

A Call to Faithful Citizenship

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Next month, we will have the opportunity to vote for the next president and vice president. This is an important duty that we have as citizens of our Republic. Those who are running for president and vice president have presented us with a variety of issues on which they hope to base their future administration. We, in turn, must decide whether or not we support the actions they intend to take. Some of those issues, such as how to lower the national debt, are matters of prudential judgments. Other issues, however, such as the protection of the life of the unborn and care for the poor, are issues of morality.

How can we best decide which candidates to support? To help us make informed judgments about the candidates and the moral issues involved in the election, the bishops of the United States have produced a document entitled *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. It is available at the Bishops' Conference website: www.usccb.org.

Since 1972, the American bishops have released such a document prior to a presidential election. The purpose of the document is threefold: First, to call all Catholics to participate in the political process as citizens; second, to guide Catholics in their decision-making regarding candidates; and third, to help frame contemporary political issues within a consistent ethic of life.

It is not the role of the bishops to tell Catholics for whom to vote. That would be a violation of an individual's conscience. It is, however, the responsibility of the bishops to articulate the moral issues in any election and to share with you our Catholic Tradition regarding conscience formation to help you discern how you will engage in political life. In this column, I want to lead you through the basic tenets of Faithful Citizenship in order to help you form your conscience.

What do I mean by "conscience"? The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes conscience in this way:

Deep within...man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths." (CCC 1776)

The document, *Faithful Citizenship*, using the Catechism as its starting point, then elaborates on the concept of conscience.

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 Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith.

There are four sources of moral wisdom which, taken collectively, we should utilize in conscience formation.

1. Experience

All of us have experiences that we bring to a decision. We may have direct and personal experience with a political or social issue or perhaps we have knowledge from a friend or family member. It is important that we recognize our experiences as valuable data. Our personal experience, however, is not enough on which to base a moral decision. We also are called upon to review the experiences of our community, locally and nationally, regarding the issues we are facing. To that end, the Church consults with the natural and social sciences to help us gain knowledge about a problem or an opportunity.

2. Reason

God not only reveals Himself to us through the Scriptures but also has given us human reason to reflect and critically analyze our positions and choices. The study of philosophy examines the numerous ways human beings have sought to use reason to understand our world and our existence. The Catholic Faith relies heavily on a moral analytical process which strives to discern the Law of Nature. This “natural law” tradition, as found in the writing of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, can help us determine if an act is moral or not.

Human actions are good, neutral or illicit. What we mean by good or neutral is clear. An illicit action is one that is always wrong, regardless of the circumstances. The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists certain acts that are always illicit or wrong, for example, abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and child abuse. In business it is always illicit not to pay fair wages or not to do an honest day’s work or to not pay a fair share of taxes

The circumstances surrounding an action must always be considered, but circumstances can never make an illicit act neutral or good. Moreover, we always have to explore what our true intentions are in taking an action and, if the action is illicit, is there an alternate way of proceeding that is morally good.

3. Scripture

The third source of moral wisdom is the revealed Word of God. Here we should prayerfully reflect upon the insights and meaning of the Scriptures. Of course Jesus did not deal with all of the current issues we face, such as land mines. But Scripture and the life-actions of Jesus Christ can and do give us some insights into our moral decisions. Indeed, Scripture is one of our most important sources of moral wisdom.

4. Teachings of the Church

What we call the “Church’s Tradition,” with a capital “T”, is that process wherein the Church, as a community of faith, continues to reflect upon current issues in light of experience, reason and Scripture. That teaching Tradition of the Church, known as the “Magisterium,” helps us analyze issues, reflect on actions, and consider choices and alternatives. We find the Church’s Tradition in the Catechism, in the encyclicals of the Popes, and the teachings of our bishops.

These four sources of moral wisdom provide the material we need to develop a well-formed conscience and make our decisions not only about which candidate for which we want to vote.

Finally, we must act. After we review our experience, reason, Scripture and the teachings of the Church, we must make a decision. Here is the place where we have to stay close to our conscience and act in the best manner we can. This is where we will be judged by God.

We make moral decisions every day: some major, some minor. This process of conscience formation should be our guide for these daily decisions and also our guide as we act as citizens and vote.

Our faith calls us to be active citizens in the world. Vatican Council II called upon us in its Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, to be “salt”, “light” and “yeast” for the world. In other words, although our voice may be small, we are to bring ourselves as Christians into the world, even the world of politics, and become agents of transformation into the Kingdom of God.

As Christians we are called to bring that Good News into the groups to which we belong to: unions, political parties, Chambers of Commerce, places of employment and even social gatherings, to act as light, salt and yeast to them. Specifically, we should not vote for any candidate because he or she represents a particular political party, be it Democrat or Republican. We should vote first and foremost as Catholics.

As outlined in *Faithful Citizenship*, here are the major moral issues that face us in every election:

1. The defense and protection of all human life

2. The fostering of family life
3. The pursuit of social justice
4. Global Solidarity to alleviate poverty, protect the environment, promote religious liberty and support basic human rights.

As Catholics we are called to be salt, light and yeast in the world. This document can help us as faithful Catholics be faithful citizens by making judgments about the moral values that will guide our country into the future. Please take the time to prayerfully review your moral choices in light of your experience, human reason, the Scriptures and the Teachings of the Church. Please also remember that at the foundation of all human rights and dignity is the right to life. Thus, the defense of all human life in all forms, from conception to natural death, should be our primary concern.

You and your families are remembered in my prayers as we continue **On the Road to Jerusalem.**