

Brief Reflections on the Role of Catholics in an Election Year

As we move closer to the November 4, 2008 general election, I would like to suggest five things we can all do as faithful citizens.

1. Develop a well informed Christian conscience.

The Church equips her 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 reasoning and the teaching of the Church. **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.** (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, par. #17)

The formation of conscience includes several elements. First, there is a desire to embrace goodness and truth. For Catholics this begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. **It is also important** to examine the facts and background information about various choices. **Finally**, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. (par. #18)

A well informed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals. The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. (Doctrinal Note, Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Vatican, 2002).

Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the Creator. (Catechism of the Catholic Church-1783).

2. Measure every candidate, policy, and party platform on whether it protects human life and promotes human dignity, what it does to the poor and vulnerable and whether it promotes the common good.

The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood; neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental moral obligation to respect the dignity of every person as a child of God. (par. # 40)

Catholic voters should use 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 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).

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. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, # 4).

Prudence is especially important when deciding how to vote. Prudence 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).

Our Bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Their purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth.

3. Become an active participant in the political process, vote and encourage others to vote.

We encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate more fully 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. (*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge of American Catholics*, USCCB, 1998, #34).

As the Holy Father also taught in *Deus Caritas Est*, "the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society is proper to the lay faithful" (no. 29). This duty is more critical than ever in today's political environment, where Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party and too few candidates fully share the Church's comprehensive commitment to the life and dignity of every human being from conception to natural death. Yet this is not a time for retreat or discouragement; rather, it is a time for renewed engagement. Forming their consciences in accord with Catholic teaching, Catholic lay women and men can become actively involved: running for office; working within political parties; communicating their concerns and positions to elected officials; and joining diocesan social mission or advocacy networks, state Catholic conference initiatives, community organizations, and other efforts to apply authentic moral teaching in the public square. (par. #16)

4. Refrain from partisan activities and discourage the distribution of partisan materials on Church property.

During election years, there may be many handouts and voter guides that are produced and distributed. **We encourage Catholics to seek those resources that are authorized by their own bishops, their state Catholic conferences, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.** (par. #8)

“While individual Catholics may choose to participate in partisan politics and the campaigns of various candidates, at no time and in no way should we as the Catholic Church give any semblance of such political participation as that is not the role of the church.” (Bishop Richard G. Lennon, 2006 Statement on the Election Season).

“Distribution of campaign literature for or granting permission to candidates and those advocating on behalf of a candidate to distribute campaign literature on parish property, including parish parking lots,” is not permissible. “Campaign literature would include, among other things, any voter scorecards, endorsements from outside organizations, fliers, or other materials that are biased toward a particular candidate.” (Diocesan Legal Office, Guidelines for Parishes and Political Activity, 2006).

5. Utilize election year resources of the United States Bishops Conference, Catholic Conference of Ohio, and the Cleveland Diocesan Social Action Office.

The Diocesan Social Action Office highly recommends the following websites for documents regarding Catholics and political life: www.catholic-action.org; www.ohiocathconf.org; www.faithfulcitizenship.org; www.vatican.va.

September 2008