Diocesan Social Action Office

A Brief Summary of "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States"

Background and Brief Overview:

- The statement urges Catholics to become involved in public life and to use the values of faith to shape their political choices. **The Bishops do not tell Catholics how to vote; rather they see their role as helping Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth.** The responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience. Participation in the political process goes beyond the casting of a vote. With a properly formed conscience, Catholics are better able to evaluate the policy positions, party platforms and candidates' promises in light of the Gospel and Catholic moral and social teaching.

Formation of 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 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 judgments based on the truths of our faith (par.#17)

- **"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." (Catechism of the Catholic Church - #1778).

- **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. Catholics must also understand that if they fail to form their consciences they can make erroneous judgments. (par. #18)

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Virtue of Prudence:

- **The virtue of prudence allows Catholics to "discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it."** Prudence enables us to deliberate over a wide range of alternatives and to decide what is most fitting in a specific context. In addition, we must have the courage to act. A good end never justifies the means. As Catholics committed to promoting the common good, we must determine which policies are morally sound. We may choose different ways to respond to social problems, however, we all have an obligation to protect human life and dignity and help build a more just and peaceful world. (par. #19)

Intrinsic Evils:

- **There are some things we must never do as individuals or a society because they are incompatible with love of God and neighbor**. These are intrinsic evils that must always be rejected. For instance, **abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, and destructive research on human embryos** are direct threats to human life and must be opposed. **Genocide, torture, racism, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war,** can never be justified as they represent assaults on human life. Disrespect for any human life diminishes respect for all human life. (par. #22)

Guidance on Voting:

- **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 abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support.** There are times when a Catholic rejects a candidate's unacceptable position, however, may vote for the candidate for other morally significant reasons. When all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, a voter may decide to vote for the candidate deemed least likely to advance such a position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods, or the voter may decide the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate. The U.S. Bishops also inform us that the political choices faced by citizens not only have an impact on the general peace and prosperity but also may affect the individual's salvation. (par. #42 and #35)

The Common Good and Basic Human Rights:

- **Opposing intrinsically evil acts causes us to recognize our duty to contribute to the common good and to act in solidarity with those in need.** The right to life implies and is linked to other human rights-to the basic goods that every human person needs to live and thrive. All life issues are connected. There is a moral imperative to respond to the basic needs of our sisters and brothers that is binding on our consciences. Blessed Pope John X111 taught that each of us has a basic right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally, the necessary social services. (Pacem in Terris, #11). The right to life is the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights. (par. #25)

Faith is an Integral Unity:

- **There are two temptations in public life that can distort the Church's defense of human life and dignity:**
  - **The first is to make no moral distinction between different issues.** 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. (par. #28)
  - **The second temptation is to diminish or ignore the other threats to human life and dignity**. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care, or an unjust immigration policy are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act. (par. #29)
- **These are not optional concerns. We are one family of faith.** The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith made the following point: "It must be noted also that a well-formed 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. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility towards the common good. (Doctrinal Note, #4).

Catholics and Public Life:

- **Decisions about public life are complex and require Catholics to exercise a well formed conscience aided by prudence.** Catholics cannot knowingly, willingly and directly support public policies and issues that undermine fundamental moral principles. Such support constitutes cooperation with intrinsic evil. When confronted with the existence of morally flawed laws, Catholics can exercise prudential judgment and the art of the possible to protect life. Pope John Paul II taught that a public official who opposes abortion may work to improve protection of the unborn and lessening the negative impact as much as possible. In other words, such an official is "limiting the harm done by such a law." Catholics must never abandon the moral requirement to protect human life from conception to natural death. (par. #32)
- **Prudential judgment is also necessary in applying moral principles to such issues as the war in Iraq, housing, health care, immigration and others. We are urged to listen carefully to the teaching of Church leaders on these issues.** The judgments of Bishops on these issues do not carry the same moral authority as those on universal moral teachings. Nevertheless, the Church's guidance on these matters is an essential resource for individual Catholics and they determine their own moral judgments, consistent with the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching. (par. # 33)

- **The Church has much to say about Catholic Social Teaching in the Public Square. A consistent ethic of life should guide all Catholics involved in public life.** This teaching 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 and other human rights from conception until natural death, in the fundamental obligation to respect the dignity of every human being as child of God. (par. #40)

- **Catholic voters should utilize Catholic teaching to examine the candidates' positions and should consider the candidates' integrity, philosophy and performance.** It is important for all citizens to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self interest. (par. #41)

Themes of Catholic Social Teaching:

- **The Right to Life and the Dignity of the Person**. Human life is sacred. Direct attacks on innocent human beings are never morally acceptable. Life is under attack by abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, and the destruction of human embryos for research. Catholics are also compelled to oppose genocide, torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty, as well as to pursue peace and help overcome poverty, racism, and other conditions that demean human life. (par. #44)

- **Call to Family, Community and Participation.** The family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, is the fundamental unit of society. Supporting families should be a priority for economic and social policies. Every person and association has a right and duty to participate in shaping society to promote the well-being of individuals and the common good. (par. #46)

- **Rights and Responsibilities**. Every person has the right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible. Each of us has a right to religious freedom, which enables us to live and act in accord with our God-given dignity, as well as a right to access to those things required for human decency-food, shelter, education and employment, health care and housing. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities-to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. (par. #49)

- **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**. Those in greatest need deserve preferential treatment. A moral test of society is how we treat the weakest among us-the unborn, those dealing with disabilities or terminal illness, the poor and the marginalized. (par. #50)

- **Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**. The economy must serve people and not the other way around. Economic justice calls for decent work at fair, living wages, opportunities for legal status 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. (par. #52)

- **Solidarity**. 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. (par. #53)

- **Caring for God's Creation**. Care for the earth is a duty of our Catholic faith. 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. (par. #54)

- **Participation in political life is an essential duty of every Catholic and all people of good will.** The Church is involved in the political process but is not partisan; the Church is engaged in the process but is not used; the Church is principled but not ideological. (par. #57 and #58)

A Renewed Kind of Politics:

- **The Bishops call for a renewed kind of politics: one that is focused more on moral principles than the latest polls; one that is more focused on the needs of the weak than on the benefits of the strong; one that is focused more on the pursuit of the common good than on the demands of narrow interests.** This kind of politics reflects the social teaching of our Church and the best traditions of our nation. (par. #61)

For additional resources of Faithful Citizenship, contact the Diocesan Social Action Office @ 888-620-5280 or 216-939-3851. Also visit www.catholic-action.org.

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January 2, 2008