

Catholics and Voting

New Guidance From Catholic Bishops

by Susan E. Wills

Since 1976, Catholic bishops of the United States have released statements, commonly called "political responsibility" or "faithful citizenship" statements, in the fall preceding presidential election years. Their aim has been to enable Catholics to better "evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and candidates' promises and actions in light of the Gospel and the moral and social teaching of the Church in order to help build a better world."

These statements were never intended to be, or to replace, the voter guides distributed by advocacy groups, which highlight the candidates' adherence (or lack thereof) to the group's focused agenda. Indeed they could not, for the simple reason that the Catholic Church has always been concerned about a multitude of issues within the following broad areas: protecting human life, fostering conditions that allow humans to flourish, such as ensuring freedom, peace, a just and impartial legal system, and opportunities for education and work, providing care for the most vulnerable members of society, and being wise stewards of the earth's resources.

Past statements have sometimes been criticized for being too long or too detailed or for failing to show how each issue of concern is rooted in basic moral principles. Taken together, these rather trivial deficiencies have allowed some candidates and their partisans to mislead voters. Some have, for example, cherry-picked issues to show their fidelity to Catholic teaching and wrongly interpreted moral theological language in self-serving ways.

This year, the bishops were determined to take a hands-on approach in writing "*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*." In a broadly collaborative effort, they squarely address the questions that have nagged Catholic voters (for example, can a Catholic in good conscience ever vote for a pro-choice candidate?) and they provide guidance that is precise, clear and virtually immune from misinterpretation.

Spin by news media, of course, we will always have with us, as two headlines attest: "Bishops: Abortion Isn't Voters' Only Issue" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Nov. 15, 2007) and "Catholic Bishops Vote for Document Saying Abortion Should Guide Voting" (*lifeneews.com*, Nov. 14, 2007).

In fact, both headlines are true as far as they go, and both ignore an aspect of the document. The bishops readily acknowledge that their responsibility in building a just society does not include endorsing or opposing candidates or telling people how to vote. Their primary role is instead "to teach fundamental moral principles that help Catholics form their consciences correctly, to provide guidance on the moral dimensions of public decisions, and to encourage the faithful to carry out their responsibilities in political life" (No. 15).

Early in the statement, they warn against two opposing "temptations" in public life that "can distort the Church's defense of human life and dignity." The first temptation is "moral equivalency" that treats issues as diverse as abortion and minimum wage policy, for example, as equally weighty. The bishops repeatedly emphasize that "the direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed" (No. 28).

The second temptation is to think that the Church cares about only one issue, dismissing or ignoring all other serious threats to human life and dignity. The bishops explain that the Church cares about the dignity of the human person in a wide variety of ways, while noting that not every individual can be actively involved in each of these concerns. The statement helpfully distinguishes between actions that are intrinsically evil, that is, those that are "so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons" and can never be condoned (No. 22), and positive policy initiatives that foster human dignity and the common good.

In the category of intrinsically evil actions, the statement names abortion, euthanasia, destructive research on human embryos, human cloning, genocide, torture, racism and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war. The intentional destruction of innocent human life as in abortion is said to have a preeminent place among these concerns. Positive policies would enhance respect for life, strengthen families, ensure quality education and provide healthcare for the poor, for example.

In paragraphs 34 through 38 of "*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*," the bishops give concrete guidance to Catholic voters. These passages were crafted with great care and, lest some of the precision be lost in paraphrasing them, they are quoted below:

34. "A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, 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."

35. "There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may 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."

36. "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."

37. "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 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."

38. "It is important to be clear that the political choices faced by citizens not only have an impact on general peace and prosperity but also may affect the individual's salvation. Similarly, the kinds of laws and policies supported by public officials affect their spiritual well-being."

Additional guidance is offered in the section of the statement that follows on seven key themes in Catholic social teaching.

41. "Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace, and they should consider candidates' integrity, philosophy and performance. It is important for all citizens "to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their principle, not party affiliation."

42. "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. Yet a candidate's position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support."

"*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*" includes much more of interest to voters — summaries of teaching on seven key issues of concern to the Catholic Church and an enumeration of 10 goals for political life which could be the starting point for personal or group reflection. A very brief summary of the statement will be printed for parish distribution.

One hopes that lay Catholics, who typically make up 25% of the national electorate, will give as much careful attention to reading this statement as the bishops gave in writing it. Imagine what could happen if at least one-fourth of voters cast their ballots on the basis of moral principles. It's so crazy, it just might work!

"*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*," U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Nov. 14, 2007 (No. 5), is available at USCCB.org.

Copyright © 2008 [National Catholic Register](http://NationalCatholicRegister.org)

Susan Wills is associate director for education for the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities