

# Voting Catholic Means...

## VOTING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

***"Politics in this election year and beyond should be about an old idea with new power - the common good. The central question should not be, 'Are you better off than you were four years ago?' It should be, 'How can we - all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable - be better off in the years ahead?'"***

– US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship*

With numerous voting guides for Catholics in circulation, and critical moral issues at the forefront in many state and national races, many Catholics are wondering where to find the most reliable guidance on how best to cast their vote. ***"Faithful Citizenship"***, a document from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is the best and most complete guide for Catholics concerned about voting and moral issues. See reverse for this excellent guide.

Other widely distributed Catholic voting guides contain only partially accurate, incomplete, reflections of Catholic teaching as it affects voting. For example, the ***"Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics"*** published by Catholic Answers lists only five "non-negotiable" issues - abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, and same-sex unions - and urges Catholics to reject any candidate for any office who endorses or seeks to legalize any of those practices. But the Catholic Church doesn't teach us to shut off our conscience this way.

The Catholic Answers guide is not adequate and is inconsistent with the teaching of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Vatican, and the Catholic Church. It reduces Catholic teaching to a few issues at election time and undermines the Christian responsibility for the common good. It tends to cut off debate about many urgent moral and social issues at a time when we need to be finding effective ways to deal with them.

A Catholic who has an awareness of the life of Christ and a commitment to the teachings of the church cannot single out five nonnegotiable issues. The implication is that other sins ARE negotiable. When Christ was asked what is the greatest commandment, he did not single out any issue but said "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

In contrast ***"Faithful Citizenship"*** lists 18 issues important to Catholics and rejects voting based on litmus tests. The Bishops say it is very difficult for a Catholic to subscribe to the complete philosophies of either the far left or far right. Both have agenda items that are not in keeping with a well-developed Christian conscience.

An good alternative is the guide ***"Voting for the Common Good"*** which is based on the full teaching of ***"Faithful Citizenship"*** and is the result of two years of consultation with theologians, priests, women religious, and Catholic lay leaders from all corners of our nation. It is published by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good ([www.thecatholicalliance.org](http://www.thecatholicalliance.org)). The Alliance is committed to promoting a culture of life and concern for the common good, as articulated by the Vatican's ***Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*** and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

### **For Example, Another Issue to Consider...**

Many Catholics defend our country's use of "alternative" or "coercive" interrogation, which are simply euphemisms for torture. After World War II Japanese who used water boarding on Allied POWs were convicted of war crimes and put to death. This is a technique that is now officially sanctioned by Congress. And do not forget that Jesus was a victim of "stress position" torture before he was killed. These and other sins - and these are surely sins - are being perpetrated in our name by our country. Is this not an issue Catholics should consider when voting?

# The Challenge of Faithful Citizenship

## A CATHOLIC CALL TO POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

A Summary of the Statement by the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

**E**lections are a time for debate and decisions. Our nation has been attacked and has gone to war. We have moved from sharing budget surpluses to allocating the burdens of deficits. Our world faces fundamental questions of life and death, war and peace, who moves ahead and who is left behind. Our community of faith is working to heal wounds and rebuild trust, but we cannot abandon the duty to act on our faith in political life.

Politics should be about an old idea with new power—the common good. The question should not be, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” It should be, “How can ‘we’—all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable—be better off in the years ahead?”

In this election year, we ask who has a place at the table of life in our nation and around the world. Where is the place at the table for children destroyed before they are born; for the hungry and those who lack health care; for families who need decent work, wages, education, and hope for the future? How can the poor and vulnerable have a real place at the table where policies and priorities are set? For Catholics, a special table—an altar—is where we find the direction to use our voices and votes to defend life, advance justice, pursue peace, and find a place at the table for all God’s children.

We need a new kind of politics—focused on moral principles, not on polls; on the needs of the vulnerable, not the contributions of the powerful; and on the pursuit of the common good, not the demands of special interests. Some Catholics may feel politically homeless, sensing that no political party and too few candidates share a consistent concern for human life and dignity. However, this is no time for retreat or discouragement. We need more, not less engagement in political life.

### **A Call to Faithful Citizenship**

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation. Believers are called to become informed, active, and responsible participants in the political process. Even those who are not citizens are called to participate. Catholics who seek political office have a particular responsibility to bring together their faith, moral convictions, and public responsibilities. This is about more than one election. It requires ongoing participation in the political process.

The Constitution protects our right to speak without governmental favoritism or discrimination. Our nation is enriched, not threatened, when religious groups join public debate. A Catholic moral framework is often not “politically correct;” it does not fit the rigid ideologies of “right” or “left,” or the platform of any party. Believers are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society, testing every candidate and party for how they affect human life and dignity, and how they pursue justice and peace.

### **The Role of the Church**

The Church is called to share our social teaching, to highlight the moral dimensions of issues, to participate in debate on public policy, and to witness to the Gospel.

Our community of faith brings several assets to these challenges: A *consistent moral framework* anchored in the Scriptures and expressed in the teaching of the Church; *everyday experience* in educating the young, caring for the sick, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, welcoming refugees, and speaking for those who have no voice; and a *large and diverse community*—Republican, Democrat, and Independent—all called to provide a moral leaven for our democracy and to be the “salt of the earth.”

We urge our fellow citizens to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or self-interest. As bishops, we do not wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing or opposing candidates. We hope that voters will examine candidates on the full range of issues and on their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance. A consistent ethic of life should be the moral framework to address issues in the political arena.

For Catholics, the defense of human life and dignity is not a narrow cause, but a way of life. A recent Vatican statement reminds us that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit voting for a political program or law that contradicts fundamental principles of our faith. It also reminds us that we should not isolate a particular element of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust our responsibility towards the common good.

### **Moral Priorities for Public Life**

Many political issues have important moral dimensions that must be considered. Over the years, we have issued statements applying Catholic social teaching to the public concerns of our day. In *Faithful Citizenship*, we offer a brief summary of our positions on issues. “Protecting Human Life” begins with our opposition to abortion and euthanasia, which are pre-eminent threats to human life and dignity, and extends to our opposition to cloning, assisted suicide, and the death penalty, and our efforts to promote peace. “Promoting Family Life” focuses on promotion of marriage, parental choice in education, responsible communications, and moral and economic supports for families. “Pursuing Social Justice” requires working for a more just economic life with decent jobs and just wages, providing adequate assistance to poor families, overcoming a culture of violence, combating discrimination, and defending the right to quality health care, housing, and food. “Practicing Global Solidarity” addresses overcoming hunger and global poverty, reducing debt and promoting development, responding to the needs of immigrants and refugees, pursuing peace, and working to reduce regional conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and other parts of the world.

This brief description only begins to explain how Catholic teaching has been applied to these issues. We hope Catholics and others will read our complete statement on *Faithful Citizenship*, as well as other documents that address key issues for the campaign and for the years to come.

### **Conclusion**

The dual calling of faith and citizenship is at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in the United States at this time. We urge Catholics to register, vote, and become more involved in public life, to protect human life and dignity and to advance the common good. Faithful citizenship challenges us to seek a place at the table of life for all God’s children in the elections of 2004 and beyond.

Please see [www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship](http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship) for the complete *Faithful Citizenship* statement and a wide range of resources for parishes, schools, dioceses, and other groups or call 800-235-8722 to order *Faithful Citizenship* materials.