñanza de la Iglesia católica sobre el final de la vida](#)
- [Human Dignity](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Restorative Justice](#)
- [Faith in the Public Square](#)
- [Family Life](#)
- [Civil Dialogue Bulletin Insert \(Español\) \(USCCB\)](#)
- [Conscience Formation Bulletin Insert \(Español\) \(USCCB\)](#)

How-to Guides

- [How to Lobby](#)
- [How to Contact Your Elected Officials Bulletin Insert \(Español\) \(USCCB\)](#)
- [Do's and Don'ts Guidelines During Election Season \(USCCB\)](#)
- [Voter Education and Voter Registration \(Español\) \(USCCB\)](#)
- [Tips for Conducting Candidate Forums \(Español\) \(USCCB\)](#)

Prayer Resources

- [Novena for Faithful Citizenship \(Español\) \(USCCB\)](#)
- [Liturgy and Prayer Suggestions \(Español\) \(USCCB\)](#)
- [Questions for Reflection and Discussion on Faithful Citizenship \(USCCB\)](#)

See Also – [California Bishop's Statements](#), [Social Encyclicals](#), [Catholic Social Teaching Themes](#)

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship provides this list of references for Catholics interested in a full purview of the Church's teachings on social justice and moral issues:

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2000.
- Pope Francis. *Laudato Si' (On Care for Our Common Home)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2015
- Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2013.
- Pope Benedict XVI. *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2009.
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Washington, DC. USCCB, 2004.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*. In *Readings on Catholics in Political Life*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, 2003.
- Pope Benedict XVI. *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006.
- Pope Benedict XVI. *Sacramentum Caritatis (The Sacrament of Charity)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007.
- Pope John XXIII. *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1963.
- Pope John Paul II. *Christifideles Laici (On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1989.
- Pope John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1995.
- Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor (The Splendor of Truth)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993.
- Second Vatican Council. *Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration on Religious Liberty)*. Vatican website.
- Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*. Vatican website.
- USCCB. *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998.

Other resources, recommended by the USCCB, can be found at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-statements.cfm>. These include the U.S. bishops' statements on such values as protecting human life, promoting family life, pursuing social justice and practicing global solidarity.

In addition, the USCCB website – www.usccb.org – references major policy-related speeches of Pope Francis during his apostolic visit to the United States and the United Nations in September 2015.