

## **Knowing Church teaching is essential to the exercise of faithful citizenship**

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Politics consists in the public conversations and decisions of how we ought to order our common life together. Even though there is a separation of Church and State in America, this does not mean that there should be a separation of faith and public life. The truths of faith, enlightening natural reason, are a great gift to humanity as we decide how best to order our common life. Every four years the bishops of the United States issue a statement on “Faithful Citizenship” in which they call Catholics to “political responsibility” grounded in reason and faith. The statement “highlights the role of the Church in the formation of conscience and the corresponding moral responsibility of each Catholic to hear, receive and act upon the Church’s teaching in the lifelong task of forming his or her own conscience” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*[FCFC] 3, United States Conference of Bishops, 2007). In this New Earth issue, Christopher Dodson’s column speaks to how Catholics are to form their consciences. I encourage you to read it.

Many of you are aware that two Catholic politicians, Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Sen. Joseph Biden, have made public comments in the past few weeks about the Catholic faith and the matter of abortion. I have remarked on how their presentation of Catholic teaching is erroneous and is based on neither a true knowledge nor a proper understanding of the faith. Bishops are responsible to present the true teaching of the Church so that the faithful will not be confused or misled by their statements.

Having accurate information concerning the teaching of the Church is essential for forming our consciences and for the exercise of faithful citizenship. The best places to find the teaching of the Church on the matter of abortion is in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC); John Paul II’s encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*) (EV); and the 1998 statement by the USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life* (LGL). These documents are easily available either at a Catholic bookstore or on the internet. In the next few weeks all of you should receive in your parish bulletins a copy of a fact sheet, “Respect for Unborn Human Life: The Church’s Constant Teaching.” In my column I simply want to cite for you the teaching of the Church as given in the above documents so that you may form your consciences.

### **What does the Catechism teach about abortion?**

“Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception.

From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life” (CCC 2270).

“Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense. The Church attaches the canonical penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life. ‘A person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication latae sententiae,’ ‘by the very commission of the offense,’ and subject to the conditions provided by Canon Law. The Church does not thereby intend to restrict the scope of mercy. Rather, she makes clear the gravity of the crime committed, the irreparable harm done to the innocent who is put to death, as well as to the parents and the whole of society” (CCC 2272).

“Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being” (2274).

### **Is the teaching definitive – part of the unchangeable teaching of the Church and one that binds all Catholics?**

“Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops -- who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine -- I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church” (EV 62).

### **What are the responsibilities of Catholics in the public arena?**

“The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation: ‘The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. Among such fundamental rights one should mention in this regard every human being's right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death.’ ‘The moment a positive law deprives a category of human beings of the protection which civil legislation ought to accord them, the state is denying the equality of all before the law. When the state does not place its power at the service of the rights of each citizen, and in particular of the more vulnerable, the very foundations of a state based on law are undermined....

As a consequence of the respect and protection which must be ensured for the unborn child from the moment of conception, the law must provide appropriate penal sanctions for every deliberate violation of the child's rights” (CCC 2273).

“Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection. ...the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (cf. Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that ‘we must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29)...In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to ‘take part in a propaganda campaign in favour of such a law, or vote for it’” (EV 73).

“Pope John Paul II elaborates...in his 1988 apostolic exhortation, *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifideles Laici)*: ‘The inviolability of the person, which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. 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 . . . everyone has the mission and responsibility of acknowledging the personal dignity of every human being and of defending the right to life, some lay faithful are given particular title to this task: such as parents, teachers, health workers and the many who hold economic and political power’” (LGL 19).

“...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. *But being 'right' in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community. If we understand the human person as the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ -- the living house of God -- then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house's foundation. These directly and immediately violate the human person's most fundamental right -- the right to life. Neglect of these issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. Such attacks cannot help but lull the social conscience in ways ultimately destructive of other human rights” (LGL 23).

“Catholics who are privileged to serve in public leadership positions have an obligation to place their faith at the heart of their public service, particularly on issues regarding the sanctity and dignity of human life. Thomas More, the former chancellor of England who preferred to give his life rather than betray his Catholic convictions, went to his execution with the words, ‘I die the king's good servant, but God's first.’ In the United States in the late 1990s, elected officials safely keep their heads. But some will face a political penalty for living their public office in accord with their pro-life convictions. To those who choose this path, we assure them that their course is just, they save lives through their witness, and God and history will not forget them. Moreover, the risk of witness should not be exaggerated, and the power of witness should not be underestimated. In an age of artifice, many voters are hungry for substance. They admire and support political figures who speak out sincerely for their moral convictions. For our part we commend Catholic and other public officials who, with courage and determination, use their positions of leadership to promote respect for all human life” (LGL 31).

“We urge those Catholic officials who choose to depart from Church teaching on the inviolability of human life in their public life to consider the consequences for their own spiritual well being, as well as the scandal they risk by leading others into serious sin. We call on them to reflect on the grave contradiction of assuming public roles and presenting themselves as credible Catholics when their actions on fundamental issues of human life are not in agreement with Church teaching. No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate for or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life. Certainly there are times when it may be impossible to overturn or prevent passage of a law which allows or promotes a moral evil -- such as a law allowing the destruction of nascent human life. In such cases, an elected official, whose position in favor of life is known, could seek legitimately to limit the harm done by the law. However, no appeal to policy, procedure, majority will or pluralism ever excuses a public official from defending life to the greatest extent possible. As is true of leaders in all walks of life, no political leader can evade accountability for his or her exercise of power (*Evangelium Vitae*, 73-4). Those who justify their inaction on the grounds that abortion is the law of the land need to recognize that there is a higher law, the law of God. No human law can validly contradict the Commandment: ‘Thou shalt not kill’” (LGL 32).

These citations provide you with a glimpse of the teaching of the Church. I encourage you during the course of the next several weeks to read the following: 1) the *Catechism* (1776-1802) which addresses the question of conscience; 2) the *Catechism* (2234-2246) which addresses “The Authorities in Civil Society;” 3) the *Catechism* (2258-2330) on the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment which addresses the matter of human life; 4) John Paul II’s 1995 Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life); 5) The U.S. Bishops’ 1998 document *Living the Gospel of Life*; and 6) The U.S. Bishops’ 2007 document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. The last three documents are easily found on the internet.

I pray that all Catholics will exercise faithful citizenship and bring the values of the Gospel into the public square.

*The documents mentioned can be found on-line at: Catechism of the Catholic Church - [http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc\\_toc.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm); Faithful Citizenship - [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org); Evangelium Vitae - [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html); Living the Gospel of Life - <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/gospel.shtml>;*