



Catholic Social Thought and Prudential Judgment

As we face another election cycle, we reflect on the role of citizen Catholics and our voting. When doing so, we recognize many factors in voting for candidates—salient issues in Catholic social teaching and the *opportunity, competence, and character* of every candidate.¹

In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*,² the U.S. bishops describe our responsibilities for political life, forming conscience, and Catholic social teaching. They discuss human life, peace, family, religious freedom, option for the poor, economic justice, health care, migration, Catholic education, justice, violence, discrimination, care for creation, communications, media, culture, and global solidarity. The entire text is essential preparation for the upcoming elections. It also reveals that no existing party or platform comports with Catholic teaching—which effectively cuts across contemporary partisan divides.

The body of the document has remained unchanged from 2015 and is substantially the same since 2007. Only the covering letter was updated at the November 2019, bishops' meeting. In that letter, the bishops note:

The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself,³ because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed. At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty, and the death penalty.⁴

In the full document, the bishops describe the principles underlying public issues. While the covering letter's designation of abortion as "our preeminent priority" was debated strongly, the letter notes that other life issues cannot be dismissed or ignored. Four paragraphs earlier in the letter, they reflected the teaching of Pope Francis:

The call to holiness, he writes, requires a "firm and passionate" defense of "the innocent unborn." "Equally sacred," he further states, are "the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection."⁵

As the bishops wrote in the document body, "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."⁶

The bishops specifically do not endorse or oppose candidates. It is explicit policy of the U.S. Conference of Bishops not to do so in elections or judicial appointments and that Catholic parishes and dioceses are forbidden to do so, although this message has not penetrated to every Catholic pulpit. The bishops' focus is on the moral quality of issues and positions, leaving to voters the exercise of well-informed conscience and prudential judgment in choosing candidates.

The bishops acknowledge that, "These decisions should take into account a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue."⁷ It is not enough for a candidate or party to give "lip service" even to important moral issues. There also must be *commitment* to action that will produce change, a candidate's intellectual *capacity* and relational skills to make a difference, and the *opportunity* in the specific political time and place to move an issue or value.

The proper, but not exclusive, role of the laity, then, is to apply principles to policy applications⁸ and then to consider policy applications in a complex calculation that scrutinizes candidates, their qualities, and capacities. The overarching responsibility of each voter and every officeholder, however, is to the common good of the community, state, nation, and world. The common good and human dignity remain the most fundamental principles of Catholic social doctrine.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bishop Robert W. McElroy. (2020, February 6). *Conscience, candidates, and discipleship in voting*. Lecture given at the University of San Diego. Retrieved from: <https://www.sdcatholic.org/bishops/bishop-mcelroy/conscience-candidates-and-discipleship-in-voting/>.
- 2 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2019, November 12). *Forming consciences for faithful citizenship: A call to political responsibility from the Catholic bishops of the United States*.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 5 Pope Francis. (2013, November 24). *Gaudete et Exsultate: The Joy of the Gospel*, 101.
- 6 *Forming Consciences*, 42.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 8 Fred Kammer, SJ. (2018). Catholic social thought and policy applications. *JustSouth Quarterly*, Winter, 3.