



## ***Civic duty: responding with charity as American citizens and children of God***

**Election Message from Bishops Francis DiLorenzo and Paul Loverde, October 2016**

Only a few weeks away from the November 8 elections, we are reminded of what Pope Francis said to politicians and the faithful, just weeks before the 2015 election.

Centering us in the words of the Gospel, the Holy Father urged “the entire people of the United States” – public officials and voters alike – to follow the “clear direction” of the Golden Rule (*MT 7:12*), which guides us to “treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated.” He also said, “You are called to defend and preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good, for this is the chief aim of all politics.”

This means on Election Day and throughout the year – even when the political discourse around us is uncivil – our civic duty calls us to engage in the political process.

As our brother U.S. bishops emphasize, “This duty [to work for a just ordering of society] is more critical than ever in today's political environment, where Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party and too few candidates fully share the Church's comprehensive commitment to the life and dignity of every human being from conception to natural death. Yet this is not a time for retreat or discouragement; rather, it is a time for renewed engagement.” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, No. 16, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015*)

The foundation of this “renewed engagement” is a well-tuned conscience -- one shaped by prayer, the Sacraments, learning and discerning the issues at hand and the character of the candidates and, finally, by understanding the guiding principles of our faith.

Four principles of Catholic social teaching light the way: Preserving the inherent dignity of every human person; striving to satisfy the common good; and incorporating the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. For more on each of these principles, visit [www.vacatholic.org](http://www.vacatholic.org) and [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org).

Church teaching tells us the dignity of the human person is the core of Catholic moral and social teaching and the foundation of a moral vision for society. This dignity calls us to oppose all activities that contribute to what Pope Francis has called “a throwaway culture.” As the U.S. Bishops note, “Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. . . . If we understand the human person as the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ – the living house of God – then these 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.*” (*Living the Gospel of Life, No. 22, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998*)

As we weigh the issues, it is essential to recognize that not all issues carry the same moral weight. Our moral obligation to oppose policies that promote intrinsically evil acts must weigh first on our consciences and actions. Intrinsically evil acts are actions we must never do because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. These 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, targeting noncombatants in acts of terror or war and redefining marriage.

As we reflect on intrinsically evil actions, we note in particular two areas of confusion that have resurfaced during this campaign season.

The first area of confusion is that one can be “personally” opposed to abortion, yet continue to publicly support laws which allow it. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of both natural law and Church teaching. The common good and Christian charity compel us to work toward overturning – not supporting or acquiescing to – all unjust laws. The basic principle of equality affirms that every human being has an equal right to life. Abortion denies this right to an entire class of human beings, and therefore permitting it is gravely unjust and fundamentally at odds with the foundational concept of equality. Indeed, “It is a mistake with grave moral consequences to treat the destruction of innocent human life merely as a matter of individual choice. A legal system that violates the basic right to life on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed.” (*FC, No. 22*)

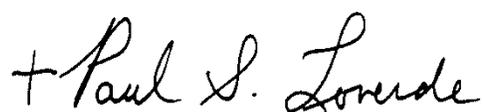
The second area of confusion relates to the institution of marriage. In response to claims that this institution can be redefined, or that even the Church could one day change its teaching on marriage, we re-affirm that marriage is and can only ever be the union of one man and one woman. This is not merely the doctrine of any one religion, but rather an understanding of our basic human nature.

This clarity is essential as we consider how to vote and how to promote the common good. Choices about how to vote are often difficult. As we noted, many issues are important; not all issues have equal weight; and our preeminent obligation is to protect the right to life upon which every other right depends. Our faith tells us we must also carefully discern the candidate's commitments, character, integrity and ability to influence a given issue.

Our Virginia Catholic Conference website at [www.vacatholic.org](http://www.vacatholic.org) provides resources to assist voters as they prepare for the election, including a comparison of the two major party presidential candidates' stances on important issues; a list of third-party presidential candidates; a Congressional Voter Guide; and Four Principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

Even in difficult elections Catholics are called to bring charity and civility into the public square. We join together in prayer and reflection, so that with wisdom and fortitude, we may choose our elected leaders with a correctly formed conscience.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,



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