

## ***Voting and Our Common Home: Reflections from the Catholic Tradition***

**“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.”<sup>1</sup>**

- “Essentially, these values are: truth, freedom, justice, love.”<sup>2</sup>

**The Church esteems politics as “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.”<sup>3</sup>**

- “How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects the common good and the capacity of individuals to develop their full potential.”<sup>4</sup>
- “Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.”<sup>5</sup>
- “In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.”<sup>6</sup>
- “The Church is involved in the political process but is not partisan. The Church cannot champion any candidate or party. Our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable” that all depend on our common home.<sup>7</sup>

**Conscience is at the heart of faithful citizenship.**

- Conscience is the natural capacity to discern who to be and what to do.<sup>8</sup>
- A well-formed conscience continually and prayerfully considers experience, reason, Scripture, and Church teaching.<sup>9</sup>
- Conscientious decisions require prudence through which a person applies general moral principles to particular situations.<sup>10</sup>
- When making prudential moral decisions, a person “must always obey” and follow their well-formed conscience.<sup>11</sup>
  - Pope Francis: The Church is “called to form consciences, not to replace them.”<sup>12</sup>

**Since voters elect candidates, “these decisions should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue,” as well as “candidates’ integrity, philosophy, and performance.”<sup>13</sup>**

**When evaluating candidates’ issue stances, it is important to remember several aspects of Church teaching:**

- “As Catholics we are not single-issue voters” – we are called to promote multiple values that are interconnected; values cut across multiple issues; no issue has a monopoly on a particular value.<sup>14</sup>
  - Pope Francis quoting the Conference of Bolivian Bishops: “Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually.”<sup>15</sup>
  - Cardinal Robert McElroy: “There is no mandate in universal Catholic social teaching that gives a categorical priority to [a single issue] . . . The drive to label a single issue preeminent distorts the call to authentic discipleship in voting rather than advancing it.”<sup>16</sup>
- Identifying a particular issue as an “intrinsic evil” does not necessarily mean it should take priority over others.
  - “Intrinsic evil” means an action is always wrong.<sup>17</sup> By itself, the term is of limited help to voters because it does not identify “the relative gravity of the evil in particular human or political actions.”<sup>18</sup> St. John Paul II recognizes that intrinsic evils are many and include “whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat labourers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons.”<sup>19</sup>
- No solution has a monopoly on addressing an issue.
  - Prudence discerns the best action based on available information and is “needed in applying moral principles to specific policy choices.”<sup>20</sup> When applying general principles, people can arrive at different prudential judgments.<sup>21</sup>

**Pope Benedict XVI (as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger): “When a Catholic does not share a candidate’s stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons.”<sup>22</sup>**

- Reasons are values which, as noted, are interconnected and cut across many issues. E.g., ecology implicates the value of life:
  - Bishop John Stowe, OFM Conv.: “Without the environment to sustain human life, you can’t have human life.”<sup>23</sup>
  - Cardinal Robert McElroy: “The death toll from abortion is more immediate, but the long-term death toll from unchecked climate change is larger and threatens the very future of humanity.”<sup>24</sup>

**Since 1990, the Church has identified human-caused climate change as an urgent moral issue that violates many Gospel values:**

- St. John Paul II: The “‘greenhouse effect’ has now reached crisis proportions.”<sup>25</sup>
- Pope Benedict XVI: “Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change?”<sup>26</sup>
- U.S. bishops: “Decarbonization . . . is the preeminent environmental challenge faced by all nations.”<sup>27</sup>
- Pope Francis, 2023: “Climate change is one of the principal challenges facing society.”<sup>28</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), no. 183, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).
- <sup>2</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 197, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html).
- <sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), no. 180, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html#\\_ftnref167](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html#_ftnref167).
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2023), no. 47, [https://www.usccb.org/resources/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship\\_3.pdf](https://www.usccb.org/resources/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship_3.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (June 18, 2015), no. 231, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 13.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 58.
- <sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1776-1782, <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM>.
- <sup>9</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 12, 1965), no. 46, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html);  
Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), no. 9, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 19.
- <sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1800, <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM>.
- <sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), no. 36, [https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, nos. 37, 41.
- <sup>14</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 42; Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 138; Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (March 19, 2018), no. 101, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exsultate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html).
- <sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 92.
- <sup>16</sup> Cardinal Robert McElroy, "Conscience, Candidates and Discipleship in Voting," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/bishop-mcelroy-voting-faith-and-conscience>.
- <sup>17</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1753.
- <sup>18</sup> McElroy, "Conscience, Candidates and Discipleship in Voting."
- <sup>19</sup> St. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993), no. 80, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_06081993\\_veritatis-splendor.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html).
- <sup>20</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 33.
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Denver: New Advent, 2017), <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>, I-II, q. 94, a. 4.
- <sup>22</sup> His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, quote in Cathleen Kaveny, "Catholics As Citizens: Today's ethical challenges call for new moral thinking," *America Magazine*, November 1, 2010, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/753/article/catholics-citizens>.
- <sup>23</sup> Most Reverend John E. Stowe, OFM. Conv., "Environment, other issues beyond abortion are critical in voting, bishop says," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/politics/environment-other-issues-beyond-abortion-are-critical-voting-bishop-says>.
- <sup>24</sup> McElroy, "Conscience, Candidates and Discipleship in Voting."
- <sup>25</sup> St. John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation* (January 1, 1990), no. 6, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html).
- <sup>26</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (January 1, 2010), no. 4, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html).
- <sup>27</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "COP 28: U.S. Bishops Call for International Climate Policies that Promote Justice," November 29, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/cop-28-us-bishops-call-international-climate-policies-promote-justice>.
- <sup>28</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum* (October 4, 2023), no. 3, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html).