



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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CATHOLICS IN POLITICAL LIFE

We speak as bishops, as teachers of the Catholic faith and of the moral law. We have the duty to teach about human life and dignity, marriage and family, war and peace, the needs of the poor and the demands of justice. Today we continue our efforts to teach on a uniquely important matter that has recently been a source of concern for Catholics and others.

It is the teaching of the Catholic Church from the very beginning, founded on her understanding of her Lord's own witness to the sacredness of human life, that the killing of an unborn child is always intrinsically evil and can never be justified. If those who perform an abortion and those who cooperate willingly in the action are fully aware of the objective evil of what they do, they are guilty of grave sin and thereby separate themselves from God's grace. This is the constant and received teaching of the Church. It is, as well, the conviction of many other people of good will.

To make such intrinsically evil actions legal is itself wrong. This is the point most recently highlighted in official Catholic teaching. The legal system as such can be said to cooperate in evil when it fails to protect the lives of those who have no protection except the law. In the United States of America, abortion on demand has been made a constitutional right by a decision of the Supreme Court. Failing to protect the lives of innocent and defenseless members of the human race is to sin against justice. Those who formulate law therefore have an obligation in conscience to work toward correcting morally defective laws, lest they be guilty of cooperating in evil and in sinning against the common good.

As our conference has insisted in *Faithful Citizenship*, Catholics who bring their moral convictions into public life do not threaten democracy or pluralism but enrich them and the nation. The separation of church and state does not require division between belief and public action, between moral principles and political choices, but protects the right of believers and religious groups to practice their faith and act on their values in public life.

Our obligation as bishops at this time is to teach clearly. It is with pastoral solicitude for everyone involved in the political process that we will also counsel Catholic public officials that their acting consistently to support abortion on demand risks making them cooperators in evil in a public manner. We will persist in this duty to counsel, in the hope that the scandal of their cooperating in evil can be resolved by the proper formation of their consciences.

Having received an extensive interim report from the Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians, and looking forward to the full report, we highlight several points from the interim report that suggest some directions for our efforts:

- 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. Our teaching on human life and dignity should be reflected in our parishes and our educational, health care and human service ministries.
- 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 public 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. We have to encourage this vocation and do more to bring all believers to this mission. As bishops, we do not endorse or oppose candidates. Rather, we seek to form the consciences of our people so that they can examine the positions of candidates and make choices based on Catholic moral and social teaching.
- The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should **not honor** those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions.
- We commit ourselves to **maintain communication** with public officials who make decisions every day that touch issues of human life and dignity.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of Catholic life. Therefore, like every Catholic generation before us, we must be guided by the words of St. Paul, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). This means that all must examine their consciences as to their worthiness to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord. This examination includes fidelity to the moral teaching of the Church in personal and public life.

The question has been raised as to whether the denial of Holy Communion to some Catholics in political life is necessary because of their public support for abortion on demand. Given the wide range of circumstances involved in arriving at a prudential judgment on a matter of this seriousness, we recognize that such decisions rest with the individual bishop in accord with the established canonical and pastoral principles. Bishops can legitimately make different judgments on the most prudent course of pastoral action. Nevertheless, we all share an unequivocal commitment to protect human life and dignity and to preach the Gospel in difficult times.

The polarizing tendencies of election-year politics can lead to circumstances in which Catholic teaching and sacramental practice can be misused for political ends. Respect for the Holy Eucharist, in particular, demands that it be received worthily and that it be seen as the source for our common mission in the world.

Catholics in Political Life was developed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians in collaboration with Francis Cardinal George, OMI, Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, OFMCap, and Bishop Donald W. Wuerl. It was approved for publication by the full body of bishops at their June 2004 General Meeting and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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