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# FORMING CONSCIENCES FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

*"As a nation, we share many blessings and strengths, including a tradition of religious freedom and political participation."*

—USCCB: Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

Recent events have brought the principle of religious liberty to the forefront of Catholic concern. As such, it is important for Catholics and all persons of good will to recommit to protecting religious liberty and to use it to promote the common good. Pope Benedict XVI has said that each generation must “preserve, defend and advance” freedom and justice during its time.<sup>1</sup> In light of the Holy Father’s statement, Catholics this election season are urged to evaluate candidates and policies that protect human life, promote dignity, and maintain the bedrock American constitutional right to religious freedom.

Each person’s ability to act as a “faithful citizen” is closely tied to the existence of religious liberty in American history. In 1649, for example, Maryland created the Toleration Act, which allowed all Christians—including Catholics—to express their religious beliefs without persecution. Although limited in scope and duration, the act began to protect the religious rights of those who previously were persecuted. In 1786, Thomas Jefferson drafted an act for religious freedom in Virginia, arguing it was necessary to keep government and religion separate so individuals could avoid suffering for their values. President Jefferson also wrote that religion was between man and his God, so by separating the state from

the church, each individual would retain his right of conscience.<sup>2</sup> James Madison also expressed that each person should determine his or her own faith and exercise it freely.<sup>3</sup>

In Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, the founders wrote that no religious test could ever be a requirement for political office. The First Amendment then codified religious liberty, stating that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or *prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*” (emphasis added). While the founders may have had their own opinions about religion and politics, their legacy has included centuries of religious tolerance and protection.

As a result of these religious liberty safeguards, Catholics are allowed, and in fact encouraged, to exercise moral opinions through voting and acting within the community. By reflecting upon the moral teachings of Jesus Christ and the Church, Catholics have the tools to be an important part of discussion and decision making in the public square, made possible by the Founding Fathers and their unyielding support of religious liberty. As the following pages indicate, Catholics have a responsibility to live out the Gospel and to make a difference as Americans. ■

# INTRODUCTORY NOTE TO FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP<sup>4</sup>

The following is the *Introductory Note* to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. The entire Faithful Citizenship statement and numerous support materials may be found at [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org)

The Catholic Bishops of the United States are pleased to re-propose to our people *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, our teaching document on the political responsibility of Catholics. This statement, overwhelmingly adopted by the body of bishops in 2007, represents the continuing teaching of our Bishops' Conference and our guidance for Catholics in the exercise of their rights and duties as participants in our democracy. We urge our Catholic pastors and people to continue to use this important statement to help them form their consciences, to contribute to civil and respectful public dialogue, and to shape their choices in the coming election in the light of Catholic teaching.

The statement lifts up our dual heritage as both faithful Catholics and American citizens. We are members of a community of faith with a long tradition of teaching and action on human life, and dignity, marriage and family, justice and peace, care for creation, and the common good. As Americans, we are also blessed with religious liberty which safeguards our right to bring our principles and moral convictions into the public arena. These Constitutional freedoms need to be both exercised and protected, as some seek to mute the voices or limit the freedoms of religious believers and religious institutions. Catholics have the same rights and duties as others to participate fully in public life. The Church through its institutions must be free to carry out its mission and contribute to the common good without being pressured to sacrifice fundamental teachings and moral principles.

*"The work for justice requires that the mind and the heart of Catholics be educated and formed to know and practice the whole faith."*<sup>5</sup>

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* is widely used to share Catholic teaching on the role of faith and conscience in political life. Although it has at times been misused to present an incomplete or distorted view of the demands of faith in politics, this statement remains a faithful and challenging call to discipleship in the world of politics. It does not offer a voters guide, scorecard of issues, or direction on how to vote. It applies Catholic moral principles to a range of important issues and warns against misguided appeals to "conscience" to ignore fundamental moral claims, to reduce Catholic moral concerns to one or two matters, or to justify choices simply to advance partisan, ideological, or personal interests. It does not offer a quantitative listing of issues for equal consideration, but outlines and makes important distinctions among moral issues acknowledging that some involve the clear obligation to oppose intrinsic evils which can never be justified and that others require action to pursue justice and promote the common good. In short, it calls Catholics to form their consciences in the light of their Catholic faith and to bring our moral principles to the debate and decisions about candidates and issues.

The moral and human challenges outlined in the second half of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* remain pressing national issues. In particular, our Conference is focused on several current and fundamental problems, some involving opposition to intrinsic evils and others raising serious moral questions:

- Continuing destruction of unborn children through abortion and other threats to the lives and dignity



of others who are vulnerable, sick, or unwanted;

- Renewed efforts to force Catholic ministries—in health care, education, and social services—to violate their consciences or stop serving those in need;

- Intensifying efforts to redefine marriage and enact measures which undermine marriage as the permanent, faithful, and fruitful union of one man and one woman and a fundamental moral and social institution essential to the common good;

- An economic crisis which has devastated lives and livelihoods, increasing national and global unemployment, poverty, and hunger; increasing deficits and debt and the duty to respond in

ways which protect those who are poor and vulnerable as well as future generations;

- The failure to repair a broken immigration system with comprehensive measures that promote true respect for law, protect the human rights and dignity of immigrants and refugees, recognize their contributions to our nation, keep families together, and advance the common good;

- Wars, terror, and violence which raise serious moral questions on the use of force and its human and moral costs in a dangerous world, particularly the absence of justice, security, and peace in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East.

In this coming election and beyond, we urge leaders and all Catholics to share the message of faithful citizenship and to use this document in forming their own consciences, so we can act together to promote and protect human life and dignity, marriage and family, justice and peace in service to the common good. This kind of political responsibility is a requirement of our faith and our duty as citizens. ■

## DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ: SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL DOCUMENT ON

# RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Pope Benedict XVI has announced a “Year of Faith” that will begin October 2012. During this year the Church will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. At that historic gathering, bishops from around the world declared, through the document *Dignitatis Humanae*, the right to religious liberty. The document reads, in part:

This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.

The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.

*"The Church through its institutions must be free to carry out its mission and contribute to the common good without being pressured to sacrifice fundamental teachings and moral principles."*<sup>6</sup>

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Catholic Conference at:

Phone: (800) 395-5565  
Fax: (517) 372-3940  
[bstarrak@micatholicconference.org](mailto:bstarrak@micatholicconference.org)

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