



# Reverence for Life: Conscience and Faithful Citizenship

Catholic social doctrine is not limited to the defense and promotion of economic and political rights; human life issues such as abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, and the violence of war also fall within the scope of social morality.

In the tragic 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case and in subsequent decisions, the U. S. Supreme Court has created a legal climate of abortion on demand and thus has denied the right to life of the unborn. *Faithful for Life: A Moral Reflection*, our 1995 pastoral statement, analyzed the fallout of pervasive ethical relativism and the ensuing deadly moral blindness generated in the wake of *Roe v. Wade*:

Since the legal floodgates were opened in 1973 by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, an abortion mentality has swept across our land and throughout our culture. The language and mindset of abortion --- presented in terms of unlimited choice, privacy, and autonomy --- pervade our entertainment, our news, our public policies, and even our private lives. Wrapped so appealingly in the language of self-determination, cloaked so powerfully in the mantle of federal authority, is it any wonder that the logic of *Roe* has been extended to apply beyond the unborn? Is it any wonder that it appears so explicitly in our public and private conversations about euthanasia?

With our fellow bishops we continue to voice our opposition to that morally flawed, unjust, and radical judicial fiat that sanctioned abortion on demand.

On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, we Catholic bishops of Kentucky are issuing a pastoral letter on the fundamental human rights issue of our day --- the right to life of the unborn. Our pastoral concerns will focus on Church teaching on conscience formation and the moral responsibilities of Catholics as citizens.

The “Resolution on Abortion” issued by our national conference of Catholic bishops in 1989 continues to remind all Catholics of the gravity and urgency of this issue: “At this particular time, abortion has become the fundamental human rights issue.”

In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (“Gospel of Life,” 1995) Pope John Paul II observed that the Church’s Gospel of life “has a profound and pervasive echo in the heart of every person — believer and non-believer alike.” (EV n. 2)

In 1998 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Living the Gospel of Life* which applied Church teaching on the sanctity of human life set forth in *Evangelium Vitae* to the American cultural scene. It clearly points out that our conviction about the sanctity of human life is “not merely Catholic doctrine but part of humanity’s global ethical heritage and our nation’s founding principle.” (LGL n. 24) Opposition to abortion, then, cannot be dismissed as a sectarian Catholic belief but is in fact a moral conviction shared by many of other faiths.

Consistent with our nation’s legal tradition we hold that all human laws must be measured against the natural law engraved in our hearts by the Creator. Our religious beliefs affirm basic human rights and obligations that are essential to the fabric of our social life. In particular, respect for human life is numbered among those basic values that underpin the very foundation of civilization. What we profess in defense of the sacredness of unborn human life harmonizes with our historic legal tradition founded on the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Abortion on demand does not.

We claim the historical freedom enjoyed by churches to exercise the freedom of expression to teach social doctrine. In the words of the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965), the Church has the duty “to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it.” (GS n. 76)

Without doubt, religious bodies in this country have significantly served the public good of society in exercising their distinctive role in forming

consciences to pursue matters of social justice. For example, the contributions of religious bodies to the common good are reflected in their involvement in building consensus to reject racism, to overcome poverty, and to subject war to moral scrutiny.

As the Pastoral Constitution confirms, the Catholic moral doctrine at the foundation of Church social teaching is rooted in a single, pivotal truth --- the dignity of the human person.

Our moral tradition teaches that human persons are both sacred and social. As such, men and women are subjects of universal and inherent rights along with correlative duties. (GS n.12)

Men and women are sacred because they are called into life by God and destined for eternal life with God. On the same grounds, they are inherently social since persons can only achieve fulfillment in and through community. Because of this essential sociality that orders society to the good of the person, society, in turn, bears a duty to foster, promote, and to protect human life --- from conception to natural death. (GS n. 12)

### **Church, the Political Order, and the Pursuit of Justice**

In his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (“God is Love,” 2006), Pope Benedict XVI identifies the duty of the Church in the political order as “indirect.” Insofar as justice comprises “both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics,” the construction of a just civil society is a charge directly incumbent on government. (DCE n. 28)

However, unless political life is anchored in common public goods and moral values, society risks succumbing to a moral blindness “caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests.”

According to the Holy Father, faith opens up horizons of truth that transcend the realm of reason and constitutes a purifying force which “liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself.”

And, in this context of faith and politics, the faith of the Church exercises an indispensable ecclesial role through the formation of consciences attuned to

blindness. To that end, the Church can make a twofold contribution --- both by means of rational argument and by means of awakening “the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper.”

Pope Benedict XVI holds that “[t]he Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible.”

Nonetheless, while the Church cannot replace the State, the Church “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.” (DCE n.28)

In order to sustain a just social order, *Deus Caritas Est* asserts that “the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.”

Pope Benedict XVI states that “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society... is proper to the lay faithful.” (DCE n. 29)

### **Political Responsibility and Conscience**

As we stated in our pastoral *Reverence for Life: A Need for “A Heart That Sees”* (September 2007), the formation of the consciences of our Catholic people becomes a priority for us in our role as pastoral teachers. In addition, we affirmed the Church’s role “to participate in the public debates about abortion and other threats to human life as correlative to the task to inform consciences and to promote justice.”

At the same time we acknowledged that believers are citizens who “share the right --- indeed, the duty --- of all citizens to insist that the laws and policies of the United States be faithful to our founders’ conviction that the foremost ‘unalienable right’ conferred by God our Creator on us is life itself.” (*Faithful for Life: A Moral Reflection*, 1995)

In its synthesis of Church teaching on the nature and duties of conscience, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2007) applies that tradition to the question of the responsible formation of conscience in reference to the civic duties of Catholics:

The Church calls for a different kind of political engagement: one shaped by the moral convictions of well-formed consciences and focused on the dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good, and the protection of the weak and vulnerable. (FCFC n. 14)

Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church. .... Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith. (FCFC n.17)

While personal conscience is “the most secret core and sanctuary of the human person,” it is not a teacher of doctrine. Catholics are responsible for forming their consciences “by attending to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.”

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 1758)*

In proclaiming the Gospel of life, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Pope John Paul II’s signature encyclical on building a culture of life, called for renewed evangelization and catechesis within the Catholic community: “We need to begin with *the renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves*. Too often it happens that believers, even those who take an active part in the life of the Church, end up by separating their Christian faith from its ethical requirements concerning life, and thus fall into moral subjectivism. ....” (EV n. 95)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) states unambiguously: “The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is *a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation.*” (CCC n. 2273)

On the question of abortion and politics, our “Resolution on Abortion” of November 1989 challenged Catholics to carry out the implications of their beliefs: “No Catholic can responsibly take a ‘pro-choice’ stand when the ‘choice’ in question involves the taking of an innocent human life.”

Moreover, the recognition of abortion on demand as legal situation that sanctions an intolerable moral evil calls for a response. A moral evil that negates a public good demands the exercise of a moral responsibility to limit and eliminate that evil.

No Catholic voter or politician can hide behind the evasion --- “Personally I oppose abortion, *but* I cannot impose my religious beliefs (or my morality) on

others.” It is a moral contradiction. Living the faith in the context of democratic pluralism cannot justify such self-deception.

*Living the Gospel of Life* (1998) unmasked the mistaken assumptions of such rationalizations:

First, regarding abortion, the point when human life begins is not a religious belief but a scientific fact --- a fact on which there is clear agreement even among leading abortion advocates. Second, the sanctity of human life is not merely Catholic doctrine but part of humanity’s global ethical heritage. Finally, democracy is not served by silence. ... *Real pluralism depends on people of conviction struggling vigorously to advance their beliefs by every ethical and legal means at their disposal.* (LGL n. 24)

No one can be exempted from the logical step to translate moral opposition into effective strategies. If there is a lack of public consensus to effect full legal protection, no one can be excused from working toward creating consensus as a first step.

With our fellow bishops, we remind political leaders, especially those publicly identified as Catholic, of “their duty to exercise genuine moral leadership in society.” Moral leadership is not dictated by opinion polls but is exercised “by educating and sensitizing themselves and their constituents to the humanity of the unborn child.” (LGL n. 29)

The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issues guidelines on political responsibility prior to national elections. On November 14, 2007 the Conference published *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States.*

In publishing our statement on political responsibility we explain our intent: “In this statement, we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God’s truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in the light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.” (FCFC n. 7)

Hence, as pastors and teachers of the faith, we do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc, nor do we desire to instruct Catholics on how to vote

either by endorsing or opposing candidates. We do uphold our right and duty to provide moral analysis of the major issues confronting society.

We also restate here the longstanding policy of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky that only voter guide materials directly published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) or by the Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) may be distributed in parishes and institutions within our dioceses. (FCFC n. 8)

The moral vision of the USCCB's *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* (2001) is anchored in "the consistent ethic of life." The "consistent ethic of life" engages a broad spectrum of issues touching "the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity." This approach "explains the Church's teaching at the level of moral principle --- far from diminishing concern for abortion and euthanasia or equating all issues touching on the dignity of life --- recognizes the distinctive character of each issue while giving each its proper place within a coherent moral vision."

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* reaffirms "the consistent ethic of life" as "a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues." (FCFC n. 40)

In short, to understand the consistent ethic of life rightly, two distortions of the Church's moral vision on human rights and dignity must be avoided.

1) The first distortion of the Church's defense of human life and dignity is that of "moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity." (FCFC n. 28)

To avoid the trap of assigning moral equivalency to all rights issues indiscriminately, *Living the Gospel of Life* sharply contrasts the intrinsic evil of intentional acts of killing with the moral evil involved in other rights issues: "Abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition of all others. They are committed against those who are weakest and most defenseless, those who are genuinely 'the poorest of the poor.'" (LGL n. 5)

In *Christifideles Laici* (“The Lay Members of God’s Faithful People,” 1988) Pope John Paul II defended the inherent and universal nature of human rights: “The human being is entitled to such rights *in every phase of development*, from conception until natural death; and *in every condition*, whether healthy or sick, whole or handicapped, rich or poor.” Specifically with regard to the fundamental right to life, the late Holy Father’s apostolic exhortation on the vocation and the mission of the laity firmly stated: “Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights --- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture --- is false and illusory if *the right to life*, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition of all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination.” (CFL n. 38)

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* stipulates that “[t]he 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.” (FCFC n. 28)

In effect, legalizing intentional killing of the very subject of ethics is tantamount to the “death of ethics.” As the Vatican’s *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* (2002) asserts: “In the face of fundamental and inalienable ethical demands, Christians must recognize that what is at stake is the essence of the moral law, which concerns the integral good of the human person. This is the case with laws concerning abortion and euthanasia.” (DN n. 4)

2) The Church’s defense of human life and dignity is also distorted through “the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity.” (FCFC n. 29)

*Living the Gospel of Life* interprets the application of Gospel values in a framework of a consistent ethic of life that “promotes a broad spectrum of issues ‘seeking to protect human life and promote human dignity from the inception of life to its final moment.’” (LGL n. 23)

Opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of

capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. Therefore Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas. Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life. (LGL n. 23)

In conclusion, *Living the Gospel of Life* stresses that “*being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.*” (LGL n. 23)

### **Guidelines for Prudential Judgments in Voting According to Principles of a Well-Formed Conscience**

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* sets forth guidelines to clarify some of the ethical dilemmas faced by Catholic voters. Those norms for voting according to a well-formed conscience are spelled out as follows:

N. 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.”

N. 35 “... There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable moral 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.”

N. 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.”

N. 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.”

The 2007 statement on conscience and political responsibility also clarified the question of single-issue voting. Since 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." (FCFC n. 42)

Differences in prudential decisions concerning the political reality of public policy proposals should not be construed as a compromise of moral principles. The issue of "imperfect law" is a case in point.

In *Evangelium Vitae* Pope John Paul II addressed the problem of conscience in cases where an elected official who is unalterably opposed to abortion might support proposals directed at limiting the harm caused by permissive legislation. (EV n. 73) When such permissive laws cannot realistically be overturned or abrogated, voting for a more restrictive law does not "represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law." It is a valid approach to limiting evil aspects of such legislation.

*The Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* (2001), *Living the Gospel of Life* (1998) and *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2007) support this position on "laws that are not perfect." Our more recent statement on political responsibility spells out the link between the exercise of political prudence and the acceptability of "imperfect legislation":

Sometimes morally flawed laws already exist. In this situation, the process of framing legislation to protect life is subject to prudential judgment and 'the art of the possible.' At times this process may restore justice only partially or gradually. For example, Pope John Paul II taught that when a government official who fully opposes abortion and cannot succeed in completely overturning a pro-abortion law, he or she may work to improve protection for unborn human life, 'limiting the harm done by such a law' and lessening its negative impact as much as possible (*Evangelium Vitae* no. 73). Such incremental improvements in the law are acceptable as steps toward the full restoration of justice. (FCFC n. 32)

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* cautions that "Catholics must never abandon the moral requirement to seek full protection for all human life from the moment of conception until natural death." (FCFC n. 32)

Accordingly, from the perspective of the moral responsibility of political leaders, *Living the Gospel of Life* concludes that "no appeal to policy, procedure,

majority will or pluralism ever excuses a public official from defending life to the greatest extent possible.” (LGL n. 32)

In accord with the positions taken in “Catholics in Political Life” (2004) we in fulfilling the duties of our pastoral office as bishops will continue to counsel “Catholic public officials that their acting consistently to support abortion on demand risks making them cooperators in evil in a public manner.” We sustain the hope that by constancy in fulfilling our pastoral responsibility “that the scandal of their cooperating in evil can be resolved by the proper formation of their consciences.”

In our advocacy of pro-life issues in defense of human dignity and rights, we pledge our ongoing efforts to defend human dignity and the promotion of human rights, especially from conception until natural death:

\* We need to continue to teach clearly and help other Catholic leaders to teach clearly on our unequivocal commitment to the legal protection of human life from the moment of conception until natural death.

\*We need to do more to persuade all people that human life is precious and human dignity must be defended. This requires more effective dialogue and engagement with all public officials, especially Catholic officials. We welcome conversation initiated by political leaders themselves.

\*Catholics need to act in support of these principles and policies in public life. It is the particular vocation of the laity to transform the world. ... As bishops, we do not endorse or oppose candidates. Rather we seek to form the consciences of our people. ...

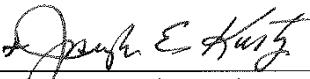
\*The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. ...

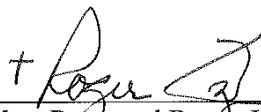
\*We commit ourselves to maintain communication with public officials who make decisions every day that touch issues of human life and dignity.

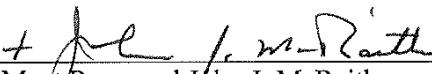
We call on public officials to exercise their moral responsibility to protect the weak and the defenseless. To the larger civic community we extend an invitation to join us as concerned citizens in a common cause to foster a pro-life atmosphere in our homes and families, in our neighborhoods, towns, and cities, in our commonwealth of Kentucky.

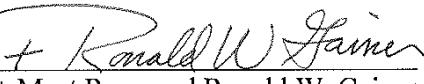
In unison with our brother bishops throughout the nation, we “encourage *all citizens*, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate *in building the culture of life*. Every voice matters in the public forum. ...” (LGL n. 34)

Adopted: January 22, 2008.

  
+ Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz  
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+ Most Reverend Roger J. Foys  
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+ Most Reverend John J. McRaith  
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The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. CCK speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of Kentucky constitute CCK's Board of Directors. Committees of the Conference are: Ecumenical, Education, Finance, Health Care, Hispanic, Pro-Life and Social Concerns.