

"Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" by the USCCB. As we approach the November elections, the *First Installment* article aims to guide and inform our parishioners on the importance of aligning their civic duties with their faith. For more information, visit the USCCB website at www.usccb.org/offices/justice-and-peace/forming-consciences-faithful-citizenship

Introductory Note



Let us look to the example of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond. This summons is ever new, yet it is grounded in a fundamental law of our being: we are called to direct society to the pursuit of the common good and, with this purpose in mind, to persevere in consolidating its political and social order, its fabric of relations, its human goals.

(Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 66)

As Catholics and Americans, we are blessed to be able to participate in our nation's political and public life. Our freedoms respect the dignity of individuals and their consciences and allow us to come together for the common good. Election seasons, therefore, should contain a sense of gratitude and hope. Our love for this country, our patriotism, properly impels us to vote.

But increasingly, it seems, election seasons are a time of anxiety and spiritual trial. Political rhetoric is increasingly angry, seeking to motivate primarily through division and hatred. Fear can be an effective tool for raising money. The most heated arguments online often get the most clicks. Demonizing the other can win votes.

We propose once more the moral framework of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* precisely as pastors, inspired by the Good Samaritan, with the hope of binding these wounds and healing these bitter divisions. This document is not based on personalities or partisanship, the latest news cycle, or what's trending on social media. Instead, it reflects the perennial role of the Church in public life in proclaiming timeless principles: the infinite

worth and dignity of every human life, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity. Not sure what these mean? We invite you to read a copy of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* and learn more.

Allowing your conscience to be stretched and formed by these reflections can give you peace! They point to Jesus' challenge to show mercy to those in need, just as the Good Samaritan. As Pope Francis writes, "Here, all our distinctions, labels and masks fall away: it is the moment of truth. Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others?" (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 70). Let this be in our hearts when we talk about politics and make political choices.

Some might be tempted to say: yes, of course, we will be the ones who help by promoting good and opposing evil. But when confronted with so much good at risk and so much evil, it is a great challenge to avoid fear and anger. The threat of abortion remains our pre-eminent priority because it directly attacks our most vulnerable and voiceless brothers and sisters and destroys more than a million lives per year in our country alone. Other grave threats to the life and dignity of the human person include euthanasia, gun violence, terrorism, the death penalty, and human trafficking. There is also the redefinition of marriage and gender, threats to religious freedom at home and abroad, lack of justice for the poor, the suffering of migrants and refugees, wars and famines around the world, racism, the need for greater access to healthcare and education, care for our common home, and more. All threaten the dignity of the human person.

So *precisely how* we promote good and oppose evil is an essential part of answering the Lord's call, of being a disciple. As St. Paul reminds us:

Never let evil talk pass your lips; say only the good things men need to hear, things that will really help them. Do nothing that will sadden the Holy Spirit with whom you were sealed against the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander, and malice of every kind. In place of these, be kind to one another, compassionate, and mutually forgiving, just as God has forgiven you in Christ (Eph. 4:29-32).

Thus, Pope Francis exhorts us to “genuine dialogue and openness to others,” by which we may “be frank and open about our beliefs, while continuing to discuss, to seek points of contact, and above all, to work and struggle together” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 203). This applies to the faithful both as voters and as candidates—we must consider not only candidates’ positions on these issues, but their character and integrity as well.

How can we meet this challenge? Again, St. Paul gives us a way: Put on “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). Take time away from social media and spend time with Holy Scripture and the Blessed Sacrament. Turn off the TV and the podcast, and listen in silence. Volunteer at a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter, a crisis pregnancy center. Serve the poor, the needy, the outcast. Pray often, letting faith inform your political participation.

Participation in political life also requires judgments about concrete circumstances. While the bishops help form the laity in accordance with basic principles, they do not tell the laity to vote for particular candidates. On these often complex matters, it is the laity’s responsibility to form their consciences and grow in the virtue of prudence to approach the many and varied issues of the day with the mind of Christ. Conscience is “a judgment of reason” by which one determines whether an action is right or wrong (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778). It does not allow us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere “feeling.” Conscience—properly formed according to God’s revelation and the teaching of the Church—is a means by which one listens to God and discerns how to act in accordance with the truth.¹ The truth is something we receive, not something we make. We can only judge using the conscience we have, but our judgments do not make things true.

It is our responsibility to learn more of Catholic teaching and tradition, to participate in Church life, to learn from trustworthy sources about the issues facing our communities, and to do our best

to make wise judgments about candidates and government actions.

We must also seek wisdom, as Holy Scripture instructs:

Wisdom from above is first of all innocent. It is also peaceable, lenient, docile, rich in sympathy and the kindly deeds that are its fruits, impartial and sincere. The harvest of justice is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace (Jas. 3:17-18).

The teachings of the Church, moreover, offer a vision of hope, where justice and mercy abound, because God is the infinite source of all goodness and love. With this wisdom and hope, we can find a way to bend down as the Good Samaritan did, through the fear and divisions, to touch and heal the wounds.

May God bless you as you consider and pray over these challenging decisions. May God bless our nation with true wisdom, peace, and mutual forgiveness, that we may decide together, through our democratic processes, to uphold the dignity of life and the common good.

This bulletin insert along with five others was approved by the body of U.S. bishops in November 2023. Find this and more complementary resources at www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

Quotes from *Fratelli Tutti* (*On Fraternity and Social Friendship*), Copyright 2020 Libreria Editrice Vaticana (LEV), Vatican City State. Used with permission. All rights reserved. Scripture texts in this work are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Copyright © 2023, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC. All rights reserved.



¹ *Gaudium et Spes* (*The Church in the Modern World*), no. 16. See also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1785.