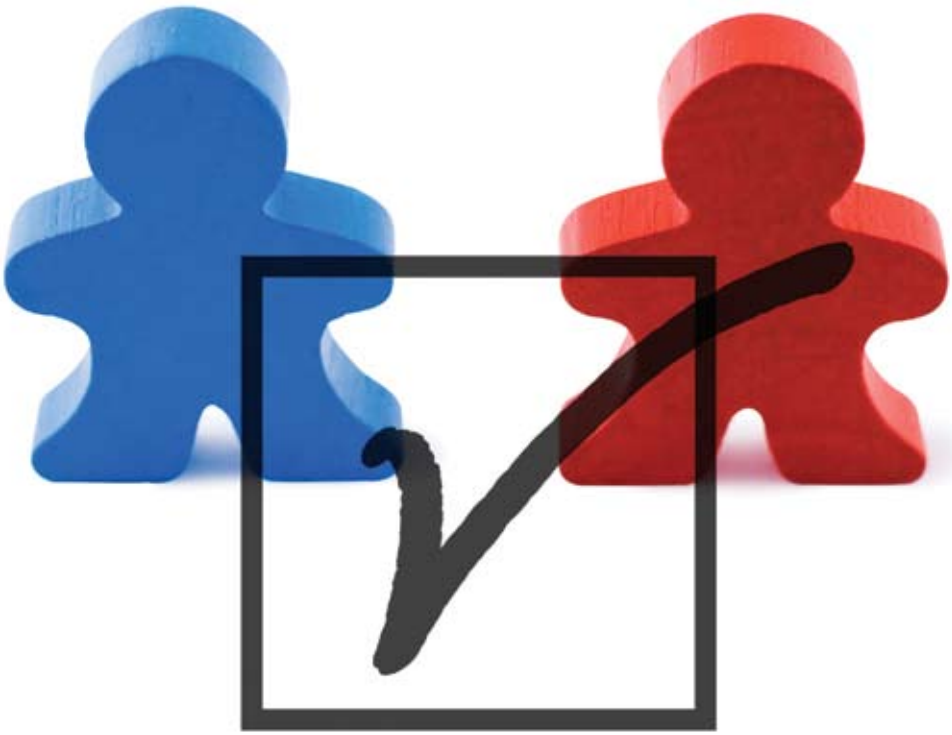


Conscience Forming

U.S. Bishops offer a unified voice for human dignity and the common good at election time.

By Amy Uelmen

As the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign season begins to heat up, many remember how the 2004 campaign was marred by profound divisions within our culture and specifically within religious communities. One reporter went so far as to describe the 2004 U.S. "Catholic vote" as a "metaphor" for political polarization. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops gathered this past November to discuss their new statement on political responsibility and some wondered whether they would be able to speak about politics in a unified voice. At the end of their meeting, their statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* was issued with almost unanimous (97.8%) approval. It takes up many of the questions that had made the 2004 campaign so difficult, giving a decisive and illuminating response to many of the challenges of our current political terrain. Here we highlight just a few of the document's overarching themes. We encourage all to reflect on the full statement which is available online at *www.usccb.org [faithfulcitizenship].*

A Different Kind of Political Engagement

Forming Consciences is first of all a hopeful invitation to re-imagine the foundations of our political life. As the bishops explain, Christians find their model in "Christ, the Word made flesh," who "shows us what it truly means to be human … Christ's love for us lets us see our human dignity in full clarity and compels us to love our neighbors as he has loved us." Quoting from Pope Benedict's first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, which served as an important point of reference for the statement, this love "must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity."

Is such a vision possible in a political terrain characterized by a "contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites and media hype?" Catholics are urged to bring their contribution to the public forum precisely in response to these challenges. "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."

A "different kind of political engagement" calls for a shift in one's point of reference: "As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help to transform

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE: 7 Key Themes

Here are a few highlights of the U.S. bishops' extensive discussion of how Catholic social teaching provides a moral framework for policy decisions:

■ **The Right to Life and the Dignity of the Human Person**
"We revere the lives of children in the womb, the lives of persons dying in war and from starvation, and indeed the lives of all human beings as children of God."

■ **A Call to Family, Community and Participation**
"The family should be defended and strengthened, not redefined or undermined. … Every person and association has a right and a duty to participate actively in shaping society and to promote the well-being of all, especially the poor and the vulnerable."

■ **Rights and Responsibilities**
"Human dignity is respected and the common good is fostered only if human rights are protected and basic responsibilities are met."

■ **The Poor and the Vulnerable**
"While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable and most in need deserve preferential concern."

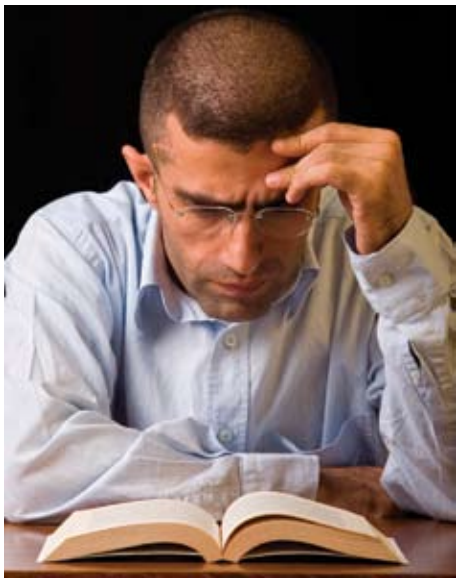
■ **The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**
"The economy must serve people, not the other way around."

■ **Solidarity**
"We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences ... Loving our neighbor has global dimensions and requires us to eradicate racism and address the extreme poverty and disease plaguing so much of the world."

■ **Caring for God's Creation**
"Care for the earth is a duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people. We should strive to live simply to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." LC

that party to which we belong; we should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths."

How might Catholics bring this unique contribution to political life? The effort is two-fold: first to form one's conscience "in accord with human reason and the teaching of the church," and second, to develop the virtue of prudence, which enables one "to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it."


DREAMSTIME (2)

Doing Good and Avoiding Evil

One of the important characteristics of a well-formed conscience is that it helps one "to make practical judgments regarding good and evil in the political arena." Here the bishops explain a key term for this process of discernment: "intrinsic 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. 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 condoned."

"The work for justice requires that mind and heart be educated and formed ... With this foundation, [people] are better able to evaluate policy positions, party platforms and candidates' promises and actions in light of the Gospel and the moral and social teaching of the Church."

Examples of "intrinsically evil" actions include the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia; direct threats to the sanctity and dignity of human life, such as human cloning and destructive research on human embryos; as well as other direct assaults on human life and violations of human dignity, such as genocide, torture, racism and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war. It is important to note that "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."

The commitment in politics, however, does not stop with identifying and avoiding evil. The bishops emphasize:

DESIGNPICS (2)

Get Informed "The formation of conscience includes several elements. It is important to examine the facts and background information about various choices."

DREAMSTIME (2)

Seek the Truth "Young people need to have the opportunity to develop intellectually, morally, spiritually, and physically, to become good citizens who make responsible decisions."

"Opposition to intrinsically evil acts that undercut the dignity of the human person should also open our eyes to the good we must do, that is, to our positive duty to contribute to the common good and to act in solidarity with those in need." In fact, the moral obligation to meet basic needs for food, shelter, health care, education and meaningful work is also "universally binding on our consciences." The fact that the political choices about how to best meet these challenges are matters for principled debate "does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues."

Here the bishops issue a decisive call to unity. As Catholics work on a variety of issues, searching for political and social remedies to the problems of abortion, war, poverty and a host of other threats to human life and dignity, "we need to support one another as our community of faith defends human life and dignity wherever it is threatened. We are not factions, but one family of faith fulfilling the mission of Jesus Christ."

Politics and the Art of the Possible

What might it mean to bring this sense of clarity about good and evil to the political sphere? Prudence is the virtue that "shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting in a specific context, and to act decisively."

Often decisions about law and policy are made against the backdrop of an already morally flawed system. In these circumstances, the process of framing legislation, or other political action, must be subject to prudential judgment, and what the bishops recognize as "the art of the possible." For example, as Pope John Paul II had explained, when a legislator who is on the record as fully opposing abortion cannot succeed in completely overturning the law, he or she may work to limit the harm done, or to lessen the negative impact as much as possible.

Prudence is especially important when the heart of a political question is not whether something is bad, but what to do about it. Looking realistically at the various circumstances and difficulties of our social life, political choices often involve not only clearly identifying the values to be protected, but also working through the practical questions about *how* to protect those values.

In *Forming Consciences*, the bishops extend an open invitation to engage in a deep process of reflection, using "the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace," and also taking into consideration "candidates' integrity, philosophy and performance."

An Important Gift for Public Life

Occasionally some question whether it is appropriate for the bishops to make such specific and decisive statements about political life. *Forming Consciences* is itself an example of how our country's "tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions and concerns into public life."

Well aware that their role is not "to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote," with the deepest respect for individuals and for the political process as a whole, the bishops highlight the important gifts that the Catholic community can bring to political life. A "consistent moral framework," "broad experience in serving those in need," and a readiness to become actively involved in public life are all crucial contributions to public life. "We are called to bring together our principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a better world." LC

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Study Sacred Scripture "Formation of conscience begins with a willingness to seek the truth by studying Sacred Scripture and the Church's teaching."

Pray and Discern "Prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. The Church fosters well-formed consciences also by encouraging people to develop the virtue of prudence."

Moral Guidance for Catholic Voters

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship answers some difficult questions about a voter's moral responsibility.

In deciding for whom to vote, what factors should be considered? The bishops note that Catholics should certainly pay particular attention to whether candidates promote policies that are "intrinsically evil," meaning "so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons." They explain, "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 intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our conscience." Voters should also consider "a candidate's commitments, character, integrity and ability to influence a given issue."

Is it a sin for a Catholic to vote for a candidate who supports intrinsically evil policies? This depends on the voter's *intent*. The bishops explain: "A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil."

Is a candidate's opposition to intrinsically evil policies the only issue that Catholics should consider in deciding how to vote? No. The bishops clearly state, "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." In fact, "there may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons."

What should a voter do when all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil? The bishops recognize this as a true dilemma. Options include "the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate," or, after careful deliberation, voting "for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods."

Should one consider the voter's guides offered in the Internet? During the 2004 presidential campaign, several Internet voter's guides purported to help "serious Catholics" decide how to vote. *Forming Consciences* sounds a note of caution about these guides.

Some guides set up a sharp contrast between five "non-negotiable" issues (abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem-cell research, human cloning and homosexual marriage) with other issues such as waging war, helping the poor, managing the economy, and handling immigration, which all admit many political options.

Compared with the bishop's discussion of "intrinsic evil," these short lists of five "non-negotiables" are inaccurate and incomplete, missing other important examples of direct assaults on human life and violations of human dignity such as genocide, torture, racism and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war. Further, some of the guides place excessive emphasis on categorizing particular acts as good or bad, and thus miss that important dimension of politics which involves not just defining what is bad for society, but also the practical questions of what to do about it.

Voters should be aware that many of these guides contain series flaws, and so they may be less helpful than "*Forming Consciences*" or other analyses approved by the state bishops' conferences.—***A. U.***