



FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP 2020

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.wisconsinacatholic.org.

Second in a five-part series

Forming Consciences

With separation of church and state, why does the Catholic Church engage 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, “the United States Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to participate and speak out without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination.” (*FCFC*, 11)

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.



Why doesn’t the Church 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)

WHEN NECESSARY, OUR PARTICIPATION SHOULD HELP TRANSFORM THE PARTY TO WHICH WE BELONG; WE SHOULD NOT LET THE PARTY TRANSFORM US IN SUCH A WAY THAT WE NEGLECT OR DENY FUNDAMENTAL MORAL TRUTHS OR APPROVE INTRINSICALLY EVIL ACTS.
(FCFC, 14)

What are fundamental moral issues that need to be addressed?

As the U.S. bishops explain in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship (FCFC)*, the challenges facing our nation are many. However, as the 2019 FCFC “Introductory Note” points out, the following areas are particularly pressing:

- Abortion because it directly attacks life itself.
- The inhumane treatment and lack of due process for immigrants at our border, the heightened barriers for those seeking refuge and asylum, and xenophobia.
- Racism, which continues to fester, as the bishops of the United States have written in their recent pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts*.
- Religious freedom both at home and abroad.
- Poverty, both domestically and internationally.
- Violence, whether by guns, war, or capital punishment.
- The family based on marriage between a man and a woman and upholding the rights of children in that regard.
- Care for God’s creation, especially those most impacted by climate change—the poor—and protection for our common home.

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What if no 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 favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to sub-human living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, 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 even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably 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 policies promoting 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)