

# Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

## Introductory Letter

As Catholics, we bring the richness of our faith to the public square. We draw from both faith and reason as we seek to affirm the dignity of the human person and the common good of all. With renewed hope, we, the Catholic Bishops of the United States, are re-issuing *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, our teaching document on the political responsibility of Catholics, which provides guidance for all who seek to exercise their rights and duties as citizens.

Everyone living in this country is called to participate in public life and contribute to the common good.<sup>1</sup> In *Rejoice and Be Glad [Gaudete et exultate]*, Pope Francis writes:

*Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace. . . . You cannot grow in holiness without committing yourself, body and soul, to giving your best to this endeavor.*<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

Our approach to contemporary issues is first and foremost rooted in our identity as followers of Christ and as brothers and sisters to all who are made in God’s image. For all Catholics, including those seeking public office, our participation in political parties or other groups to which we may belong should be influenced by our faith, not the other way around.

Our 2015 statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, sought to help Catholics form their consciences, apply a consistent moral framework to issues facing the nation and world, and shape their choices in elections in the light of Catholic Social Teaching. In choosing to re-issue this statement, we recognize that the thrust of the document and the challenges it addresses remain relevant today.

At the same time, some challenges have become even more pronounced. Pope Francis has continued to draw attention to important issues such as migration, xenophobia, racism, abortion, global conflict, and care for creation. In the United States and around the world, many challenges demand our attention.

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1913-15.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate*, no. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, no. 101.

The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

Our efforts to protect the unborn remain as important as ever, for just as the Supreme Court may allow greater latitude for state laws restricting abortion, state legislators have passed statutes not only keeping abortion legal through all nine months of pregnancy but opening the door to infanticide. Additionally, abortion contaminates many other important issues by being inserted into legislation regarding immigration, care for the poor, and health care reform.

At our border, many arriving families endure separation, inhumane treatment, and lack of due process, while those fleeing persecution and violence face heightened barriers to seeking refuge and asylum. Within our borders, Dreamers, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and mixed-status and undocumented families face continued fear and anxiety as political solutions fail to materialize. Lawmakers' inability to pass comprehensive immigration reform which acknowledges the family as the basic unit of society has contributed to the deterioration of conditions at the border. As we seek solutions, we must ensure that we receive refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants in light of the teachings of Christ and the Church while assuring the security of our citizens.

The wound of racism continues to fester; the bishops of the United States drew attention to this important topic in the recent pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts*. Religious freedom problems continue to intensify abroad and in the United States have moved beyond the federal to state and local levels. As international conflicts proliferate, addressing poverty and building global peace remain pressing concerns, as does the need to assist persons and families in our own country who continue to struggle to make ends meet. We must work to address gun violence, xenophobia, capital punishment, and other issues that affect human life and dignity. It is also essential to affirm the nature of the human person as male and female, to protect the family based on marriage between a man and a woman, and to uphold the rights of children in that regard. Finally, we must urgently find ways to care better for God's creation, especially those most impacted by climate change—the poor—and protect our common home. We must resist the throw-away culture and seek integral development for all.

With these and other serious challenges facing both the nation and the Church, we are called to walk with those who suffer and to work toward justice and healing.

At all levels of society, we are aware of a great need for leadership that models love for righteousness (Wisdom 1:1) as well as the virtues of justice, prudence, courage and temperance. Our commitment as people of faith to imitate Christ's love and compassion should challenge us to serve as models of civil dialogue, especially in a context where discourse is eroding at all levels of society. Where we live, work, and worship, we strive to understand before seeking to be understood, to treat with respect those with whom we disagree, to dismantle stereotypes, and to build productive conversation in place of vitriol.

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<sup>4</sup> *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 22

<sup>5</sup> *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 29

Catholics from every walk of life can bring their faith and our consistent moral framework to contribute to important work in our communities, nation, and world on an ongoing basis, not just during election season. In this coming year and beyond, we urge leaders and all Catholics to respond in prayer and action to the call to faithful citizenship. In doing so, we live out the call to holiness and work with Christ as he builds his kingdom of love.

*Merciful Father,*

*Thank you for inviting each of us to join in your work of building the kingdom of love, justice, and peace.*

*Draw us close to you in prayer as we discern your call in our families and communities.*

*Send us forth to encounter all whom you love: those not yet born, those in poverty, those in need of welcome.*

*Inspire us to respond to the call to faithful citizenship, during election season and beyond.*

*Help us to imitate your charity and compassion and to serve as models of loving dialogue.*

*Teach us to treat others with respect, even when we disagree, and seek to share your love and mercy.*

*We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen*