



Life, Liberty, and Faithful Citizenship

October 2012

Tuesday, November 6, is Election Day. As you prepare to vote, we wish to share some reflections with you as pastors and teachers, responsible for the catechesis of nearly 700,000 parishioners entrusted to our spiritual care.

The duty to vote

“In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. This obligation is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, para. 13. When we vote, we help shape the future for our brothers and sisters in the human family. Conversely, when we decline to participate in these decisions, we forfeit an essential opportunity to love God and neighbor through our actions.

Voting with a well-formed conscience

As bishops, we do not tell Catholics for whom to vote. It is the duty of each voter to receive the Church’s teachings (see, e.g., www.faithfulcitizenship.org) with an open mind and heart and to apply those teachings. In preparing our minds and hearts for the work of faithful citizenship, prayer is our surest foundation. When we welcome the Lord in the Eucharist and in our daily prayer lives, we enable Him to mold and fashion us into the faithful citizens He calls us to be.

“The Church equips its members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church. Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere ‘feeling’ about what we should or should not do. Rather, conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, para. 17.

With prayerful reflection, we can apply the principles of Church teaching to the various issues and decisions before us. In doing so, we believe the following three-part framework is essential for the correct formation of conscience:

- Many issues are important. “Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access to those things required for human decency – food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, para. 49. This consistent ethic of life provides the proper moral foundation for our engagement in political life. As Catholics, we must seek the best ways to respond to the many needs of our neighbors, at every stage of life and in every condition. Indeed, we must be attentive to all issues that affect human life and dignity and the common good.
- Not all issues have equal moral weight. Some practices are intrinsically evil – that is, always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. “[T]he moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil

acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions.” *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, para. 37. Examples include abortion (which occurs more than a million times each year in the U.S.), euthanasia, human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, genocide, torture, racism, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war. Not all of these issues occur in the context of the present election, but many, such as abortion, do. It is also essential to note that God is the author of marriage, and therefore marriage has a built-in design and purpose that cannot be redefined. The institution of marriage, rooted in the natural law, is integral to the common good because it is the building block of the family and society.

- When the issue is whether to protect or deny the fundamental right to life, it outweighs other matters. Among acts that are intrinsically evil, those that directly attack life itself, the clearest example of which is abortion, are the foremost violations of human dignity. The right to life is the foundation upon which all other human rights are based and without which no other right could possibly exist. The right to life is indeed our first right, and protecting life to the maximum degree possible must be our highest priority.

Faithful citizenship throughout the year, every year

This three-part framework is the lens through which we should view not only voting, which is just one part of our duty to be faithful citizens, but also advocacy. We must advocate for just policies throughout the year, every year.¹

In solidarity with our brother bishops across the country, one way in which we recently sought to underscore the need for greater advocacy was through designating two weeks earlier this year (June 21 – July 4) as a “Fortnight for Freedom” – a special period of prayer, study, catechesis, and public action in dioceses throughout the U.S. that highlighted the importance of defending religious liberty.

In our Commonwealth, this liberty has an especially prominent place in our heritage. In 1777, Thomas Jefferson drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in Fredericksburg, and this statute became law in our state in 1786. It also provided a firm foundation for the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

As our country’s founders affirmed, religious freedom is our first freedom. As Virginians and Americans, we must recall this history and defend this freedom with renewed vigor. As Catholics, we must recognize that the defense of religious liberty is necessary if we, as individuals and as a Church, are to preserve our ability to practice in our daily lives and in the public square all that we profess at Mass each Sunday.

Responding to our calling as Catholics and Americans

We are a nation founded on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Indeed, our faith and our nation’s foundational principles both tell us that the right to life is our first right, and religious liberty is our first freedom. Life and liberty, then, are at the heart of what it means to be faithful citizens – that is, Americans who practice civic virtue guided by our Catholic faith. As we pray, vote, and advocate, let us respond to this calling in the very best ways we can.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde
Bishop of Arlington



Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo
Bishop of Richmond

¹ For more on advocacy, please visit the website of the Virginia Catholic Conference, www.vacatholic.org, and join the Conference’s email network.)