



FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP 2014

This series has been prepared by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference as a guide for those who wish to inform their consciences in order to participate more fully in the political process. To learn more about the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC), visit www.faithfulcitizenship.org and www.wisconsinccatholic.org.

Second in a seven-part series

FORMING CONSCIENCES

If there is separation of church and state, why does the Catholic Church speak out on political issues?

As Pope Francis explains, “The Church’s pastors, taking into account the contributions of the different sciences, have the right to offer opinions on all that affects people’s lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being. ... An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. 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.’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 182-3)

In addition, under the First Amendment, individuals and groups have the right to speak freely and to freely exercise their religion. Indeed, our nation’s character is strengthened by the participation of all faiths in the public square.

Aren’t Catholics supposed to follow their individual conscience when voting?

Yes, but the key is that the individual conscience must be well-formed. As Pope Francis has written, “We should recognize how in a culture where each person wants to be bearer of his or her own subjective truth, it becomes difficult for citizens to devise a common plan which transcends individual gain and personal ambitions.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 61)

For Catholics, conscience presupposes some knowledge of a higher moral law. This higher or divine law comes to us from Scripture, Church teaching, and the natural law.



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If the Church participates in the political process, why not endorse candidates?

As a moral voice in the public square, the Church must remain independent of any political party, faction, or candidate. Within the Church, clergy and laity have different but complementary roles. The charism of the clergy is to preach the Gospel message so that all may form their consciences properly.

The charism of the laity is to transform the culture. In the political arena, lay men and women do this by voting, serving in public office, supporting or opposing candidates, forming political parties, educating voters, and developing or influencing public policy between elections.

THE CHURCH IS NOT A POLITICAL POWER, IT’S NOT A PARTY, BUT IT’S A MORAL POWER. SINCE POLITICS FUNDAMENTALLY SHOULD BE A MORAL ENTERPRISE, THE CHURCH IN THIS SENSE HAS SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT POLITICS.

(Pope Benedict XVI, Interview en route to Mexico, March 23, 2012)

What are the most fundamental moral issues for the Church?

As the U.S. bishops explain in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship (FCFC)*, the challenges facing our nation are many. However, as the FCFC “Introductory Note” points out, six areas are particularly pressing at this time. This series will devote special attention to them. All flow from the central core of Catholic teaching – the dignity of every human person:

- Abortion, euthanasia, and other threats to the lives and dignity of all who are vulnerable, sick, or unwanted;
- Forcing Catholic ministries to violate their consciences or stop serving those in need;
- Redefining marriage;
- Poverty and the growing gap between the rich and the poor;
- A broken immigration system; and
- War, terror, and violence.

THE CHURCH IS NOT SEEKING TO IMPOSE ITS TEACHING ON ANYBODY, BUT IT IS USING RATIONAL ARGUMENTS AND MORAL PERSUASION TO DEFEND THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON AND TO PROMOTE THE COMMON GOOD.



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But what is a Catholic voter to do when no single party or candidate adequately addresses these moral issues?

“Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods. A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate's opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.” (FCFC, 34)

“There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.” (FCFC, 35)

“When all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, the conscientious voter faces a dilemma. The voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods.” (FCFC, 36)

“In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. These decisions should take into account a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching.” (FCFC, 37)

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