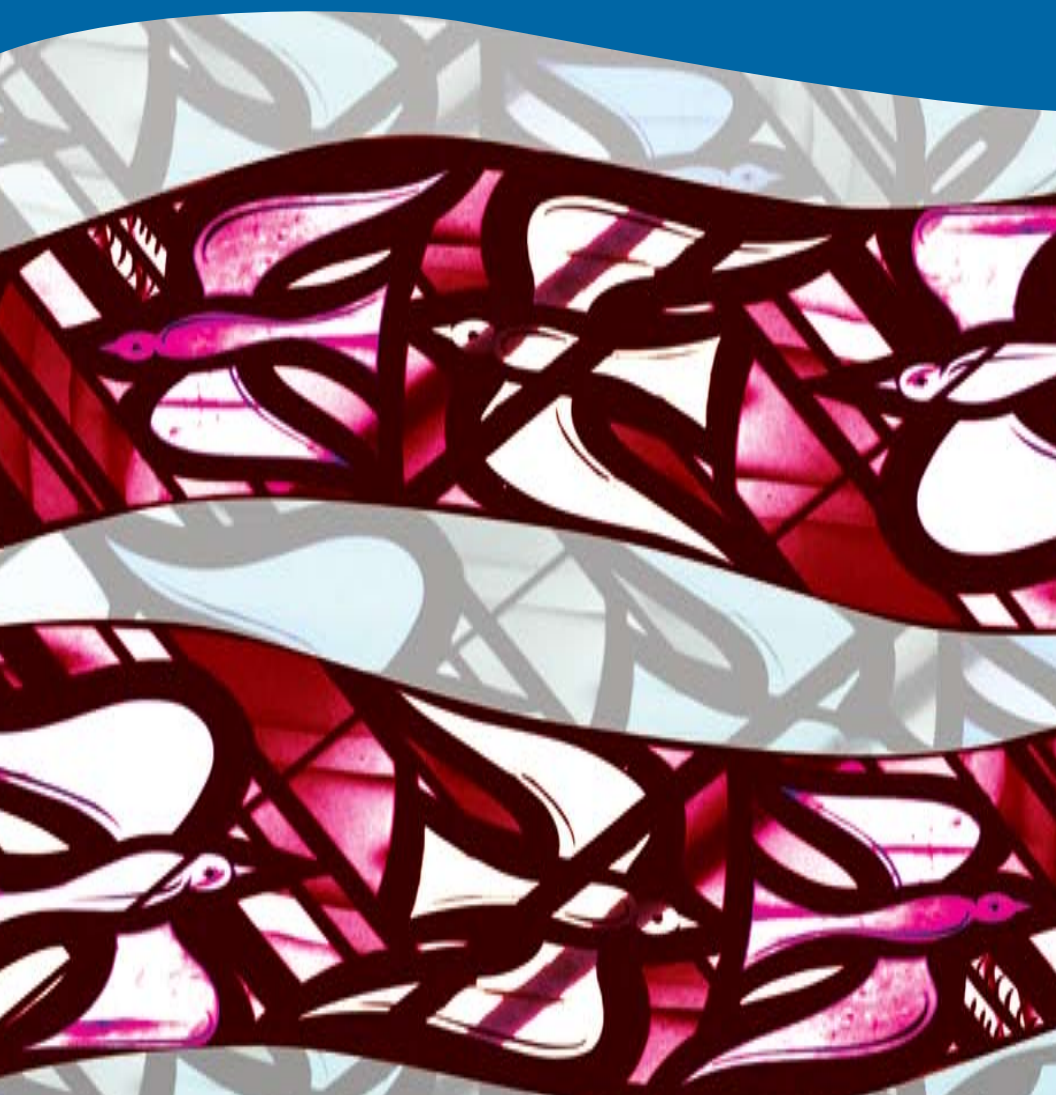


Voting for the Common Good

A Practical Guide for
Conscientious Catholics



How Should Catholics Vote?

You men and women in public life, called to serve the common good, exclude no one from your concerns; take special care of the weakest sectors of society.

– John Paul II, *World Day of Peace*, 1997

As Catholics, we are called to participate fully in the political process of our nation. One of the most effective ways we can do this is by voting. Voting allows us to promote the social values of our faith, like protecting human life and dignity, building a just and fair society, and helping the poor and vulnerable. But when it comes to choosing a candidate who best represents these values, we are often left wondering – just how should a faithful Catholic vote?

In recent years some have suggested that we can answer this question by applying a simple “litmus test” of a few selected issues. But common sense tells us that deciding who to vote for is much more complicated. Some candidates tell us what we want to hear in order to get elected. Others, once in office, lack the political will to follow through on their promises. **These are things Catholics must consider before going into the voting booth.**

Most importantly, however, we need to understand that our Church’s social teachings call us to consider a broad range of important issues – on everything from poverty to war, human rights, abortion, and the environment. **There is no Catholic voting formula, and there is rarely, if ever, a perfect candidate for Catholic voters.** Deciding how to vote can be difficult, but it is a task we all must take seriously and prayerfully in order to be faithful citizens.

Catholic Social Teaching

The social values of our faith are expressed in Papal letters, encyclicals, and council documents as well as the Scriptures and writings of our early Church fathers. Together, these documents make up the body of **Catholic Social Teaching**.

Seven Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person
2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation
3. Rights and Responsibilities – to One Another, Families, and Society
4. Prioritizing the Needs of the Poor and Vulnerable
5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
6. Solidarity with all Humanity, Regardless of National, Racial, Ethnic, and Ideological differences
7. Care of God’s Creation

– *U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops*

Catholic Social Teaching requires us to promote and defend human life and dignity; a call rooted in the understanding that every human life is sacred and created in the image of God. According to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), “Catholics have the right and the duty to recall society to a deeper understanding of human life and to the responsibility of everyone in this regard.” (DN 3) This duty requires us to build the essential conditions for a culture of life, to end affronts to human life such as poverty, abortion, torture, and war, and ensure freedom and opportunity for all. It is deeply interwoven with our broader obligation to promote the **common good of all humanity**.

This voting guide was created to inform Catholics about the fullness of our Church’s teachings and to help us make choices in the voting booth that reflect the fullness of those values.

Three Principles for Catholic Voting

Deciding how to vote is not easy, but the following three principles can help you make a sound and faithful decision:

1. **Inform your Conscience** – on Church teaching and the candidates' positions.
2. **Apply Prudence** – when deciding how to apply Catholic values to voting.
3. **Vote for the Common Good** – by focusing on what's best for everyone, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Principle I: Inform Your Conscience

Listening to one's conscience is necessary to make any moral decision. Fidelity to conscience joins all humankind in the search for truth, and conscience must be developed by prayer, reflection, and dialogue with others. We must share the truths we have discovered in order to assist one another in the quest for truth, and to enable each other to act prudently in accord with the law written in all our hearts.

Some Issues Important to Catholics

Abortion	Jobs
Death Penalty	Marriage
Discrimination	Minimum Wage
Environment	Nuclear Disarmament
Euthanasia	Poverty
Genocide	Religious Freedom
Global Arms Trade	Stem-Cell Research
Human Rights	War
Immigration	Workers' Rights

– *U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Faithful Citizenship, 2003*

The first step in voting your conscience is to inform it, by learning about the Church’s positions on important issues. We recommend starting with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ *Faithful Citizenship* document, found at www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship. *Faithful Citizenship* is published every four years, and lists the major issues Catholics should consider when determining their vote. Your pastor can also help you find other resources on Catholic Social Teaching.

Next, **research the candidates’ positions** on these issues by visiting their web sites, reading media coverage about their campaigns, and talking to your friends and family. It’s important to look at a candidate’s actions – particularly how he or she has acted on issues in the past, in addition to what he or she is saying about the issue today – in order to understand how he or she may act in the future.

Principle II: Apply Prudence

While an informed conscience is essential for *knowing* right from wrong, actually *doing* the right thing requires the virtue of prudence. Prudence is the moral wisdom required to apply principles to an imperfect world and unforeseeable circumstances. It is like a “moral common sense,” and it requires us to ask the practical question, *which candidate will actually deliver more tangible progress for the Common Good?*

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, “it is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience... With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid” (CCC 1806). Through prudence, we apply the law written in our hearts to real-world circumstances.

Prudence is especially important when deciding how to vote. **Seldom does a single candidate or party offer a consistently Catholic set of positions.** For example, a candidate may not entirely share the Church’s principles on an issue, but still do much

through his or her actions to promote Catholic Social Teaching. Our Church's social teaching is clear, but many times Catholics disagree on the best way to achieve justice and dignity in the world.

Since we seldom, if ever, have the opportunity to vote for a candidate with the right positions on all the issues important to Catholics, **we often must vote for candidates who may hold the 'wrong' Catholic positions on some issues in order to maximize the good our vote achieves in other areas.** Catholics must thoughtfully and prayerfully consider and debate what is most pressing and possible in our time. It is okay for us to disagree about who and what to vote for, as long as our decisions are made prudently with an informed conscience.

Principle III: Vote for the Common Good

As politically active Catholics, our primary responsibility is to the common good. A culture of the common good provides for the health, welfare, and dignity of all people, and promotes the best interests of everyone, not just the few. It also focuses on helping those who need it most – the poor and vulnerable.

"Our human interdependence...is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."

– Pope John Paul II, 1989

The common good is not the same as charity. As St. Augustine teaches, “charity is no substitute for justice withheld.” A common good culture protects the middle class, as well as the rich and poor. At its core lies the Catholic belief that our lives are interdependent. **We look out for our neighbors not out of charity but out of love, and the understanding that we are all safer, healthier, and freer in a world where we take care of one another.**

A culture of the common good demands justice for all Americans, as well as citizens of other nations. It is based on a belief that **the health, security, and prosperity of American must go hand-in-hand with the well-being of all peoples, and that our common humanity must be made stronger than our divisions.** We are, in a moral and strategic sense, in this together.

As people of faith, we must overcome a culture of excessive materialism and individualism, and see our duty to the human community as essential to being responsible individuals.

The common good is not solely a Catholic value – the first three words of the U.S. Constitution, “We the people,” remind us that concern for the common good is also a founding principle of our nation.

Frequently Asked Questions

Are all Catholic issues equally important?

No. While we ought to consider the full range of Catholic issues when we go to the voting booth, this does not mean that all these issues are equally important. Issues that bear directly on the life and dignity of human beings, such as abortion, poverty, torture, and war, demand our most urgent attention.

Pope John Paul II, for example, told an American audience in 2000 that the poverty of billions of men, women, and children is “the one issue that most challenges our human and Christian consciences.”

Some have argued that because some issues are never morally acceptable, these alone must determine our vote. This point of view not supported by Church teaching. Our challenge is to embrace the fullness of Catholic issues and make an informed and balanced decision that will best provide for the common good of all humanity.

Where can I find a list of all the important Catholic issues?

Every four years, the U.S. Catholic Bishops publish *Faithful Citizenship*, which details the issues important to Catholic voters. The most recent version was released in 2003 and contains some 50 different issues. You can find this document on the Internet at www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship, or ask for it in your parish office.

Is it okay to vote for a “pro-choice” candidate?

When confronted with this question in 2004, Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) responded that it could be acceptable for a Catholic to vote for a “pro-choice” candidate if “proportionate reasons” exist, and if the voter is voting based on those reasons and not the candidate’s “pro-choice” beliefs. It is never acceptable to vote for a “pro-choice” candidate merely

because of that candidate's position in favor of legal abortion (CRM).

Here Cardinal Ratzinger is speaking about prudence. Many “pro-life” candidates talk a good talk on ending abortion but don't produce results. On the other hand, there are candidates who don't believe in making abortion illegal, but who support effective measures to promote healthy families and reduce abortions by providing help to pregnant women and young children.

Catholics must look at a candidate's position on other life issues. Can one really claim to be “pro-life” and yet support the death penalty, turn a blind eye to poverty, and not take steps to avoid war? Our Church teaches that the answer to this question is “no.”

Does voting my conscience mean I can apply my own moral standards?

Our faith teaches that Catholics cannot, in good conscience, disagree with the Church on questions of morality. However, Catholics can disagree in good conscience on the question of *how to do the right thing in a practical situation*.

The virtue of prudence is what helps guide our conscience in all moral decisions, including how we should vote. Oftentimes we prudently conclude that we must vote for a candidate who many other public Catholic voices object to because we feel our choice will most benefit the common good. It is entirely possible that two Catholics may arrive at different prudent conclusions while remaining true to their consciences and to Church teaching.

Does this guide violate the principle of separation of church and state?

Politics is most effective when it is grounded in values. While our nation and our faith rightly acknowledge a separation between the authority of the church and the authority of the state, this does not mean that citizens' social values should not be influenced by their faith. *Concern for the common good is not only*

a Catholic value, but one shared by many faith traditions and our nation's founders.

In recent years we have witnessed an unfortunate trend of religious leaders abusing their positions by using politics to impose their faith on others. True Catholicism, however, calls us to propose policies that work to better the common good of all humanity.

Will distributing this guide at church jeopardize my parish's tax status?

No. Because this guide is not intended to promote any candidate or political party, it falls within the legal definition of nonprofit voter education. It also conforms to the U.S. Catholic Bishops instruction that parish voter education materials “cover a wide range of issues important to voters” (PIP, 3).

But please check with your pastor before distributing any literature at church.

Some members of my parish are telling others that it is a sin to vote for certain candidates. What should I do?

Any attempt to scare others into voting for or against a candidate violates Catholic teaching on conscience, prudence, and human freedom. If you suspect this is happening in your parish, tell your pastor or diocesan office immediately. You may also report these instances to Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good at 202.822.5105 or info@thecatholicalliance.org.

Conclusion

As Catholics, we vote for the common good because it is at the core of our Faith. We all want to live in a world in which everyone enjoys security, freedom, and the opportunity to lead fulfilled lives. And we want our children to have this as well. This is only possible if we make prudent political decisions and work to build a society based on justice and dignity.

As long as you inform your conscience, use prudence, and maintain a commitment to the common good, you are well on your way to making a decision that is consistent with the call of our Catholic faith.

**To help spread the word to more Catholics
or to order additional copies, please visit
www.thecatholicalliance.org.**

Key to Documents Used in this Guide

- CCC: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
CRM: Memo from Cardinal Ratzinger to U.S. Catholic Bishops, June 2004.
DN: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, 2002.
FC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship, A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, 2003.
PIP: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Planning Ideas for Parish Staffs and Parish Councils*, 2004.

Election Day Checklist

I. Inform Your Conscience

- Inform your conscience on the Church's Social Teaching by reading documents such as the U.S. Bishops' *Faithful Citizenship* (www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship), and by talking with your pastor.
- Research statements and voting records of the candidates on issues such as the respect for human dignity, justice, and peace.
- Discuss issues of Catholic citizenship with family, friends and Church officials.

II. Apply Prudence to Choices

- Look for the candidate who will do the most in concrete terms to promote the dignity of human life, justice, and peace.
- Reject "Litmus Tests" that reduce Catholic issues to one or a few issues.
- Voting for a candidate who fails to endorse all of Church teaching can be justifiable if the candidate would produce results consistent with Church principles once in office.

III. Vote for the Common Good

- Will the candidate promote a society in which neighbors see each other as brothers and sisters of God? Will the candidate reject a get-what-you-can culture that validates greed and materialism?
- What will the candidate do to address affronts to human life and dignity such as poverty, torture, abortion, war, the death penalty, and a lack of freedom and opportunity?
- Does the candidate believe that the health, security, and prosperity of our nation are inextricably linked to the health, security and prosperity of the rest of the world? In short, does s/he believe we are in this together or going it alone?
- Does this candidate support an economic system that demands opportunity and human dignity for all – a living wage, health care, affordable education, and human rights?
- Does the candidate put principles ahead of power and personal profits? Do they respect the sacred trust between citizens and their public officials to put the common good ahead of special interests?