

The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship



Part I of II: Our Call as Catholic Citizens

This brief document is Part I of a summary of the US bishops' reflection, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, which complements the teaching of bishops in dioceses and states.



"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.'"¹ 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 the 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
- Wars, terror, and violence that threaten every aspect of human life and dignity.²

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.

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 US Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to proclaim and 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 its 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.

Who in the Church Should Participate in Political 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 an election year duty.

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.'"³ 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 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.**⁴

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 multifaceted 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" (no. 131). 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*, no. 27). Every political, economic, social, scientific and cultural program must be inspired by the awareness of the primacy of each human being over society."⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷

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 fulfilment more fully and more easily.”⁸

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 have 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 coworkers 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.”⁹ 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 Message, 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]”.¹⁰ 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.

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.”¹¹

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 the **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.

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.

Notes

- 1 *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 183.
- 2 This specific list of issues is taken from the Introductory Note to *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015. For a fuller consideration, see the second document in this series, “The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship; Part II: Making Moral Choices and Applying Our Principles” (2016), and the full statement of the bishops’ *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015.
- 3 *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 221.
- 4 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.
- 5 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 132. 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.
- 6 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 185.
- 7 *Centesimus Annus*, no. 48; *Dignitatis Humanae*, nos. 4-6.
- 8 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 164.
- 9 *Laudato Si'*, no. 77.
- 10 *Laudato Si'*, nos. 219 and 217.
- 11 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 193. (See Mt 10:40-42, 20:25; Mk 10:42-45; Lk 22:25-27)

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The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship



Part II of II: Making Moral Choices and Applying Our Principles

This brief document is Part II of a summary of the US bishops' reflection, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, which complements the teaching of bishops in dioceses and states.

Part I of the summary of the US bishops' reflection, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, considered the core principles that underlie Catholic engagement in the political realm. Part II is a consideration of the process by which these principles are applied to the act of voting and taking positions on policy issues. It begins with the general consideration of the nature of conscience and the role of prudence. The application of prudential judgment does not mean that all choices are equally valid or that the bishops' guidance and that of other church leaders is just another political opinion or policy preference among many others. Rather, Catholics are urged to listen carefully to the Church's teachers when they apply Catholic social teaching to specific proposals and situations.

How Does the Church Help the Catholic Faithful to 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.

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.



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.

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 St. 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."¹ 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.

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.

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 St. 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.¹

What Public Policies Should Concern Catholics Most?

As Catholics, we are led to raise questions about 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 following practices: 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 the 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.

Notes

1. *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 52.



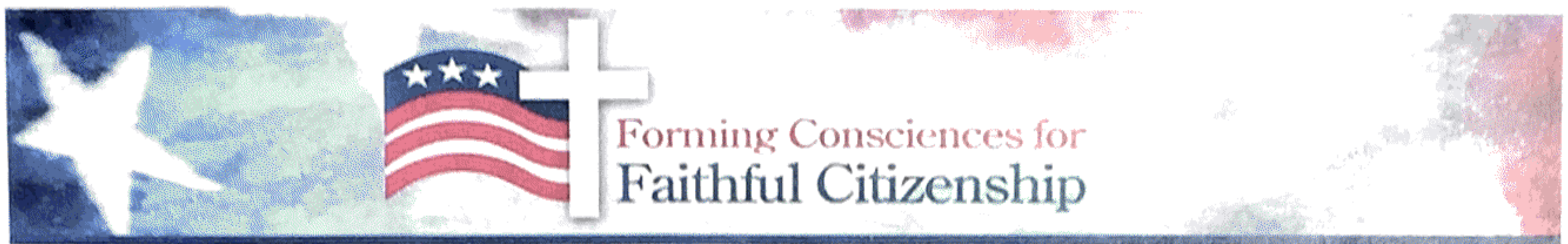
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Civil Dialogue

In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the Catholic bishops of the United States urge all people to practice civility, charity and justice in public life (no. 60). In the following essay, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, reflects on how Catholics can carry out this call to civil dialogue.

Civil Discourse: Speaking Truth in Love

By Cardinal Donald Wuerl

The preacher's pulpit, the politician's podium and the print and electronic media all bear some responsibility to encourage a far more civil, responsible and respectful approach to national debate and the discussion of issues in our country today.

A wise and ancient Catholic maxim has always insisted that we are to "hate the sin and love the sinner." At the heart of this time-honored wisdom is the simple recognition that some things are wrong and yet we still distinguish between what is done and who does it.

Increasingly, there is a tendency to disparage the name and reputation, the character and life, of a person because he or she holds a different position. The identifying of some people as "bigots" and "hate mongers" simply because they hold a position contrary to another's has unfortunately become all too commonplace today. Locally, we have witnessed rhetorical hyperbole that, I believe, long since crossed the line between reasoned discourse and irresponsible demagoguery.

It should not be acceptable to denounce someone who favors immigration reform that includes the process to citizenship as a "traitor" and "unpatriotic." The representatives in federal and state government who voted against the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program or against tax

credits for Catholic schools educating minority children should not be labeled in the media as "anti-Catholic bigots" or "racists" since the majority of the children are African American. People and organizations should not be denounced disparagingly as "homophobic" simply because they support the traditional, worldwide, time-honored definition of marriage. The defaming words speak more about political posturing than about reasoned discourse.

Why is it so important that we respect both our constitutional right to free speech and our moral obligation that we not bear false witness against another? A profoundly basic reason is that we do not live alone. While each of us can claim a unique identity, we are, nonetheless, called to live out our lives in relationship with others ~ in some form of community.

All human community is rooted in this deep stirring of God's created plan within us that brings us into ever-widening circles of relationship: first with our parents, then our family, the Church and a variety of community experiences, educational, economic, cultural, social and, of course, political. We are by nature social and tend to come together so that in the various communities of which we are a part, we can experience full human development. All of this is part of God's plan initiated in creation and reflected in the natural law that calls us to live in community.

What does this have to do with toning down our rhetoric? Everything! No community, human or divine, political or religious, can exist without trust. At the very core of all human relations is the confidence that members speak the truth to each other. It is for this reason that God explicitly protected the bonds of community by prohibiting falsehood as a grave attack on the human spirit. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex 20:16). To tamper with the truth or, worse yet, to pervert it, is to undermine the foundations of human community and to begin to cut the threads that weave us into a coherent human family.

The call to truthfulness is far from being a denial of freedom of speech. Rather, it is a God-given obligation to respect the very function of human speech. We are not free to say whatever we want about another, but only what is true. To the extent that freedom is improperly used to sever the bonds of trust that bind us together as a people, to that extent it is irresponsible. The commandment that obliges us to avoid false witness also calls us to tell the truth. We, therefore, have an obligation to ascertain that what we say or hear or read is really the truth.

Someone once described a "gossip" as a person who will never tell a lie if a half-truth will do as much harm. When we listen to news accounts or read what is presented in the print and electronic media, we are too often reminded that spin, selecting only some of the facts, highlighting only parts of the picture, has replaced too often an effort to present the facts ~ the full story. We all know the tragic results of gossip against which there is little or no defense. In an age of blogs, even the wildest accusations can quickly become "fact." Gossip is like an insidious infection that spreads sickness throughout the body. These untruths go unchallenged because the persons who are the object of the discussion are usually not present to defend themselves, their views or actions.

Irresponsible blogs, electronic and print media stories, and pulpit and podium people-bashing rhetoric can be likened to many forms of anonymous violence. Spin and extremist language should not be embraced as the best this country is capable of achieving. Selecting only some facts, choosing inflammatory words, spinning the story, are activities that seem much more directed to achieving someone's political purpose rather than reporting events. One side is described as "inquiring minds that want to know" and the other side as "lashing out in response."

We need to look at how we engage in discourse and how we live out our commitment to be a people of profound respect for the truth and our right to express our thoughts, opinions, positions ~ always in love. We who follow Christ must not only speak the

truth but must do so in love (Eph 4:15). It is not enough that we know or believe something to be true. We must express that truth in charity with respect for others so that the bonds between us can be strengthened in building up the body of Christ.

Freedom of speech and respect for others, freedom of expression and regard for the truth, should always be woven together. This should be true of everyone, whether they speak from a pulpit, a political platform, or through the electronic and print media and other means of social communications.

Ground Rules for Civil Dialogue

We are all called to engage in civil dialogue. Here are some possible ground rules for civil dialogue:

1. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak.
2. Share your personal experience, not someone else's.
3. 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.
4. Don't interrupt unless for clarification or time keeping.
5. Accept that no group or viewpoint has a complete monopoly on the truth.
6. "Be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another's statement than condemn it" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2478, quoting St. Ignatius of Loyola).
7. Be cautious about assigning motives to another person.



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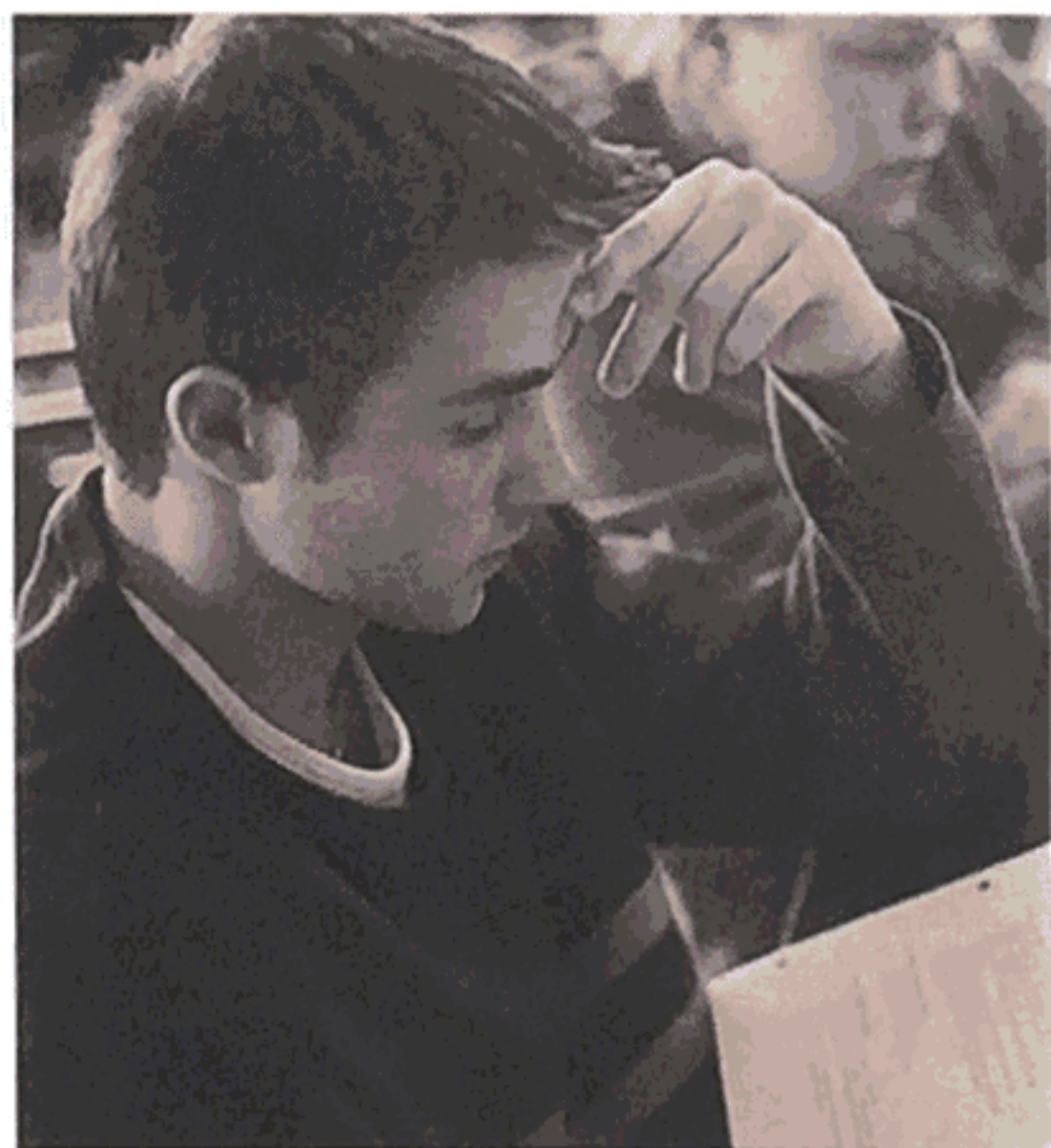


What is Conscience?

In ***Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*** (no. 17), the Catholic Bishops of the United States Conscience remind us:

“The Church equips its members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. ...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 is a judgment 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).



The Second Vatican Council wrote:

“Always summoning [one] to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to [one’s] heart more specifically: do this, shun that” (*Gaudium et Spes* 16).

Conscience does not simply “come to us”! Throughout our lives, we have to spend time *forming our consciences* so that we can make well-reasoned judgments about particular situations.

How Do I Form My Conscience?

As the bishops note in ***Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship***, we need to form our consciences in an *ongoing manner*. How do we do this?

- 1) When examining any issue or situation, we must begin by **being open to the truth** and what is right.
- 2) We must **study Sacred Scripture** and the **teaching** of the Church.
- 3) We must **examine the facts** and **background information** about various choices.
- 4) 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:

- 5) The **prudent advice** and **good example** of others support and enlighten our conscience.
- 6) The **authoritative teaching** of the Church is an essential element.
- 7) The **gifts of the Holy Spirit** help us develop our conscience.
- 8) Regular **examination of conscience** is important as well (p. 314).



Reflections on Conscience

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

1777 Moral conscience,¹ present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to **do good and to avoid evil**. It also **judges particular choices**, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil.² It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.

1778 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. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.

¹Cf. *Rom* 2:14-16. ²Cf. *Rom* 1:32.

Reflections on Conscience Formation

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

1784 The education of the conscience is a **lifelong task**. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. **Prudent education** teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults.



The education of the conscience **guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart**.

1785 In the formation of conscience the **Word of God** is the light for our path,³ we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also **examine** our conscience before the **Lord's Cross**. We are assisted by the **gifts of the Holy Spirit**, aided by the **witness or advice of others** and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.⁴

³Cf. *Ps* 119:105. ⁴ Cf. *Dignitatis Humanae* 14.

Reflection Questions

1. What is conscience?
2. When has my conscience guided me to "do good and avoid evil"?
3. What are some key resources I can use to form my conscience?
4. Forming conscience is a "lifelong task." What do I do to *regularly* form my conscience? What more should I do?



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