



*Catholic Morality  
Module*



ARCHDIOCESE of HARTFORD  
CENTER FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION & FORMATION

# Center for Catholic Education and Formation Archdiocese of Hartford

*Leadership Formation for  
Teachers, Catechists, and Parish Ministers*

## Guide to Catholic Morality

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# The Ten Commandments

| Commandment   | Meaning  | Reference                   |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| I am the LORD your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me.  | Love and obey God before all else and let nothing have greater importance in your life.  | Ex 20:2–6,<br>Deut 5:6–10   |
| You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God.   | Honor the name of God. Be reverent in speech.  | Ex 20:7,<br>Deut 5:11       |
| Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy.   | Honor the Lord's Day with worship, prayer, and rest. The Sabbath is marked as a day of remembrance.  | Ex 20:8–11,<br>Deut 5:12–15 |
| Honor your father and your mother.  | Honor your parents, listen to them, and care for them when they are elderly.   | Ex 20:12,<br>Deut 5:16      |
| You shall not murder.   | Choose life and do not murder.   | Ex 20:13,<br>Deut 5:17      |
| Neither shall you commit adultery.  | Choose chastity and loyalty. Honor marriage vows to protect the family.  | Ex 20:14,<br>Deut 5:18      |
| Neither shall you steal.  | Choose justice. Don't steal. Build security and confidence in one another.   | Ex 20:15,<br>Deut 5:19      |
| Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.   | Choose honesty. Do not lie. Build trust and faith among people. Make your word and witness honorable.  | Ex 20:16,<br>Deut 5:20      |
| Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house.                                     | Don't covet or entertain fantasies of being with another's spouse. Choose purity of mind. Reject jealousy.   | Ex 20:17,<br>Deut 5:21      |
| Neither shall you desire your neighbor's . . . male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. | Choose freedom from greed. Don't envy another's property or good fortune. Prevent sin by not entertaining jealous thoughts that might lead to stealing another's property. | Ex 20:17,<br>Deut 5:21      |

(This chart is taken from *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Bible Dictionary*, by Sheila O'Connell-Roussell [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2005], page 166. © 2005 by Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.)



# Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: Christian *Halakhah* Ethic

Catherine Cory

Perhaps more than any other part of the New Testament, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount has been regarded over the centuries as the standard of Christian living. However, what Christians sometimes fail to understand about this text is that it represents a Christian reinterpretation or refinement of *Halakhah*—that is, Jewish Law. This article begins with some brief background on the Gospel of Matthew and its portrayal of Jesus as the messianic king of the Jews and the new Moses. Then attention shifts to the Sermon on the Mount as instruction on how the disciple of Jesus should observe *Halakhah*. Brief commentary on the lesser-known Sermon on the Plain from Luke's Gospel provides a way to better appreciate the distinctive features of Matthew's version. The article concludes with some comments on the significance of the Sermon on the Mount for today's Christian believers.

## Matthew: A Jewish Christian Gospel

Traditionally the Gospel of Matthew was associated with an Apostle named Matthew, a tax collector (see Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15, Acts of the Apostles 1:13), also known as Levi (see Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27). Today most biblical scholars would say that this Gospel derives from the apostolic tradition but was written anonymously. It is believed to have been written in approximately AD 85 by a Christian Jew—that is, a Jewish person who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, also identified as a Jewish Christian. Likewise, most scholars of Matthew's Gospel think the intended audience consisted of Christian Jews, though perhaps not exclusively. Perhaps from Antioch or another city in Syria, this community viewed themselves as a minority community, and they may have recently separated from a synagogue. However, we do not know exactly why they separated, nor do we know much about their social status.

Like all the New Testament Gospels, the Gospel of Matthew was never intended to be a documentary history of the life of Jesus. Rather, it is a narrative proclamation of faith concerning Jesus, the Christ, which was intended to inspire faith among its hearers. Evidence of its Jewish Christian origins is apparent throughout. It opens with a genealogy of Jesus' family, beginning with Abraham and extending through David, considered to be the greatest king of Israel, and the Babylonian Exile, its greatest national tragedy at the time (see 1:1–17). This genealogy is followed by stories of Jesus' birth, which present him as the messianic king of the Jews and the new Moses (see 1:18–2:23). Most notable is the slaughter of the male children of Bethlehem (see 2:16–18, Exodus 1:15–22, Jeremiah 31:15) and the escape of the Holy Family to Egypt so that the Scriptures could be fulfilled: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:15, Hosea 11:1).

Continuing the Moses and Exodus motifs, Matthew later describes how Jesus was forced into the wilderness just prior to the beginning of his public ministry (see 4:1). Like the Israelites, Jesus is tested in the wilderness, but unlike the Israelites who grumbled against Moses and abandoned God for their worship of a golden calf, Jesus passes the test of loyalty—depending only on God for food, not challenging God's trustworthiness in keeping him safe, and worshiping no one but God (see 4:2–11). Such is the literary context for the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is presented as the new Moses and a true Israelite, who depends on God alone and who is perfectly obedient to God's will.



## Overview of the Sermon on the Mount

The geographical setting that Matthew assigns to the Sermon on the Mount is an unnamed mountain, presumably in the Galilee (see 5:1–2). The astute reader will likely conclude that this mountain is a symbol for Sinai, the place where Moses first received God's Law on behalf of God's People (see Exodus 19:3). With the crowds gathered around him, Jesus sits down—the traditional position of a teacher—and speaks to his disciples. They are about to receive the word of God's Covenant.

This is the first and the longest of several speeches in Matthew's Gospel. Scholars believe that the author of this Gospel crafted the speech from oral traditions and collections of short sayings attributed to Jesus. In its final form, the Sermon on the Mount appears to have been organized into the following units:

1. Beatitudes (5:3–12)
2. Discipleship sayings (5:13–16)
3. Teachings about the Law (5:17–48)
4. Teachings about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (6:1–18)
5. Sayings about worldly possessions and dependence on God (6:19–34)
6. Sayings about proper human behavior and God's response to it (7:1–27)

As you investigate each of these units of the Sermon on the Mount, pay special attention to the ways Matthew has shaped the Jesus tradition to create for us an ethic that is both deeply rooted in Jewish *Halakhah* and distinctively Christian.

## The Beatitudes and Discipleship Sayings

A beatitude is a saying that begins with the phrase “Blessed are” or “Blessed is.” Although many people have heard of the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel, most are surprised to learn that these sayings can be found elsewhere in the Bible, mostly in the Wisdom literature (see Sirach 25:7–9, 48:1–11; Psalms 1, 2, 32), prophetic literature (see Isaiah 30:18, 32:20; Jeremiah 17:7), and the Book of Revelation (see 1:3, 14:13, 16:15). Beatitudes usually describe a behavior or disposition that God approves or looks favorably upon. Each of Matthew's Beatitudes has a promise of future reward or well-being attached to it, which makes them a call to obedience and an invitation to faith. The implication is that those who are obedient to God's call will receive their reward when God's Reign is finally made manifest and God's salvation is realized through the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

When we first hear the phrase “Blessed are,” we might be tempted to feel warm and fuzzy, but when we look beyond the opening phrase of Matthew's Beatitudes, we soon realize that this is serious business. These Beatitudes demand personal sacrifice, involve exposing oneself to shame or harm, and require total dependence on God. For example, the person who is “poor in spirit” (5:3) needs to be detached from his wealth and the security it brings so that he can care for the poor. This is a traditional theme in the Law and the prophets (see Exodus 22:25–27, 23:11; Deuteronomy 15:7–11; Isaiah 61:1), but the Matthean Jesus has extended the concept to include taking on the spirit of the poor, those who depend on the graciousness of God for their very survival.



Likewise, those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (5:6) must be committed and passionate in every way about obeying God’s will—even to the point of allowing themselves to be persecuted (see 5:10). In Matthew’s Gospel, *righteousness* means obedience to God’s will as articulated in the Law (see, for example, 3:14–15; 5:20; 6:1,33; 7:21). Those who mourn must allow themselves to suffer loss (see 5:4). Those who are meek must have a humble spirit that is dependent on God alone (see 5:5). Those who are merciful must reject the inclination toward vengeance or retribution when they are harmed (see 5:7). The clean of heart must possess the single-heartedness of those who love God without fail and thus are worthy to stand in God’s presence on the holy mountain (see Psalm 24:3–6).

Matthew follows his Beatitudes with some sayings that liken the disciples to salt and light (see 5:13–16). These sayings are, in a sense, the culmination of the message of the Beatitudes. Jesus tells his disciples that their calling requires that they stand out like salt that flavors food or like light that makes a city shine on a mountaintop. If they wish to be Jesus’ disciples, they cannot hide. Their good works must manifest to everyone the coming Reign of God.

## Teachings about the Law

This next section of the Sermon on the Mount is an exposition on what some Matthean scholars have called the “greater righteousness” of the Law. It begins with Jesus’ declaration that he has not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (see 5:17). In this context the word *fulfill* carries the connotation of completion or satisfaction. Christians and nonobservant Jews sometimes assume that fulfillment of the Law refers to some kind of legalism—adherence to the letter of the Law—but that is far from the truth. The Jewish Law, called *Halakhah*, is best understood as “the path one walks.” It represents Israel’s obligation to the Sinai Covenant. It is a comprehensive way of life that involves each individual’s freely choosing to observe the Jewish Law as completely as possible as an expression of the community’s desire to be in relationship with God.

What is at stake for the disciples? The Matthean Jesus says that those who observe every detail of the Law will get the highest place in God’s Kingdom, when God’s Reign is fully manifest (see 5:19–20). However, those who are lax in observing even the smallest of the requirements of Jewish Law will get the lowest place in the Kingdom (see 5:19). But why do the little details matter so much? Jewish rabbinic sayings that are roughly contemporaneous with the New Testament might provide some insight. *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* identifies three things that are necessary for the proper transmission of the Torah, meaning the totality of the Law, from generation to generation. The third is to make a fence around the Torah:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

The “fence around the Torah” is the network of small and seemingly insignificant rules that surround the major precepts of Torah Law. For example, the Sabbath rest is a major precept of Jewish Law. In making a “fence around the Torah,” a rabbi might advise an observant Jew not to carry matches on the

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<sup>1</sup> *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 1.1. Translation at [www.shechem.org/torah/avot.html](http://www.shechem.org/torah/avot.html).



Sabbath, because he might forget and accidentally strike the match, thereby doing work and breaking Sabbath. Again here is *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* on making a fence around the Torah:

Rabbi Akiva said: Jestings and frivolity lead a man towards promiscuity. Tradition is a safeguarding fence around the Torah. Tithes are a fence to wealth. Vows a fence to abstinence. Silence is a fence to wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

Although the lesser ordinances can be burdensome at times, the person who seeks to obey them fully eventually embraces an ethical way of life that is all encompassing and that continually orients the person toward the subject of his or her obedience, namely, God.

Whether or not Matthew knew of the concept of “making a fence around the Torah,” he portrays Jesus’ doing just that in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:21–48, Jesus gives his disciples six examples of greater righteousness that are for all intents and purposes a reinterpretation of the commandments, and in so doing has built a fence around the Torah. The “fence” may seem impossibly high, but it represents a comprehensive way of life that orients the disciples toward God. And Matthew shows, through the stories he has included in his Gospel, that Jesus has already shown them the “path” to walk.

Let us briefly survey these six examples of greater righteousness of the Law. Concerning the commandment, “Do not kill,” the Matthean Jesus erects a fence around the Torah, saying that his disciples not only must not kill but also must not even harbor anger in their hearts against a family member or a neighbor or call him a “blockhead.” Anger, after all, leads to murder. Instead they should quickly seek reconciliation with their enemies. It is the only way, he says, to avoid judgment in the coming Reign of God (see Matthew 5:21–26).

Likewise, concerning the commandment, “Do not commit adultery,” Jesus tells his disciples they must learn to restrain their passions, because allowing oneself to look lustfully at another can lead to adultery and ultimately to judgment in fiery Gehenna (see Matthew 5:27–30). Closely related to the commandment on adultery is the commandment on divorce. Jesus says that any man who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery as well as anyone who might marry her in the future (see 5:31–32). The scholarly literature on this verse is extensive and not particularly relevant to this discussion except to say that the disciples are morally responsible for the consequences of their actions for the well-being of others.

The pattern set by the first three examples of greater righteousness continues with a commentary on the taking of oaths. Out of respect for the Divine Name, people were apparently referring to Heaven or earth or Jerusalem in their oath formularies. The Matthean Jesus tells the disciples not to swear oaths at all. Instead their speech should be honest and direct at all times. If their words are always truthful, then they have no need for oaths (see 5:33–37).

Like the second and third examples, the fifth and sixth examples are related. Expanding on the “eye for an eye” commandment, Jesus tells the disciples that they must not retaliate in *any* way (see 5:38–39). Moreover, they should not respond with violence to anyone who unfairly demands things of them (see 5:40–41). Instead generosity should be the norm. Perhaps Matthew also believes that Christians’ passivist response might cause their persecutors to reflect on their bad behavior and undergo a conversion of heart (see Proverbs 25:21–22, Romans 12:19–21). And finally as commentary on the

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<sup>2</sup> *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 1.17. Translation at [www.shechem.org/torah/avot.html](http://www.shechem.org/torah/avot.html).



commandment “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” Jesus tells the disciples they must love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (see Matthew 5:43–47).

Through his commentary on important Torah laws, Jesus has constructed a *very* high fence around the Torah. Early Christians hearing the words of this Gospel must have wondered how they could possibly come close to full observance of the Law as Jesus, their new Moses, had interpreted it. But then they would have heard, “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). But what is perfection in this context? Is it a strict adherence to the letter of the law? No, the disciples are to look to God the Father as their model of right behavior and disposition of heart. The Matthean Jesus says of God, “He makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (5:45). What must the Christian believer do in turn? Act with generosity and love toward everyone (see 5:46–47).

These six examples of greater righteousness and the Law focus on the disciples’ relationships with other human beings, but what follows are three teachings on piety, which focus on the disciples’ relationship to God. Though in reverse order, the commandments of the Sinai Covenant are likewise clustered into two categories: right relation with God and right relationship with God’s creatures (see Exodus 20:1–17, Deuteronomy 5:6–21). So also is the Matthean Jesus’ twofold summary of the commandments: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39). Again the definitive attribute or disposition of the disciple should be Christian love.

## Teachings about Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting

Immediately following the six examples of greater righteousness and the Law, the Matthean Jesus warns about doing righteous deeds simply so others will see them (see Matthew 6:1). In this context he talks about three of the most important aspects of Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. By the time Matthew was writing his Gospel, almsgiving was already a well-established and highly valued practice in early Judaism. This teaching does not reject the practice of almsgiving. Instead Jesus teaches that if you give alms only so that others will see you, then you already have your reward (see 6:2–4). Christian believers’ righteous deeds must be done with proper motivation and disposition of heart.

Jesus says much the same thing about prayer and fasting (see Matthew 6:5–8, 16–18). Both are highly valued religious practices within Judaism and in Matthew’s community, but the disciples are taught that neither should be done for the sake of securing praise or glory for oneself. What matters is one’s relationship with God the Father, Jesus says, and the disciples need not be concerned that their efforts are in vain, because God sees their intention and knows their need even before they do. Still today, within Judaism and subsequently for Christians as well, fasting is about humbling oneself before God, mourning over loss and failure, and strengthening one’s desire for prayer.

Situated between the teachings on prayer and fasting, Matthew gives an accounting of how one ought to pray (see 6:9–13). This prayer, known as the Our Father or the Lord’s Prayer, is familiar to most Christians today, but perhaps few know that it is patterned after typical Jewish prayers of the time—except for the address of God as Father—and that Matthew’s community was probably already using it in common prayer long before the Gospel was written. It consists of seven brief petitions followed by a statement about the necessity of forgiveness. The first three petitions focus on asking God to make known God’s holy name and manifest his Kingdom here on earth just as it already is manifest in Heaven (see 6:9–10). The last four petitions acknowledge humanity’s total dependence on God for its sustenance, forgiveness from sin, and protection from evil (see 6:11–13). The concluding statement



reflects a principle of Jewish Law seen elsewhere in the Bible: human action will be repaid by a comparable action from God. Simply stated, the closing statement of this prayer acknowledges that God will forgive us if we forgive others, but God will not forgive us if we refuse to forgive others (see 6:14).

## More Jesus Sayings

The remainder of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount consists of collections of sayings attributed to Jesus. On the surface there seems to be little order to the collections, but on closer examination one can group them into two categories. The first collection focuses on not worrying about worldly possessions and instead depending on God alone (see 6:19–34). Of course, this theme is not new to the sermon. We saw it already in the Beatitudes and in the six examples of greater righteousness as well as in the second half of the Lord's Prayer. The second collection of Jesus sayings focuses on proper human behavior and God's response to it (see 7:1–27). This theme is not new either. In fact, it dominates every segment of the sermon, from the Beatitudes through the sayings on salt and light and the six examples of greater righteousness as well as the teachings on piety and the concluding statement of the Lord's Prayer.

Most of these sayings are in the imperative form and tersely written, creating a cascading effect of one command following rapidly on another until finally we arrive at the conclusion of the sermon, perhaps exhausted from the realization of how much discipleship demands of the Christian believer. Then Jesus issues two warnings—one against false prophets and another against disciples who are not true disciples—and a brief parable (see 7:15–27). All three concluding units have as their central message the necessary connection between the disciple's disposition of heart and right behavior. This is the greater righteousness to which the Matthean Jesus, the new Moses, calls each of his disciples, then and now.

## A Note on Luke's Sermon on the Plain

Luke's Gospel has a counterpart to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It is usually called the Sermon on the Plain because its setting is described as "a stretch of level ground" (Luke 6:17). Again Jesus is speaking to his disciples with a large crowd gathered around them, but this time his eyes are raised to the sky as if receiving God's Word from Heaven (see 6:19–20).

Like Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Luke's Sermon on the Plain begins with a series of Beatitudes. However, these Beatitudes are followed by a parallel series of woes, which are patterned after the prophetic oracles of disaster that we find in the Old Testament, and are concerned with the socio-economic conditions of the disadvantaged. This is not surprising if one recognizes that, throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the prophet *par excellence*. Luke has introduced his Sermon on the Plain as a word of prophecy.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain does not contain the sayings that liken the disciples to salt and light, nor does it contain Jesus' words about his teaching being a fulfillment of Jewish Law. It does not contain the six examples of greater righteousness, and it does not contain the teachings on piety. Perhaps Luke was not aware of these teachings, or he deliberately chose to omit them from his version of the sermon. In view of the latter possibility, scholars of Luke's Gospel have concluded that Luke's Christian community probably was not Jewish. However, much of the remainder of his Sermon on the Plain is shared with Matthew's Gospel (see Matthew 5:39–48; 7:1–5, 16–20, 24–27).



Yet, because Luke's setting is different and the interpretational framework of Jewish *Halakhah* is absent, the Sermon on the Plain has a different theology from the Sermon on the Mount. It is an important message nonetheless. As the prophet par excellence, the Lukan Jesus calls the Christian believer to conversion of heart and mercy for God's little ones. You are encouraged to explore his Sermon on the Plain further on your own.

## The Message of the Sermon on the Mount for Today's Christian Believers

As Christians today we are often not cognizant of our Jewish roots and the extent to which both our piety and our praxis (faith-based action) are shaped by Jewish practice. However, even without the lived experience of the meaning and significance of Jewish *Halakhah* as the "path one walks," hopefully we can still glean much from Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses who interprets for his disciples the "greater righteousness" of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount.

In summary, what is Matthew's *Halakhah* ethic? It is a recognition that those who embrace Christian discipleship must be willing to care for the poor and disenfranchised and stand in complete dependence on the graciousness of God as the poor do. Christian discipleship demands of us personal sacrifice, a humble spirit, and single-heartedness as we strive to obey God's will completely in our daily lives. Christian discipleship means not being satisfied with the minimum requirements of Christian living but committing oneself to walking the path of Christian *Halakhah* that Jesus set out for us in his own complete obedience to the will of his Father. It means restraining our passions, not harboring bad feelings toward others, and seeking reconciliation as a way of life. It means acting in generosity and love toward everyone. It requires that our words match our deeds and that we listen to Jesus and live accordingly.

This is the "greater righteousness" or the "fence around the Torah" of which the Matthean Jesus speaks. It requires embracing an ethical way of life that is all-encompassing and that continually orients us toward God and the manifestation of God's Kingdom now and in the future. The challenge is enormous, but Matthew is careful to note in subtle and not so subtle ways that it requires only one thing—that we give ourselves over to God.



# Ten Essential Moral Principles in Catholic Teaching

The following is a summary of ten essential principles of Catholic morality that are found consistently in Catholic moral teaching.

## **Respect for Human Dignity**

Catholics are called to respect, love, and promote human life; and to defend the life, dignity, and rights of all people. Human dignity is the belief that all people have been endowed by God with dignity and deserve respect. It is the belief that everyone has something to offer. The Catholic faith begins with the recognition of the infinite worth of each and every human being – seeing the value and worth of every human being and honoring and respecting the uniqueness of each person. Respect for the dignity of all people leads to defending their human rights – the right to the basics of life (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, education, work) and ensuring that everyone in society works to see that people’s basic needs are met.

## **Respect for Creation and the Environment**

Catholics are called to respect, care for, and defend all of creation. We are called to examine how we use and share the goods of the earth, and how we live in harmony with God’s creation. Catholics are called to stewardship – the duty or responsibility to use the world’s resources responsibly.

## **Love**

Catholics are called to love one another and ourselves. Jesus said that our love for one another is a sign by which others will know that we are his disciples (John 13:34-35). Jesus said that we need to love others as we love ourselves and to remember that we are always loved by God. Catholics are called to love even our enemies. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ...If you love those who love you,” Jesus said, “what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (Luke 6:27, 32)

## **Justice**

Catholics are called to actively work to right the wrongs, to balance the indignities, to fight for the good causes, and to bring human dignity into this well-intentioned but imperfect world. Justice means working for human equality and decency by not displaying ignorance or prejudice, by not judging others, by respecting differences, by opposing bias, bigotry, and discrimination. Justice means expanding our care and concern beyond our family and local community to the nation and world.

**Care and Compassion**

Catholics are called to hear another's cries of anguish, feel another's pain, and respond. Compassion is the experience of feeling the other's life as one's own. One of Jesus' most powerful stories focuses on the call to compassion: the Samaritan looks on the man in the ditch with compassion and responds in a way that no one expects (Luke 10:25-37). Compassion moves us beyond just "feeling" the pain of another, it moves us to action.

**Service**

Catholics are called to serve one another, humbly and unselfishly. Jesus gave us an example when he washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:4-17). Catholics are called to serve the poor and the powerless – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless... (Matthew 25). Catholics are called to befriend those whom society looks down upon. Jesus made himself the friend of the outcasts (Matthew 11:19) and did not avoid their company (Mark 2:16).

**Forgiveness**

Catholics are called to forgive one another and always to seek reconciliation with one another. Jesus said that we cannot ask forgiveness for our own sins unless we are also ready to forgive those who sin against us (Mt. 6:12). Catholics are called to renounce revenge. "If anyone strikes you on the cheek," Jesus said, "offer the other also" (Lk. 6:29).

**Peace**

Catholics are called to pursue peace and harmony in their personal life, relationships, and world. Peace means reconciling differences and resolving conflicts non-violently, recognizing that differences are seldom resolved through conflict or violence.

**Faithfulness**

Catholics are called to develop relationships built on loyalty, trust and love that provide intimacy, security, and happiness. Faithfulness in relationships involves respect and commitment between people. Catholics are called to reserve sexual intimacy to the committed relationship of marriage.

**Honesty and Integrity**

Catholics are called to be honest and genuine with other individuals, institutions, society, and self in every act, deed, and dealing. Honesty grows from an inner strength and confidence that is bred by exacting truthfulness, trustworthiness, and integrity.

# Moral Decision Making and Personal Discernment: A Catholic Approach

Catholic Bishops of the United States

“How do I know if I’ve chosen correctly? Is this the morally right thing to do? How do I know if I’ve chosen the right vocation? How do I know if this course of action, this relationship or this chosen life-style is best for me?” There are few easy answers. Whether one is facing specific moral decisions or broader vocational questions, the Catholic tradition speaks of discernment as that process by which a person uses one’s own reasoning ability, the sources of divine revelation (Scripture and tradition), the Church’s teaching and guidance, the wise counsel of others, and one’s own individual and communal experiences of grace in a sincere effort to choose wisely and well.

Moral decision making is a particular type of discernment process. In order to decide the right course of action, particularly about matters that may be complex or controversial, Catholics must be open to the wisdom of God manifest in all these sources – one’s family, the Church, the Word of God, the sacraments, communal and private prayer, the stories of the saints. At the same time, data from the physical sciences, information from the social sciences, and the insights of human reason can all contribute to one’s discovering moral truth.

The bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed that Christian morality is determined by objective standards. “These, based on the nature of the human person and his or her acts,” (*Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World*, no. 51) are not intended to preempt human evaluation and discernment, but neither are they reducible solely to sincere intentions or an evaluation of motives.

The Catholic tradition has generally accepted a tiered or sequential approach to Christian ethics, as reflected in the traditional levels of natural law theory. Certain values and derived norms remain timeless and absolute. At the most basic or objective level are certain principles and values that reflect human nature as imprinted by the design and will of the Creator. The belief that “good is to be sought and evil avoided” is one such fundamental principle.

Similarly, the inherent and abiding worth of such basic values as life, love, and truth are indisputable. Each is a constitutive dimension of human well-being to be preserved and fostered if one is to be a responsible and virtuous person. People of all races, nations, and times have been able to discover and affirm these as true. The Church holds that “there can be no real conflict between the teaching of reason and faith correctly understood.” (*Faithful to Each Other Forever* 27) Whether through reasoned reflection or Spirit-inspired revelation, or both, humanity can discover, at least in general outline, the meaning of life, the image of God incarnate in the human heart and history.

In some instances, the linkage between a core value and the subsequent positive or negative norm derived from it is so self-evident that the prescription or proscription shares the absoluteness of the value itself. For example, if one accepts that human life is a value, that a certain dignity adheres innately to all living members of the human species, then certain actions, particularly if specified carefully, would in all cases be right or wrong. Thus, the Church holds that the direct killing of the innocent (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, murder, bombing aimed at noncombatants) as well as all directly intended bodily harm to innocent persons (e.g., rape, child or spouse abuse, and torture) are always and everywhere morally wrong.

In other instances, the linkage between fundamental values, norms for behavior, and specific case applications, while real, is more difficult to discern. While we agree that one should always do the “loving thing” or the “life-respecting thing,” determining what that means in terms of a given case or context may not be so self-evident. For example, when, if ever, is it “loving” or “life-respecting” to cease life-sustaining treatment on a terminally ill patient? While the Church believes there are still objectively right and wrong answers to such moral dilemmas, the process of moving from absolute values to general norms to specific case judgments requires the virtue of prudence. Prudence refers to the ability to exercise judgment in practical matters. Prudence is one of the four cardinal or hinge virtues of the Christian tradition.

John Paul II notes that this prudential or providential discernment process is accomplished through the “sense of faith,” which is a gift given by the Holy Spirit to all the faithful. “The Church, therefore, does not accomplish this discernment only through the pastors, who teach in the name and with the power of Christ, but also through the laity.” (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5)

Still, as the bishops reaffirmed at Vatican II, there is a special teaching role or office within the Church, entrusted to the bishops in communion with the pope. “Endowed with the authority of Christ,” it is our responsibility, “by the light of the Holy Spirit,” to discern and to teach the faith that is to be believed and put into practice. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 25) It is our unique duty, in conjunction with the Holy Father and other bishops of the world, “to ensure that the Church remains in the truth of Christ” and to lead the People of God ever more deeply into that truth through “an even more mature evangelical discernment.” (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5)

Finally, there is the area of subjective responsibility. The Church has consistently taught that a person of sincere conscience may have perceived and acted on a moral situation in a manner inconsistent with the teaching of the Church. Still, provided she or he did so with no intentional malice or desire to do wrong, the Christian tradition has recognized mitigated subjective culpability for a decision that objectively is wrong and ought not to have been made. Subjective culpability is determined by how diligently one strives to form correctly his or her conscience and how sincerely one follows that conscience.

In the end, whether choosing one's vocation or making a moral decision that relates to or affects one's vocation, each person is bound to live with and to stand by his or her own discernment or perception of God's will. In either case, "the art of discernment of spirits comes into play. If the content of the experience is in harmony with the Gospel data of revelation and tradition and results in a rekindling of faith, strengthening of hope, and fostering of love, then it probably is an experience of God. A sense of greater integrity, peace, and joy or renewed call to a personal conversion of heart are validating qualities." (*Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood* 44)

Ultimately, each person must discern his or her own moral decisions and wider vocational calling. With all the input and support possible, both from individuals and communities, one must still face the future based on decisions made before God in the recesses of one's own heart. As the bishops at Vatican II phrased it, "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths." (*To Live is Christ*, no. 14)

("Moral Decision-Making and Personal Discernment: A Catholic Approach" is excerpted from *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning* by the Catholic Bishops of the United States, November 21, 1990.)

# **Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship**

A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the  
United States

*with New Introductory Letter*

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

The document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility* from the Catholic Bishops of the United States was developed by the chairmen, in consultation with the membership, of the Committees on Catholic Education, Communications, Cultural Diversity in the Church, Doctrine, Domestic Justice and Human Development, Evangelization and Catechesis, International Justice and Peace, Migration, Pro-Life Activities; the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage; and the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was approved by the full body of bishops at its November 2015 General Meeting.

A new Introductory Letter from the Catholic Bishops of the United States for *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* was developed by the chairmen, in consultation with the membership, of the Committees on Catholic Education, Communications, Cultural Diversity in the Church, Doctrine, Domestic Justice and Human Development, Evangelization and Catechesis, International Justice and Peace, Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, Migration, Pro-Life Activities; the Committee for Religious Liberty; the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage; and the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism of the USCCB. The Introductory Letter was approved by the full body of bishops at its November 2019 General Meeting.

Both documents have been directed for publication by the undersigned.

Msgr. J. Brian Bransfield General Secretary, USCCB

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# Introductory Letter

As Catholics, we bring the richness of our faith to the public square. We draw from both faith and reason as we seek to affirm the dignity of the human person and the common good of all. With renewed hope, we, the Catholic Bishops of the United States, are re-issuing *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, our teaching document on the political responsibility of Catholics, which provides guidance for all who seek to exercise their rights and duties as citizens.

Everyone living in this country is called to participate in public life and contribute to the common good.<sup>1</sup> In *Rejoice and Be Glad [Gaudete et Exsultate]*, Pope Francis writes:

Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace. . . . You cannot grow in holiness without committing yourself, body and soul, to giving your best to this endeavor.<sup>2</sup>

The call to holiness, he writes, requires a “firm and passionate” defense of “the innocent unborn.” “Equally sacred,” he further states, are “the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection.”<sup>3</sup>

Our approach to contemporary issues is first and foremost rooted in our identity as followers of Christ and as brothers and sisters to all who are made in God’s image. For all Catholics, including those seeking public office, our participation in political parties or other groups to which we may belong should be influenced by our faith, not the other way around.

Our 2015 statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, sought to help Catholics form their consciences, apply a consistent moral framework to issues facing the nation and world, and shape their choices in elections in the light of Catholic Social Teaching. In choosing to re-issue this statement, we recognize that the thrust of the document and the challenges it addresses remain relevant today.

At the same time, some challenges have become even more pronounced. Pope Francis has continued to draw attention to important issues such as migration, xenophobia, racism, abortion, global conflict, and care for creation. In the United States and around the world, many challenges demand our attention.

The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself,<sup>4</sup> because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed. At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and

dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty.<sup>5</sup>

Our efforts to protect the unborn remain as important as ever, for just as the Supreme Court may allow greater latitude for state laws restricting abortion, state legislators have passed statutes not only keeping abortion legal through all nine months of pregnancy but opening the door to infanticide. Additionally, abortion contaminates many other important issues by being inserted into legislation regarding immigration, care for the poor, and health care reform.

At our border, many arriving families endure separation, inhumane treatment, and lack of due process, while those fleeing persecution and violence face heightened barriers to seeking refuge and asylum. Within our borders, Dreamers, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and mixed-status and undocumented families face continued fear and anxiety as political solutions fail to materialize. Lawmakers' inability to pass comprehensive immigration reform which acknowledges the family as the basic unit of society has contributed to the deterioration of conditions at the border. As we seek solutions, we must ensure that we receive refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants in light of the teachings of Christ and the Church while assuring the security of our citizens.

The wound of racism continues to fester; the bishops of the United States drew attention to this important topic in the recent pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts*. Religious freedom problems continue to intensify abroad and in the United States have moved beyond the federal to state and local levels. As international conflicts proliferate, addressing poverty and building global peace remain pressing concerns, as does the need to assist persons and families in our own country who continue to struggle to make ends meet. We must work to address gun violence, xenophobia, capital punishment, and other issues that affect human life and dignity. It is also essential to affirm the nature of the human person as male and female, to protect the family based on marriage between a man and a woman, and to uphold the rights of children in that regard. Finally, we must urgently find ways to care better for God's creation, especially those most impacted by climate change—the poor—and protect our common home. We must resist the throw-away culture and seek integral development for all.

With these and other serious challenges facing both the nation and the Church, we are called to walk with those who suffer and to work toward justice and healing.

At all levels of society, we are aware of a great need for leadership that models love for righteousness (Wisdom 1:1) as well as the virtues of justice, prudence, courage, and temperance. Our commitment as people of faith to imitate Christ's love and compassion should challenge us to serve as models of civil dialogue, especially in a context where discourse is eroding at all levels of society. Where we live, work, and worship, we strive to understand before seeking to be understood, to treat with respect those with whom we disagree, to dismantle stereotypes, and to build productive conversation in

place of vitriol.

Catholics from every walk of life can bring their faith and our consistent moral framework to contribute to important work in our communities, nation, and world on an ongoing basis, not just during election season. In this coming year and beyond, we urge leaders and all Catholics to respond in prayer and action to the call to faithful citizenship. In doing so, we live out the call to holiness and work with Christ as he builds his kingdom of love.

Merciful Father,

Thank you for inviting each of us to join in your work  
of building the kingdom of love, justice, and peace.

Draw us close to you in prayer  
as we discern your call in our families and communities.

Send us forth to encounter all whom you love:  
those not yet born, those in poverty, those in need of welcome.

Inspire us to respond to the call to faithful citizenship,  
during election season and beyond.

Help us to imitate your charity and compassion  
and to serve as models of loving dialogue.

Teach us to treat others with respect, even when we disagree,  
and seek to share your love and mercy.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen

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- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1913-15.
- 2 Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 25.
- 3 *Ibid*, no. 101.
- 4 *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 22.
- 5 *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 29.

# PART I

## Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: The US Bishops' Reflection on Catholic Teaching and Political Life

### Introduction

*Our redemption has a social dimension because “God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also . . . social relations.” To believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds. Accepting the first proclamation, which invites us to receive God’s love and to love him in return with the very love which is his gift, brings forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek and protect the good of others.*

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 178)

1. As a nation, we share many blessings and strengths, including a tradition of religious freedom and political participation. However, as a people, we face serious challenges that are both political and moral. This has always been so and as Catholics we are called to participate in public life in a manner consistent with the mission of our Lord, a mission that he has called us to share. As Pope Francis teaches,

An authentic faith . . . always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. If indeed “the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics,” the Church, “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 183)

In this fight for justice, God gives us a special gift, hope, which Pope Benedict describes in *Caritas in Veritate* as “burst[ing] into our lives as something not due to us, something that transcends every law of

justice” (no. 34). Thus we take up the task of serving the common good with joy and hope, confident that God, who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” walks with us and strengthens us on the way (Jn 3:16). God is love, and he desires that we help to build a “civilization of love”—one in which all human beings have the freedom and opportunity to experience the love of God and live out that love by making a free gift of themselves to one another. Pope Francis encourages us in *Evangelii Gaudium* to meditate on the

inseparable bond between our acceptance of the message of salvation and genuine fraternal love . . . God’s word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us: “As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). The way we treat others has a transcendent dimension: “The measure you give will be the measure you get” (Mt 7:2). It corresponds to the mercy which God has shown us: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you . . . For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Lk 6:36-38). What these passages make clear is the absolute priority of “going forth from ourselves toward our brothers and sisters” as one of the two great commandments which ground every moral norm and as the clearest sign for discerning spiritual growth in response to God’s completely free gift. (no. 179)

Love compels us “to ‘go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation’ (Mk 16:15)” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 181). “Here,” Pope Francis continues, “‘the creation’ refers to every aspect of human life; consequently, ‘the mission of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ has a universal destination. Its mandate of charity encompasses all dimensions of existence, all individuals, all areas of community life, and all peoples. Nothing human can be alien to it’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 181). This “mandate” includes our engagement in political life.

2. The political realities of our nation present us with opportunities and challenges. We are a nation founded on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but the right to life itself is not fully protected, especially for unborn children, the terminally ill, and the elderly, the most vulnerable members of the American family. We are called to be peacemakers in a nation at war. We are a country pledged to pursue “liberty and justice for all,” but we are too often divided across lines of race, ethnicity, and economic inequality. We are a nation of immigrants, struggling to address the challenges of many new immigrants

in our midst. We are a society built on the strength of our families, called to defend marriage and offer moral and economic supports for family life. We are a powerful nation in a violent world, confronting terror and trying to build a safer, more just, more peaceful world. We are an affluent society where too many live in poverty and lack health care and other necessities of life. We are part of a global community charged with being good stewards of the earth's environment, what Pope Francis calls "our common home," which is being threatened. These challenges are at the heart of public life and at the center of the pursuit of the common good.<sup>1</sup> They are intertwined and inseparable. As Pope Francis has insisted, "We are faced . . . with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 139).

3. For many years, we bishops of the United States have sought to share Catholic teaching on social and political life. We have done so in a series of statements issued every four years focused on "political responsibility" or "faithful citizenship." In this document we continue that practice, maintaining continuity with what we have said in the past in light of new challenges facing our nation and world. This is not new teaching but affirms what is taught by our bishops' conference and the whole Church.

4. As Catholics, we are part of a community with a rich heritage that helps us consider the challenges in public life and contribute to greater justice and peace for all people. Part of that rich heritage on faithful citizenship is the teaching of Vatican Council II's Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*). It says that "society itself may profit by the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in [people's] faithfulness to God and to His holy will" (no. 6). The work for justice requires that the mind and the heart of Catholics be educated and formed to know and practice the whole faith.

5. This 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. Foremost amongst those teachings are the four basic principles of Catholic social doctrine: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 160). With this foundation, Catholics are better able to evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and candidates' promises and actions in light of the Gospel and the moral and social teaching of the Church in order to help build a better world.

6. We seek to do this by addressing four questions: (1) Why does the Church teach about issues affecting public policy? (2) Who in the Church should participate in political life? (3) How does the Church help the Catholic faithful to speak about political and social questions? (4) What does the Church say about Catholic social teaching in the public square?

7. 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 light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.

8. During election years, there may be many handouts and voter guides that are produced and distributed. We encourage Catholics to seek those resources authorized by their own bishops, their state Catholic conferences, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This statement is intended to reflect and complement, not substitute for, the ongoing teaching of bishops in our own dioceses and states. When using this document, it is important to remember that Church teaching is coherent and rests on a comprehensive vision of the dignity of the human person, a dignity that St. John Paul II described as "manifested in all its radiance when the person's origin and destiny are considered: created by God in his image and likeness as well as redeemed by the most precious blood of Christ, the person is called to be a 'child in the Son' and a living temple of the Spirit, destined for the eternal life of blessed communion with God" (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 37). Thus, the particular judgments of the document may fall at various points along the political spectrum, but the foundational principles that guide these teachings should not be ignored in any case nor used selectively in order to serve partisan interests. In light of these reflections and those of local bishops, we encourage Catholics throughout the United States to be active in the political process, particularly in these challenging times.

## **Why Does the Church Teach About Issues Affecting Public Policy?**

*The Church's teachings concerning contingent situations are subject to new and further developments and can be open to discussion, yet we cannot help but be concrete—without presuming to enter into details—lest the great social principles remain mere generalities which challenge no one. . . . The Church's pastors, taking into account the contributions of the different sciences, have the right to offer opinions in all that affects people's lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being.*

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 182)

9. The Church's obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith. It is a basic part of the mission we have received from Jesus Christ, who offers a vision of life revealed to us in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. To echo the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: Christ, the Word made flesh, in showing us the Father's love, also shows us what it truly means to be human (see *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). Christ's love for us lets us see our human dignity in full clarity and compels us to love our neighbors as he has loved us. Christ, the Teacher, shows us what is true and good, that is, what is in accord with our human nature as free, intelligent beings created in God's image and likeness and endowed by the Creator with dignity and rights as well as duties.

Christ also reveals to us the weaknesses that are part of all human endeavors. In the language of revelation, we are confronted with sin, both personal and structural. "The Church's wisdom," according to Pope Benedict XVI, "has always pointed to the presence of original sin in social conditions and in the structure of society" (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 34). All "structures of sin," as St. John Paul II calls them, "are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 36). Thus, our faith helps us understand that the pursuit of a civilization of love must address our own failures and the ways in which these failures distort the broader ordering of the society in which we live. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action and morals" (no. 407). As Pope Francis, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, reaffirmed in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "We need to be convinced that charity 'is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)'" (no. 205).

10. What faith teaches about the dignity of the human person, about the sacredness of every human life, and about humanity's strengths and weaknesses helps us see more clearly the same truths that also come to us through the gift of human reason. At the center of these truths is respect for the dignity of every person. This is the core of Catholic moral and social teaching. Because we are people of both faith and reason, it is appropriate and necessary for us to bring this essential truth about human life and dignity to the public square. We are called to practice Christ's commandment to "love one another" (Jn 13:34). We are also called to promote the well-being of all, to share our blessings with those most in need, to defend marriage, and to protect the lives and dignity of all, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the voiceless. In

his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI explained that “charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as ‘social charity’” (no. 29).

11. Some question whether it is appropriate for the Church to play a role in political life. However, the obligation to teach the moral truths that should shape our lives, including our public lives, is central to the mission given to the Church by Jesus Christ. Moreover, the United States Constitution protect the right of individual believers and religious bodies to participate and speak out without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination. Civil law should fully recognize and protect the right of the Church and other institutions in civil society to participate in cultural, political, and economic life without being forced to abandon or ignore their central moral convictions. Our nation’s tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions and concerns into public life. Indeed, our Church’s teaching is in accord with the foundational values that have shaped our nation’s history: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

12. The Catholic community brings important assets to the political dialogue about our nation’s future. We bring a consistent moral framework—drawn from basic human reason that is illuminated by Scripture and the teaching of the Church—for assessing issues, political platforms, and campaigns. We also bring broad experience in serving those in need—educating the young, serving families in crisis, caring for the sick, sheltering the homeless, helping women who face difficult pregnancies, feeding the hungry, welcoming immigrants and refugees, reaching out in global solidarity, and pursuing peace. We celebrate, with all our neighbors, the historically robust commitment to religious freedom in this country that has allowed the Church the freedom to serve the common good.

## **Who in the Church Should Participate in Political Life?**

*Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment. . . . Since they have an active role to play in the whole life of the Church, laymen are not only bound to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit, but are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society.*

*Bishops, to whom is assigned the task of ruling the Church of God, should, together with their priests, so preach the news of Christ that all the earthly activities of the faithful will be bathed in the light of the Gospel. All pastors should remember too that by their daily conduct and concern they are*

*revealing the face of the Church to the world, and men will judge the power and truth of the Christian message thereby.*

(Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43)

13. In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. “People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 220). The obligation to participate in political life is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, “It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life” (nos. 1913-1915).

14. Unfortunately, politics in our country often can be a contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites, and media hype. 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 the vulnerable. As Pope Francis reminds us, “Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good. . . . I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor!” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 205). The Catholic call to faithful citizenship affirms the importance of political participation and insists that public service is a worthy vocation. As citizens, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help transform the party to which we belong; we should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths or approve intrinsically evil acts. We are called to bring together our principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a civilization of truth and love.

15. Clergy and lay people have complementary roles in public life. We bishops have the primary responsibility to hand on the Church’s moral and social teaching. Together with priests and deacons, assisted by religious and lay leaders of the Church, we are to teach fundamental moral principles that help Catholics form their consciences correctly, to provide guidance on the moral dimensions of public decisions, and to encourage the faithful to carry out their responsibilities in political life. In fulfilling

these responsibilities, the Church's leaders avoid endorsing or opposing candidates. As Pope Benedict XVI stated in *Deus Caritas Est*,

The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest. . . . The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. (no. 28)

16. As the Holy Father also taught in *Deus Caritas Est*, “The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society is proper to the lay faithful” (no. 29). This duty 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 their consciences in accord with Catholic teaching, Catholic lay women and men can become actively involved: running for office; working within political parties; communicating their concerns and positions to elected officials; and joining diocesan social mission or advocacy networks, state Catholic conference initiatives, community organizations, and other efforts to apply authentic moral teaching in the public square. Even those who cannot vote have the right to have their voices heard on issues that affect their lives and the common good.

## **How Does the Church Help the Catholic Faithful to Speak About Political and Social Questions?**

*As the bishops of the United States of America have rightly pointed out, while the Church insists on the existence of objective moral norms which are valid for everyone, “there are those in our culture who portray this teaching as unjust, that is, as opposed to basic human rights. Such claims usually follow from a form of moral relativism that is joined, not without inconsistency, to a belief in the absolute rights of individuals. In this view, the Church is perceived as promoting a particular prejudice and as interfering with individual freedom” (USCCB, Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination (2006), 17). We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data—all treated as being of equal importance—and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the*

*area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values.*

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 64)

### ***A Well-Formed Conscience***

17. The Church equips its members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church. Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere “feeling” about what we should or should not do. Rather, conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith. As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right” (no. 1778).

18. The formation of conscience includes several elements. First, there is a desire to embrace goodness and truth. For Catholics, this begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is also important to examine the facts and background information about various choices. Finally, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. Catholics must also understand that if they fail to form their consciences in the light of the truths of the faith and the moral teachings of the Church they can make erroneous judgments.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Virtue of Prudence***

19. The Church fosters well-formed consciences not only by teaching moral truth but also by encouraging its members to develop the virtue of prudence, which St. Ambrose described as “the charioteer of the virtues.” Prudence enables us “to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806). Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively. Exercising this virtue often requires the courage to act in defense of moral principles when making decisions about how to build a society of justice and peace.

20. The Church’s teaching is clear that a good end does not justify an immoral means. As we all seek to advance the common good—by defending the inviolable sanctity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death, by promoting religious freedom, by defending marriage, by feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, by welcoming the immigrant and protecting the environment—it is important to recognize that not all possible courses of action are morally acceptable. We have a responsibility to discern carefully which public policies are morally sound. Catholics may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems, but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to help build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended.

### ***Doing Good and Avoiding Evil***

21. Aided by the virtue of prudence in the exercise of well-formed consciences, Catholics are called to make practical judgments regarding good and evil choices in the political arena.

22. There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called “intrinsically evil” actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia. In our nation, “abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others” (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 5). 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.

23. Similarly, human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, and other acts that directly violate the sanctity and dignity of human life are also intrinsically evil. These must always be opposed. Other direct assaults on innocent human life, such as genocide, torture, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, can never be justified. Nor can violations of human dignity, such as acts of racism, treating workers as mere means to an end, deliberately subjecting workers to subhuman living conditions, treating the poor as disposable, or redefining marriage to deny its essential meaning, ever be justified.

24. Opposition to intrinsically evil acts, which undercut the dignity of the human person, should also open our eyes to the good we must do, that is, to our positive duty to contribute to the common good and to act in solidarity with those in need. As St. John Paul II said, “The fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 52). Both opposing evil *and* doing good are essential obligations.

25. The right to life implies and is linked to other human rights—to the basic goods that every human person needs to live and thrive. All the life issues are connected, for erosion of respect for the life of any individual or group in society necessarily diminishes respect for all life. The moral imperative to respond to the needs of our neighbors—basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work—is universally binding on our consciences and may be legitimately fulfilled by a variety of means. Catholics must seek the best ways to respond to these needs. As St. John XXIII taught, “[Each of us] has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and, finally, the necessary social services” (*Pacem in Terris*, no. 11).

26. St. John Paul II explained the importance of being true to fundamental Church teachings:

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 for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination. (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 38)

27. Two temptations in public life can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity:

28. The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. The 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.<sup>3</sup>

29. The second is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity. The current and projected extent of environmental degradation has become a moral crisis especially because it poses a risk to humanity in the future and

threatens the lives of poor and vulnerable human persons here and now. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, the use of torture,<sup>4</sup> war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care, pornography, redefining civil marriage, compromising religious liberty, or an unjust immigration policy are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act. These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed. Catholics are urged to seriously consider Church teaching on these issues. Although choices about how best to respond to these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters for principled debate and decision, this does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues. Clearly not every Catholic can be actively involved on each of these concerns, but we need to support one another as our community of faith defends human life and dignity wherever it is threatened. We are not factions, but one family of faith fulfilling the mission of Jesus Christ.

30. The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith made a similar point:

It must be noted also that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals. The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility toward the common good. (*Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, no. 4)

### ***Making Moral Choices***

31. Decisions about political life are complex and require the exercise of a well-formed conscience aided by prudence. This exercise of conscience begins with outright opposition to laws and other policies that violate human life or weaken its protection. Those who knowingly, willingly, and directly support public policies or legislation that undermine fundamental moral principles cooperate with evil.

32. 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, St. John Paul II taught that when a government official who fully opposes abortion 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. However, Catholics must never abandon the moral requirement to seek full protection for all human life from the moment of conception until natural death.

33. Prudential judgment is also needed in applying moral principles to specific policy choices in areas such as armed conflict, housing, health care, immigration, and others. This does not mean that all choices are equally valid, or that our guidance and that of other Church leaders is just another political opinion or policy preference among many others. Rather, we urge Catholics to listen carefully to the Church’s teachers when we apply Catholic social teaching to specific proposals and situations. The judgments and recommendations that we make as bishops on such specific issues do not carry the same moral authority as statements of universal moral teachings. Nevertheless, the Church’s guidance on these matters is an essential resource for Catholics as they determine whether their own moral judgments are consistent with the Gospel and with Catholic teaching.

34. Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods. A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, 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.

35. There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably 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.

36. When all candidates hold a position that promotes an intrinsically evil act, 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.

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 policies promoting 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.

38. It is important to be clear that the political choices faced by citizens not only have an impact on general peace and prosperity but also may affect the individual's salvation. Similarly, the kinds of laws and policies supported by public officials affect their spiritual well-being. Pope Benedict XVI, in his reflection on the Eucharist as "the sacrament of charity," challenged all of us to adopt what he calls "a Eucharistic form of life." This means that the redeeming love we encounter in the Eucharist should shape our thoughts, our words, and our decisions, including those that pertain to the social order. The Holy Father called for "Eucharistic consistency" on the part of every member of the Church:

It is important to consider what the Synod Fathers described as *eucharistic consistency*, a quality which our lives are objectively called to embody. Worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without consequences for our relationships with others: it demands a public witness to our faith. Evidently, this is true for all the baptized, yet it is especially incumbent upon those who, by virtue of their social or political position, must make decisions regarding fundamental values, such as respect for human life, its defense from conception to natural death, the family built upon marriage between a man and a woman, the freedom to educate one's children and the promotion of the common good in all its forms. . . .

(*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 83)

39. This calls for a heroic commitment on the part of Catholics who are politicians and other leaders in society. Having been entrusted with special responsibility for the common good, Catholic leaders must commit themselves to the pursuit of the virtues, especially courage, justice, temperance, and prudence. The culmination of these virtues is the strong public promotion of the dignity of every human person as made in the image of God in accord with the teachings of the Church, even when it conflicts with current

public opinion. Catholic politicians and legislators must recognize their grave responsibility in society to support laws shaped by these fundamental human values and oppose laws and policies that violate life and dignity at any stage from conception to natural death. This is not to bring a “Catholic interest” to the political sphere, it is to insist that the truth of the dignity of the human person, as discovered by reason and confirmed by revelation, be at the forefront of all political considerations.

## **What Does the Church Say About Catholic Social Teaching in the Public Square?—Four Principles of Catholic Social Teaching**

*The permanent principles of the Church’s social doctrine constitute the very heart of Catholic social teaching. These are the principles of: the dignity of the human person, . . . the common good; subsidiarity; and solidarity. These principles [are] the expression of the whole truth about man known by reason and faith . . .”*

*(Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 160)*

40. In the words of Pope Francis, “progress in building a people in peace, justice and fraternity depends on four principles related to constant tensions present in every social reality. These derive from the pillars of the Church’s social doctrine, which serve as ‘primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomena’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 221). Taken together, these principles provide a moral framework for Catholic engagement in advancing what we have called elsewhere a “consistent ethic of life” (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 22). Rightly understood, this ethic does not treat all issues as morally equivalent nor does it reduce Catholic teaching to one or two issues. It anchors the Catholic commitment to defend human life, from conception until natural death, in the fundamental moral obligation to respect the dignity of every person as a child of God. It unites us as a “people of life and for life” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 6) pledged to build what St. John Paul II called a “culture of life” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 77). This culture of life begins with the preeminent obligation to protect innocent life from direct attack and extends to defending life whenever it is threatened or diminished:

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)*

41. Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic social teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace, and they should consider candidates' integrity, philosophy, and performance. It is important for all citizens "to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self-interest" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 33).

42. 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 if a candidate's position on a single issue promotes an intrinsically evil act, such as legal abortion, redefining marriage in a way that denies its essential meaning, or racist behavior, a voter may legitimately disqualify a candidate from receiving support.

43. As noted previously, the Catholic approach to faithful citizenship rests on moral principles found in Sacred Scripture and Catholic moral and social teaching as well as in the hearts of all people of good will. Recent papal teaching has identified four major principles of Catholic social teaching. We now present the central and enduring themes of the Catholic social tradition organized under these four principles that can provide a moral framework for decisions in public life.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Dignity of the Human Person***

44. Human life is sacred. The **dignity of the human person** is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Direct attacks on innocent persons are never morally acceptable, at any stage or in any condition. In our society, human life is especially under direct attack from abortion, which some political actors mischaracterize as an issue of "women's health." Other direct threats to the sanctity of human life include euthanasia and assisted suicide (sometimes falsely labelled as "death with dignity"), human cloning, in vitro fertilization, and the destruction of human embryos for research.

45. Catholic teaching about the dignity of life calls us to oppose torture,<sup>6</sup> unjust war, and the indiscriminate use of drones for violent purposes; to prevent genocide and attacks against noncombatants; to oppose racism; to oppose human trafficking; and to overcome poverty and suffering. Nations are called to protect the right to life by seeking effective ways to combat evil and terror without resorting to armed conflicts except as a last resort after all peaceful means have failed, and to end the use

of the death penalty as a means of protecting society from violent crime. We revere the lives of children in the womb, the lives of persons dying in war and from starvation, and indeed the lives of all human beings as children of God. We stand opposed to these and all activities that contribute to what Pope Francis has called “a throwaway culture.”

### ***Subsidiarity***

*It is impossible to promote the dignity of the person without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, local territorial realities; in short, for that aggregate of economic, social, cultural, sports-oriented, recreational, professional and political expressions to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth.*

*(Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 185)*

46. The human person is not only sacred but also social. Full human development takes place in relationship with others. The **family**—based on marriage between a man and a woman—is the first and fundamental unit of society and is a sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children. It should be defended and strengthened, not redefined, undermined, or further distorted. Respect for the family should be reflected in every policy and program. It is important to uphold parents’ rights and responsibilities to care for their children, including the right to choose their children’s education.

47. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects the common good and the capacity of individuals to develop their full potential. Every person and association has a right and a duty to participate actively in shaping society and to promote the well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

48. The principle of subsidiarity reminds us that larger institutions in society should not overwhelm or interfere with smaller or local institutions, yet larger institutions have essential responsibilities when the more local institutions cannot adequately protect human dignity, meet human needs, and advance the common good (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 48; *Dignitatis Humanae*, nos. 4-6).

### ***The Common Good***

*The common good indicates “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 26). . . .*

*The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good.*

*(Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 164)*

49. Human dignity is respected and the common good is fostered only if **human rights are protected and basic responsibilities** are met. Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access those things required for human decency—food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life. The right to exercise religious freedom publicly and privately by individuals and institutions along with freedom of conscience need to be constantly defended. In a fundamental way, the right to free expression of religious beliefs protects all other rights. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. Rights should be understood and exercised in a moral framework rooted in the dignity of the human person.

50. The economy must serve people, not the other way around. It is therefore necessary that an economic system serve the dignity of the human person and the common good by respecting the **dignity of work and protecting the rights of workers**. A “growth in justice,” according to Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*,

requires more than economic growth, while presupposing such growth: it requires decisions, programs, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality. I am far from proposing an irresponsible populism, but the economy can no longer turn to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing the work force and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded. (no. 204)

Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. Employers contribute to the common good through the services or products they provide and by creating jobs that uphold the dignity and rights of workers—to productive work, to decent and just wages, to adequate benefits and security in their old age, to the choice of whether to organize and join unions, to the opportunity for legal status for immigrant workers, to private property, and to economic initiative. Workers also have responsibilities—to provide a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay, to treat employers and co-workers with respect, and to carry out their work in ways that contribute to the common good.

Workers, employers, and unions should not only advance their own interests but also work together to advance economic justice and the well-being of all. Pope Francis has summarized well the Church's teaching on work in *Laudato Si'*. "Work," he writes,

should be the setting for . . . rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God. . . . Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment. Helping the poor financially must always be a provisional solution in the face of pressing needs. The broader objective should always be to allow them a dignified life through work. (*Laudato Si'*, no. 127-128)

51. We have a duty to **care for God's creation**, or as Pope Francis refers to it in *Laudato Si'*, "our common home." We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of God's creation because "every creature is . . . the object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 77). **Care for creation** is a duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people, especially the poor, who "both everyday experience and scientific research show" suffer "the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment" (no. 48). Pope Francis underscores that environmental degradation can often force the poor "to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children" (no. 25). The threats to the environment are many. Pope Francis, consistent with both St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (World Day of Peace Message in 1990 and 2010), has recently lifted up pollution, climate change, lack of access to clean water, and the loss of biodiversity as particular challenges. He speaks of an "ecological debt" (no. 51) owed by wealthier nations to developing nations and he laments the weakness of many responses to the ecological challenges rooted in "complacency and a cheerful recklessness" (no. 59). In the face of this, we should aim for "a new lifestyle" (no. 203-208), one that strives to live simply to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, and one that brings "healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power." (no. 206). We have a moral obligation to protect the planet on which we live—to respect God's creation and to ensure a safe and hospitable environment for human beings, especially children at their most vulnerable stages of development. As stewards called by God to share the responsibility for the future of the earth, we should work for a world in which people respect and protect all of creation and seek to live simply in harmony with it for the sake of future generations. Fully embracing this task amounts to what Pope Francis calls an "ecological conversion" (no. 219), by which "the effects of [our] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us]" (no. 217). Such a conversion "can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in

resolving the world's problems and in offering ourselves to God 'as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable' (Rom 12:1)" (no. 220).

## ***Solidarity***

*Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity. Solidarity must be seen above all in its value as a moral virtue that determines the order of institutions. On the basis of this principle the "structures of sin" (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, nos. 36, 37) that dominate relationships between individuals and peoples must be overcome.*

*(Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, nos. 192-193)*

52. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions and requires us to eradicate racism and address the extreme poverty and disease plaguing so much of the world. **Solidarity** also includes the scriptural call to welcome the stranger among us—including immigrants seeking work—by ensuring that they have opportunities for a safe home, education for their children, and a decent life for their families and by ending the practice of separating families through deportation. In light of the Gospel's invitation to be peacemakers, our commitment to solidarity with our neighbors—at home and abroad—also demands that we promote peace and pursue justice in a world marred by terrible violence and conflict. Decisions on the use of force should be guided by traditional moral criteria and undertaken only as a last resort. As Bl. Paul VI taught, "If you want peace, work for justice" (*World Day of Peace Message*, January 1, 1972).

53. In reference to solidarity, a special emphasis must be given to the Church's **preferential option for the poor**. While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for any society is how it treats those who are most vulnerable. In a society marred by deepening disparities between rich and poor, Sacred Scripture gives us the story of the Last Judgment (see Mt 25:31-46) and reminds us that we will be judged by our response to the "least among us." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

Those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of *a preferential love* on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through numerous works of charity

which remain indispensable always and everywhere. (no. 2448)

54. Pope Benedict XVI has taught that “love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 22). This preferential option for the poor and vulnerable includes all who are marginalized in our nation and beyond—unborn children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill, victims of injustice and oppression, and immigrants.

55. These four principles and related themes from Catholic social teaching provide a moral framework that does not easily fit ideologies of “right” or “left,” “liberal” or “conservative,” or the platform of any political party. They are not partisan or sectarian, but reflect fundamental ethical principles that are common to all people.

56. As leaders of the Church in the United States, we bishops have the duty to apply these moral principles to key public policy decisions facing our nation, outlining directions on issues that have important moral and ethical dimensions. More detailed information on policy directions adopted by our bishops’ conference can be found in Part II of this document. We hope Catholics and others will seriously consider these policy applications as they make their own decisions in public life.

### ***Conclusion***

57. Building a world of respect for human life and dignity, where justice and peace prevail, requires more than just political commitment. Individuals, families, businesses, community organizations, and governments all have a role to play. Participation in political life in light of fundamental moral principles is an essential duty for every Catholic and all people of good will.

58. The Church is involved in the political process but is not partisan. The Church cannot champion any candidate or party. Our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable.

59. The Church is engaged in the political process but should not be used. We welcome dialogue with political leaders and candidates; we seek to engage and persuade public officials. Events and photo ops cannot substitute for serious dialogue.

60. The Church is principled but not ideological. As St. John Paul II wrote in his encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*,

The Church's social doctrine is not . . . an ideology, but rather the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church's tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior. It therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral theology. (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 41)

We cannot compromise basic principles or moral teaching. We are committed to clarity about our moral teaching and to civility. In public life, it is important to practice the virtues of charity and justice that are at the core of our Tradition. We should work with others in a variety of ways to advance our moral principles.

61. In light of these principles and the blessings we share as part of a free and democratic nation, we bishops vigorously repeat our call for a renewed kind of politics:

- Focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls
- Focused more on the needs of the weak than on benefits for the strong
- Focused more on the pursuit of the common good than on the demands of narrow interests

62. This kind of political participation reflects the social teaching of our Church and the best traditions of our nation.

# PART II

## Applying Catholic Teaching to Major Issues: A Summary of Policy Positions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

63. Politics is a noble mission to promote the common good. As such, it is about ethics and principles as well as issues, candidates, and officeholders. To engage in “politics,” then, is more than getting involved in current polemics and debates; it is about acting with others and through institutions for the benefit of all. The fact that much of our political rhetoric has become very negative and that political polarization seems to have grown should not dissuade us from the high calling to work for a world that allows everyone to thrive, a world in which all persons, all families, have what they need to fulfill their God-given destiny. In our democracy, one aspect of this task for all of us requires that we weigh issues and related policies. In this brief summary, we bishops call attention to issues with significant moral dimensions that should be carefully considered in each campaign and as policy decisions are made in the years to come. As the descriptions below indicate, some issues involve principles that can never be abandoned, such as the fundamental right to life and marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Others reflect our judgment about the best way to apply Catholic principles to policy issues. No summary could fully reflect the depth and details of the positions taken through the work of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). While people of good will may sometimes choose different ways to apply and act on some of our principles, Catholics cannot ignore their inescapable moral challenges or simply dismiss the Church’s guidance or policy directions that flow from these principles. For a more complete review of these policy directions and their moral foundations, see the statements listed at the end of this document.

### *Human Life*

64. Our 1998 statement, *Living the Gospel of Life*, declares, “**Abortion and euthanasia** have become preeminent threats to human life and dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental good and the condition for all others” (no. 5). **Abortion**, the deliberate killing of a human being before birth, is never morally acceptable and must always be opposed. **Cloning and destruction of human**

**embryos** for research or even for potential cures are always wrong. The purposeful taking of human life by **assisted suicide and euthanasia** is not an act of mercy, but an unjustifiable assault on human life.

**Genocide, torture, and the direct and intentional targeting of noncombatants in war or terrorist attacks** are always wrong.

65. Laws that legitimize any of these practices are profoundly unjust and immoral. Our Conference supports laws and policies to protect human life to the maximum degree possible, including constitutional protection for the unborn and legislative efforts to end abortion, assisted suicide, and euthanasia. We also promote a culture of life by supporting laws and programs that encourage childbirth and adoption over abortion and by addressing poverty, providing health care, and offering other assistance to pregnant women, children, and families.

66. The USCCB calls for greater assistance for those who are sick and dying, through health care for all and effective and compassionate palliative care and hospice care. The end of life is a holy moment, a moment that marks a preparation for life with God, and it is to be treated with reverence and accompaniment. The end of life is as sacred as the beginning of life and requires treatment that honors the true dignity of the human person as created in the image of the living God. We recognize that addressing this complex issue effectively will require collaborative efforts between the public and private sectors and across party lines. Policies and decisions regarding **biotechnology** and human experimentation should respect the inherent dignity of human life from its very beginning, regardless of the circumstances of its origin. Respect for human life and dignity is also the foundation for essential efforts to address and overcome the hunger, disease, poverty, and violence that take the lives of so many innocent people.

67. Society has a duty to defend life against violence and to reach out to victims of crime. The Catholic Church has accepted the death penalty in the past for particularly egregious crimes when there was a serious continuing threat to society and no alternative was available. But our nation's continued reliance on the **death penalty** cannot be justified. Because we have other ways to protect society that are more respectful of human life, the USCCB supports efforts to end the use of the death penalty and in the meantime to restrain its use through broader use of DNA evidence, access to effective counsel, and efforts to address unfairness and injustice related to application of the death penalty.

## *Promoting Peace*

68. Catholics must also work **to avoid war and to promote peace**. This is of particular importance, as there is a danger in the present time of becoming indifferent to war because of the number of armed conflicts. War is never a reflection of what ought to be but a sign that something more true to human dignity has failed. The Catholic tradition recognizes the legitimacy of just war teaching when defending the innocent in the face of grave evil, but we must never lose sight of the cost of war and its harm to human life. Nations should protect the dignity of the human person and the right to life by finding more effective ways to prevent conflicts, to resolve them by peaceful means, and to promote reconstruction and reconciliation in the wake of conflicts. Nations have a right and obligation to defend human life and the common good against terrorism, aggression, and similar threats, such as the targeting of persons for persecution because of their religion, including Christians. In the words of Pope Francis, people are being killed “for the sole reason of being Christians” (Homily, Feb. 17, 2015), and there are “more martyrs in the Church today than there were in the first centuries” (Homily, June 30, 2014). “The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard by everyone who can still distinguish between good and evil. All the more this cry must be heard by those who have the destiny of peoples in their hands” (Message of Pope Francis to Patriarch Abuna Matthias of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox Church, April 20, 2015). Indeed, the duty of nations to defend human life and the common good demands effective responses to terror, moral assessment of and restraint in the means used, respect for ethical limits on the use of force, a focus on the roots of terror, and fair distribution of the burdens of responding to terror. The use of **torture** must be rejected as fundamentally incompatible with the dignity of the human person and ultimately counterproductive in the effort to combat terrorism. The Church has raised fundamental moral concerns about **preventive use of military force**.<sup>7</sup> Our Church honors the commitment and sacrifice of those who serve in our nation’s armed forces and also recognizes the moral right to conscientious objection to war in general, a particular war, or a military procedure.

69. Even when military force can be justified as a last resort, it should not be indiscriminate or disproportionate. Direct and intentional attacks on noncombatants in war and terrorist acts are never morally acceptable. The use of weapons of mass destruction or other means of warfare that do not distinguish between civilians and soldiers is fundamentally immoral. The United States has a responsibility to work to reverse the spread of **nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons**, and to reduce its own reliance on weapons of mass destruction by pursuing progressive nuclear disarmament. It also must end its use of anti-personnel landmines and reduce its predominant role in the global arms trade.

The use of military force confronts us with urgent moral choices. We support the proportionate and discriminate use of military force to protect civilians in a way that recognizes the continuing threat of fanatical extremism and global terror, minimizes the loss of life, and addresses the humanitarian and refugee crises in war-torn regions, and the need to protect human rights, especially religious freedom.

Though we recognize the justifiable use of military force, we encourage the reallocation of resources from armed conflict to the urgent needs of the poor and the root causes of violence. Further, we support policies and actions that protect refugees of war and violence, at home and abroad, and all people suffering religious persecution throughout the world, many of whom are our fellow Christians.

### ***Marriage and Family Life***

70. The family founded upon marriage is the basic cell of human society. The role, responsibilities, and needs of families should be central national priorities. **Marriage** must be defined, recognized, and protected as a lifelong exclusive commitment between a man and a woman, and as the source of the next generation and the protective haven for children.<sup>8</sup> The institution of marriage is undermined by the ideology of “gender” that dismisses sexual difference and the complementarity of the sexes and falsely presents “gender” as nothing more than a social construct or psychological reality, which a person may choose at variance with his or her biological reality (see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 224). As Pope Francis has taught, “the removal of [sexual] difference creates a problem, not a solution” (General Audience, April 15, 2015). “Thus the Church reaffirms . . . her no to ‘gender’ philosophies, because the reciprocity between male and female is an expression of the beauty of nature willed by the Creator” (Pope Benedict XVI Address to the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, Jan. 19, 2013). This affirmation in no way compromises the Church’s opposition to unjust discrimination against those who experience “deep-seated homosexual tendencies,” who “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2358).

Policies on taxes, work, divorce, immigration, and welfare should uphold the God-given meaning and value of marriage and family, help families stay together, and reward responsibility and sacrifice for children. **Wages** should allow workers to support their families, and public assistance should be available to help poor families to live in dignity. Such assistance should be provided in a manner that promotes eventual financial autonomy.

71. **Children**, in particular, are to be valued, protected, and nurtured. As a Church, we affirm our commitment to the protection and well-being of children in our own institutions and in all of society. Pope Francis has stressed, “Children have a right to grow up in a family with a father and a mother

capable of creating a suitable environment for the child’s development and emotional maturity” (Address on the Complementarity Between Man and Woman, Nov. 17, 2014). Children who may be placed in foster care or with adoptive parents have a right to be placed in homes with a married man and woman, or if not possible, in environments that do not contradict the authentic meaning of marriage. Child welfare service providers, consistent with their religious beliefs, have a right to place children in such homes rather than in other environments. We oppose contraceptive and abortion mandates in public programs and health plans, which endanger rights of conscience and can interfere with parents’ right to guide the moral formation of their children.

### ***Religious Freedom***

72. US policy should promote **religious liberty** vigorously, both at home and abroad: our first and most cherished freedom is rooted in the very dignity of the human person, a fundamental human right that knows no geographical boundaries. In all contexts, its basic contours are the same: it is the “immun[ity] from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2). In the United States, religious freedom generally enjoys strong protection in our law and culture, but those protections are now in doubt. For example, the longstanding tax exemption of the Church has been explicitly called into question at the highest levels of government, precisely because of her teachings on marriage. Catholics have a particular duty to make sure that protections like these do not weaken but instead grow in strength. This is not only to secure the just freedom of the Church and the faithful here but also to offer hope and an encouraging witness to those who suffer direct and even violent religious persecution in countries where the protection is far weaker.

### ***Preferential Option for the Poor and Economic Justice***

73. Economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person. Social and economic policies should foster the creation of **jobs for all who can work** with decent working conditions and **just wages**. Barriers to equal pay and employment for women and those facing unjust **discrimination must be overcome**. Catholic social teaching supports the **right of workers to choose whether to organize**, join a union, and bargain collectively, and to exercise these rights without reprisal. It also affirms **economic freedom, initiative, and the right to private property**. Workers, owners, employers, and unions have a corresponding

responsibility to work together to create decent jobs, build a more just economy, and advance the common good. We also note with growing concern the increase in “excessive social and economic inequalities,” as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to it, and the shrinking middle class.

74. We support legislation that protects consumers from the excessive and exploitative rates of interest charged by many payday lenders. “Although the quest for equitable profits is acceptable in economic and financial activity, recourse to usury is to be morally condemned” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 341).

75. **Welfare policy** should reduce **poverty** and dependency, strengthen family life, and help families leave poverty through work, training, and assistance with child care, health care, housing, and transportation. Given the link between family stability and economic success, welfare policy should address both the economic and cultural factors that contribute to family breakdown. It should also provide a safety net for those who cannot work. Improving the **Earned Income Tax Credit** and **child tax credits**, available as refunds to families in greatest need, will help lift low-income families out of poverty.

76. **Faith-based groups** deserve recognition and support, not as a substitute for government, but as responsive, effective partners, especially in the poorest communities and countries. The USCCB actively supports conscience clause and other religious freedom protections, opposes any effort to undermine the ability of faith-based groups to preserve their identity and integrity as partners with government, and is committed to protecting long-standing civil rights and other protections for both religious groups and the people they serve. Government bodies should not require Catholic institutions to compromise their moral or religious convictions to participate in government health or human service programs.

77. **Social Security** should provide adequate, continuing, and reliable income in an equitable manner for low- and average-wage workers and their families when these workers retire or become disabled, and for the survivors when a wage-earner dies.

78. The lack of safe, affordable **housing** requires a renewed commitment to increase the supply of quality housing and to preserve, maintain, and improve existing housing through public/private partnerships, especially with religious groups and community organizations. The USCCB continues to oppose unjust housing discrimination and to support measures to meet the credit needs of low-income and

minority communities.

79. A first priority for **agriculture** policy should be **food security for all**. Because no one should face **hunger** in a land of plenty, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or Food Stamps), the Special Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and other nutrition programs need to be strong and effective. Farmers and farm workers who grow, harvest, and process food deserve a just return for their labor, with safe and just working conditions and adequate housing. Supporting rural communities sustains a way of life that enriches our nation. Careful stewardship of the earth and its natural resources demands policies that support **sustainable agriculture** as vital elements of agricultural policy.

### *Health Care*

80. **Affordable and accessible health care** is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right. Despite an increase in the number of people insured, millions of Americans still lack health care coverage. Health care coverage remains an urgent national priority. The nation's health care system needs to be rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, respect the principle of subsidiarity, and meet the needs of the poor and uninsured, especially born and unborn children, pregnant women, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations. Employers, including religious groups and family-owned businesses, should be able to provide health care without compromising their moral or religious convictions, and individuals should be able to purchase health care that accords with their faith. The USCCB supports measures to strengthen Medicare and Medicaid. Our conference also advocates effective, compassionate care that reflects Catholic moral values for those suffering from HIV/AIDS and those coping with addictions.

### *Migration*

81. The Gospel mandate to “welcome the stranger” requires Catholics to care for and stand with **newcomers**, authorized and unauthorized, including unaccompanied immigrant children, refugees and asylum-seekers, those unnecessarily detained, and victims of human trafficking. Comprehensive reform is urgently necessary to fix a broken immigration system and should include a broad and fair legalization program with a path to citizenship; a work program with worker protections and just wages; family reunification policies; access to legal protections, which include due process procedures; refuge for those fleeing persecution and violence; and policies to address the root causes of migration. The right and

responsibility of nations to control their borders and to maintain the rule of law should be recognized but pursued in a just and humane manner. The detention of immigrants should be used to protect public safety and not for purposes of deterrence or punishment; alternatives to detention, including community-based programs, should be emphasized.

As Pope Francis has said, human trafficking is a “crime against humanity” (Address, Dec. 12, 2013, and April 10, 2014) and should be eradicated from the earth. Trafficking victims, most especially children, should receive care and protection, including special consideration for permanent legal status. Additional education and mobilization efforts are needed to address the root causes of human trafficking—poverty, conflict, and the breakdown of judicial process in source countries.

### *Catholic Education*

82. Parents—the first and most important educators—have a fundamental **right to choose the education** best suited to the needs of their children, including public, private, and religious schools. Government, through such means as tax credits and publicly funded scholarships, should help provide resources for parents, especially those of modest means, to exercise this basic right without discrimination. Students in all educational settings should have opportunities for moral and character formation consistent with the beliefs and responsibilities of their parents.

83. All persons have a right to receive a quality **education**. Young people, including those who are poor and those with disabilities, need to have the opportunity to develop intellectually, morally, spiritually, and physically, allowing them to become good citizens who make socially and morally responsible decisions. This requires parental choice in education. It also requires educational institutions to have orderly, just, respectful, and non-violent environments where adequate professional and material resources are available. The USCCB strongly supports adequate funding, including scholarships, tax credits, and other means, to educate all persons no matter what their personal condition or what school they attend—public, private, or religious. All teachers and administrators deserve salaries and benefits that reflect principles of economic justice, as well as access to resources necessary for teachers to prepare for their important tasks. Services aimed at improving education— especially for those most at risk—that are available to students and teachers in public schools should also be available to students and teachers in **private and religious schools** as a matter of justice.

### *Promoting Justice and Countering Violence*

84. Promoting moral responsibility and effective responses to violent crime, curbing violence in media, supporting reasonable restrictions on access to assault weapons and handguns, and opposing the use of the **death penalty** are particularly important in light of a growing “culture of violence.” An ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration should be a foundation for the reform of our broken **criminal justice system**. A humane and remedial rather than a strictly punitive approach to offenders should be developed. Such an approach includes supporting efforts that justly reduce the prison population, help people leaving prison to reintegrate into their communities, combat recidivism, promote just sentencing reform, and strengthen relationships between the police and the communities they serve.

### *Combatting Unjust Discrimination*

85. It is important for our society to continue to combat any unjust **discrimination, whether** based on race, religion, sex, ethnicity, disabling condition, or age, as these are grave injustices and affronts to human dignity. Where the effects of past discrimination persist, society has the obligation to take positive steps to overcome the legacy of injustice, including vigorous action to remove barriers to education, protect voting rights, support good policing in our communities, and ensure equal employment for women and minorities.

### *Care for Our Common Home*

86. **Care for Creation** is a moral issue. Protecting the land, water, and air we share is a religious duty of stewardship and reflects our responsibility to born and unborn children, who are most vulnerable to environmental assault. We must answer the question that Pope Francis posed to the world: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 160). There are many concrete steps we can take to assure justice and solidarity between the generations. Effective initiatives are required for energy conservation and the development of alternate, renewable, and clean-energy resources. Our Conference offers a distinctive call to seriously address **global climate change**, focusing on the virtue of prudence, pursuit of the common good, and the impact on the poor, particularly on vulnerable workers and the poorest nations. The United States should lead in contributing to the sustainable development of poorer nations and promoting greater justice in sharing the burden of environmental blight, neglect, and recovery. It is important that we address the rising number of migrants who are uprooted from their homeland as a consequence of environmental degradation and climate change. They are not currently recognized as refugees under

any existing international convention and are thus not afforded legal protections that ought to be due to them.

Our nation's efforts to reduce poverty should not be associated with demeaning and sometimes coercive population control programs. Such an approach is condemned by Pope Francis:

Instead of resolving the problems of the poor and thinking of how the world can be different, some can only propose a reduction in the birth rate. At times, developing countries face forms of international pressure which make economic assistance contingent on certain policies of "reproductive health." Yet "while it is true that an unequal distribution of the population and of available resources creates obstacles to development and a sustainable use of the environment, it must nonetheless be recognized that demographic growth is fully compatible with an integral and shared development" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 483). To blame population growth, instead of an extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues. It is an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption. Besides, we know that approximately a third of all food produced is discarded, and "whenever food is thrown out it is as if were stolen from the table of the poor" (Catechesis, June 5, 2013). (*Laudato Si'*, no. 50)

Our efforts should, instead, focus on working with the poor to help them build a future of hope and opportunity for themselves and their children.

### ***Communications, Media, and Culture***

87. Print, broadcast, and electronic **media** shape the culture. To protect children and families, responsible regulation is needed that respects freedom of speech yet also addresses policies that have lowered standards, permitted increasingly offensive material, and reduced opportunities for non-commercial religious programming.

88. Regulation should limit concentration of media control, resist management that is primarily focused on profit, and encourage a variety of program sources, including religious programming. TV rating systems and appropriate technology can assist parents in supervising what their children view.

89. The Internet offers both great benefits and significant problems. The benefits should be available to

all students regardless of income. Because access to pornographic and violent material is becoming easier, vigorous enforcement of obscenity and child pornography laws is necessary, as well as technology that assists parents, schools, and libraries in blocking unwanted or undesirable materials.

### ***Global Solidarity***

90. The increasing interconnectedness of our world calls for a moral response, the virtue of solidarity. In the words of St. John Paul II, “Solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38). A more just world will likely be a more peaceful world, a world less vulnerable to terrorism and other violence. The United States has the responsibility to take the lead in addressing the scandal of **poverty and underdevelopment**. Our nation should help to **humanize globalization**, addressing its negative consequences and spreading its benefits, especially among the world’s poor. The United States also has a unique opportunity to use its power in partnership with others to build a more just and peaceful world.

- The United States should take a leading role in helping to **alleviate global poverty** through substantially increased development aid for the poorest countries, more equitable trade policies, and continuing efforts to relieve the crushing burdens of debt and disease.
- US policy should promote **religious liberty** and other basic **human rights**. In particular, US policy should promote and defend the rights of religious minorities throughout the world, especially in regions where people of faith are threatened by violence simply because of their faith.
- The United States should provide political and financial support for beneficial **United Nations** programs and reforms, for other **international bodies**, and for international law, so that together these institutions may become more responsible and responsive agents for addressing global problems.
- Asylum should be afforded to refugees who hold a well-founded fear of persecution in their homelands. Our country should support protection for persons fleeing persecution through safe haven in other countries, including the United States, especially for unaccompanied children, women, victims of human trafficking, and religious minorities.
- Our country should be a leader—in collaboration with the international community—in addressing **regional conflicts**.

- Leadership on the **Israeli-Palestinian conflict** is an especially urgent priority. The United States should actively pursue comprehensive negotiations leading to a just and peaceful resolution that respects the legitimate claims and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians, ensuring security for Israel, a viable state for Palestinians, respect for Lebanon’s sovereignty, and peace in the region. Defending human life, building peace, combating poverty and despair, and protecting freedom and human rights are not only moral imperatives—they are wise national priorities that will make our nation and world safer.

# PART III

## Goals for Political Life: Challenges for Citizens, Candidates, and Public Officials

91. As Catholics, we are led to raise questions for political life other than those that concentrate on individual, material well-being. Our focus is not on party affiliation, ideology, economics, or even competence and capacity to perform duties, as important as such issues are. Rather, we focus on what protects or threatens the dignity of every human life.

92. Catholic teaching challenges voters and candidates, citizens and elected officials, to consider the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues. In light of ethical principles, we bishops offer the following policy goals that we hope will guide Catholics as they form their consciences and reflect on the moral dimensions of their public choices. Not all issues are equal; these ten goals address matters of different moral weight and urgency. Some involve intrinsically evil acts, which can never be approved. Others involve affirmative obligations to seek the common good. These and similar goals can help voters and candidates act on ethical principles rather than particular interests and partisan allegiances. We hope Catholics will ask candidates how they intend to help our nation pursue these important goals:

Address the preeminent requirement to protect the weakest in our midst— innocent unborn children— by restricting and bringing to an end the destruction of unborn children through abortion and providing women in crisis pregnancies the supports they need to make a decision for life.

- Keep our nation from turning to violence to address fundamental problems—a million abortions each year to deal with unwanted pregnancies, euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of illness and disability, the destruction of human embryos in the name of research, the use of the death penalty to combat crime, and imprudent resort to war to address international disputes.
- Protect the fundamental understanding of marriage as the life-long and faithful union of one man and one woman and as the central institution of society; promote the complementarity of the sexes and reject false “gender” ideologies; and provide better support for family life morally, socially, and

economically, so that our nation helps parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values, and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility.

- Achieve comprehensive immigration reform that offers a path to citizenship, treats immigrant workers fairly, prevents the separation of families, maintains the integrity of our borders, respects the rule of law, and addresses the factors that compel people to leave their own countries.
- Help families and children overcome poverty: ensuring access to and choice in education, as well as decent work at fair, living wages and adequate assistance for the vulnerable in our nation, while also helping to overcome widespread hunger and poverty around the world, especially in the areas of development assistance, debt relief, and international trade.
- Provide health care while respecting human life, human dignity, and religious freedom in our health care system.
- Continue to oppose policies that reflect prejudice, hostility toward immigrants, religious bigotry, and other forms of unjust discrimination.
- Encourage families, community groups, economic structures, and government to work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, and care for creation, with full respect for individuals and groups and their right to address social needs in accord with their basic moral and religious convictions.
- Establish and comply with moral limits on the use of military force— examining for what purposes it may be used, under what authority, and at what human cost—with a special view to seeking a responsible and effective response for ending the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East and other parts of the world.
- Join with others around the world to pursue peace, protect human rights and religious liberty, and advance economic justice and care for creation.

# Notes

- 1 The common good is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1906).
- 2 “Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one’s passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church’s authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1792).
- 3 “When political activity comes up against moral principles that do not admit of exception, compromise, or derogation, the Catholic commitment becomes more evident and laden with responsibility. 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*. . . . Such laws must defend the basic right to life from conception to natural death” (*Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, no. 4).
- 4 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2297.
- 5 These themes are drawn from a rich tradition of principles and ideas that are more fully described in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).
- 6 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2297.
- 7 See *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 501.
- 8 See *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*.

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- Pope John XXIII. *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1963.
- Pope John Paul II. *Christifideles Laici (On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1989.
- Pope John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1995.
- Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor (The Splendor of Truth)*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993.
- Second Vatican Council. *Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration on Religious Liberty)*. Vatican website.
- Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*. Vatican website.

USCCB. *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998.

# Major Catholic Statements on Public Life and Moral Issues

The following documents from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) explore in greater detail the public policy issues discussed in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. The documents are listed chronologically, except for under the first heading, where they are grouped generally by topic and then by year.

For more information on these and other documents, visit the USCCB website: [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org). Documents marked with an asterisk are not available online.

## ***Protecting Human Life***

*Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology*, 2009

*Married Love and the Gift of Life*, 2006

*On Embryonic Stem Cell Research*, 2008

*Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life*, 2001

*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, 1998

*Faithful for Life: A Moral Reflection*, 1995

*A Matter of the Heart: A Statement on the Thirtieth Anniversary of Roe v. Wade*, 2002

*Resolution on Abortion*, 1989

*Documentation on the Right to Life and Abortion*, 1974, 1976, 1981\*

*A Call for Bipartisan Cooperation on Responsible Transition in Iraq*, 2007

*Statement on Iraq*, 2002

*A Pastoral Message: Living with Faith and Hope After September 11*, 2001

*Sowing the Weapons of War*, 1995

*The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace*, 1993

*A Report on the Challenge of Peace and Policy Developments*, 1983-1888, 1989\*

*The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, 1983

*To Live Each Day with Dignity: A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide*, 2011

*Nutrition and Hydration: Moral and Pastoral Reflections*, 1992\*

*Statement on Euthanasia*, 1991

*Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities*, 1999\*

*Pastoral Statement of United States Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities*, 1984\*

*Confronting a Culture of Violence*, 1995

*A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, 2005

*Statement on Capital Punishment*, 1980

*Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (Fifth Edition), 2009

### ***Promoting Family Life***

*Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 2009

*National Directory for Catechesis*, 2005\*

*Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*,  
2005

*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, 1998

*Principles for Educational Reform in the United States*, 1995\*

*To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education*, 1972\*

*When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*, 2002

*A Family Perspective in Church and Society*, 1998

*Blessings of Age*, 1999

*Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions*, 2003

*Walk in the Light: A Pastoral Response to Child Sexual Abuse*, 1995

*Follow the Way of Love: A Pastoral Message to Families*, 1993

*Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation and World*, 1992\*

### ***Pursuing Social Justice***

*Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love—A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*, 2018

*Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (Fifth Edition), 2009

*For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers*, 2003

*Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, 2003

*A Place at the Table: A Catholic Recommitment to Overcome Poverty and to Respect the Dignity of All God's Children*, 2002

*Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*, 2001

*Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, 2000

*A Commitment to All Generations: Social Security and the Common Good*, 1999

*In All Things Charity: A Pastoral Challenge for the New Millennium*, 1999

*One Family Under God*, 1995\*

*Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*, 1995

*Moral Principles and Policy Priorities for Welfare Reform, 1995\**

*The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace, 1993*

*A Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform, 1993\**

*Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on the Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching, 1992*

*Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation and World, 1992\**

*New Slavery, New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse, 1990\**

*Brothers and Sisters to Us: Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day, 1989*

*Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis, 1989*

*Homelessness and Housing: A Human Tragedy, A Moral Challenge, 1988\**

### ***Practicing Global Solidarity***

*A Call for Bipartisan Cooperation on Responsible Transition in Iraq, 2007*

*A Call to Solidarity with Africa, 2001*

*A Jubilee Call for Debt Forgiveness, 1999*

*Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for US Parishes, 1998*

*Sowing the Weapons of War, 1995*

*One Family Under God, 1995\**

*The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace, 1993*

*The New Moment in Eastern and Central Europe, 1990\**

*Toward Peace in the Middle East, 1989*

*Statement on Central America, 1987*

***Major Policy-Related Speeches of Pope Francis During His Apostolic Visit to the United States, September 22-27, 2015***

Pope Francis. Address of the Holy Father, Welcoming Ceremony, South Lawn of the White House, Washington, DC, September 23, 2015.

*[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150923\\_usa-benvenuto.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150923_usa-benvenuto.html)*

Pope Francis, Address of the Holy Father, Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, United States Capitol, Washington, DC, September 24, 2015.

*[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150924\\_usa-us-congress.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html)*

Pope Francis. Address of the Holy Father, Meeting with the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, United Nations Headquarters, New York City. September 25, 2015.

*[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150925\\_onu-visita.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html)*

Pope Francis. Address of the Holy Father, Meeting for Religious Liberty with the Hispanic Community and Other Immigrants, Independence Mall, Philadelphia. September 26, 2015.

*[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150926\\_usa-liberta-religiosa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150926_usa-liberta-religiosa.html)*

# Catholic Morality Learning Activities

## The Ten Commandments

Just as the Ten Commandments helped the Israelites live their covenant relationship with God, the Commandments are also a guide for us. They tell us the minimum that is required to love God and others. The first three commandments show us how to be faithful to God. The last seven show us how to treat other people with love.

### **1. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.**

*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*

*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6)*

The great purpose of life is friendship with God, which leads to eternal life.

- Place your faith in God alone.
- Worship, praise, and thank the Creator.
- Believe in, trust in, and love God.

### **2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.**

*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. (Exodus 20:7)*

What we say reflects who we are. We respect the Lord's name.

- Speak God's name with reverence or great respect.
- Don't curse.
- Never call on God to witness to a lie.

### **3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.**

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.*

*For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20:8-11)*

On Sunday we remember Jesus' resurrection. We set aside this day as a day of rest.

- Participate in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.
- Rest and avoid unnecessary work on Sunday.
- Spend time enjoying your family. Perform a work of service. Take part in parish activities.
- Do nothing that would prevent others from keeping the Lord's day holy.

#### **4. Honor your father and your mother.**

*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12)*

Parents should love and care for their children. Children should respect and obey their parents and other people with proper authority.

- Respect, honor, and obey parents, older family members, and all those who have proper authority.

#### **5. You shall not kill.**

*You shall not murder. (Exodus 20:13)*

We respect and protect God's gift of life.

- Respect and protect the lives of others and your own life.
- Show special care for unborn babies, people who are elderly, and those who are dying.

#### **6. You shall not commit adultery.**

*You shall not commit adultery. (Exodus 20:14)*

We honor family life. We are faithful to our marriage promises and God's gift of sexuality.

- Practice chastity—express God's gift of sexuality in the right way according to our state in life.
- Be faithful and loyal to friends and family.

#### **7. You shall not steal.**

*You shall not steal. (Exodus 20:15)*

We respect the property of others, promote justice, and take responsibility for shared resources.

- Respect the things that belong to others and the resources that all people depend on.
- Share what you have with those in need.
- Work for justice.

#### **8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exodus 20:16)*

We are honest and truthful. We do not brag about ourselves or make fun of others. We respect the truth and defend others' good name

- Be honest and truthful.
- Do not brag about yourself.
- Do not say untruthful or negative things about others.

#### **9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.**

*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:17)*

We are not envious of other people's relationships. We dress and act in modest ways.

- Practice modesty in thoughts, words, dress, and actions.

#### **10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.**

*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:17)*

We do not envy what others have. We are not greedy. We rejoice in others' good fortune and help them in hard times.

- Keep ourselves free of envy and overattachment to material goods.
- Do not be jealous of others' possessions.
- Do not be greedy.

(Sources: p. 40-41 and p. 144 *Walking by Faith Four: Christian Morality* and p. 61 *Call to Faith Book 4*)

# House of Values

**Foundation of the House:** Write down the (most important) moral values that guide how you live your life as an individual or family. What are the things you will not budge on?

**Walls of the House:** What are the kinds of things you do to strengthen and support the moral values in your foundation—people, activities?

**Windows of the House:** What are some of the specific ways you try to live your moral values?



# Beatitudes Litany

The Beatitudes are values that come straight from the mind of Christ. Beatitudes are a way of life designed for those who want to live their lives like Jesus. The Beatitudes invite us to take the risk of living as Jesus did. They tell us that God loves us and gives us the courage to live a Beatitude-life. The Beatitudes are found in Chapter Five of the Gospel of Matthew. Translated into simple language, Jesus could have said something like this.

- ❖ Blessed are those who are convinced of their basic dependency on God, whose lives are emptied of all that doesn't matter, those for whom the riches of this world just aren't that important.  
**Response:** The Reign of heaven is theirs.
- ❖ Blessed are those who know that all they are is a gift from God, and so they can be content with their greatness and their smallness, knowing themselves and being true to themselves.  
**Response:** For they shall have the earth for their heritage.
- ❖ Blessed are those who wear compassion like a garment, those who have learned how to find themselves by losing themselves in another's sorrow.  
**Response:** For they too shall receive comfort.
- ❖ Blessed are those who are hungry for goodness, those who never get enough of God and truth and righteousness.  
**Response:** For they shall be satisfied.
- ❖ Blessed are the merciful, those who remember how much has been forgiven them, and are able to extend this forgiveness into the lives of others.  
**Response:** For they too shall receive God's mercy.
- ❖ Blessed are those whose hearts are free and simple, those who have smashed all false images and are seeking honestly for truth.  
**Response:** For they shall see God.
- ❖ Blessed are the creators of peace, those who build roads that unite rather than walls that divide, those who bless the world with the healing power of their presence.  
**Response:** For they shall be called children of God.
- ❖ Blessed are those whose love has been tried, like gold, in the furnace and found to be precious, genuine, and lasting, those who have lived their belief out loud, no matter what the cost of pain.  
**Response:** For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

(Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB. *Seasons of Your Heart*. page 78)

# Beatitude Prayer

Here is a simple litany based on the Beatitudes as found in Matthew 5:1-10.

**Reader:**

"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:"

**Leader:**

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

**Response:** Help us to share our riches and treasures with others so that all may experience the kingdom of heaven.

**Leader:**

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Help us to have compassionate hearts for others have suffered and gone before us.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

**Response:** Help us to be gentle and considerate of one another, so that true peace can reign in our midst.

**Leader:**

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

**Response:** In the spirit of fairness and generosity help us to challenge each other to seek justice in all walks of life.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

**Response:** Help us to be ever ready to forgive and slow to condemn those who harm us.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

**Response:** Help us to be pure in thought and action and to keep our eyes fixed on you.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

**Response:** In our families, our community, and throughout the world, help us to go beyond just keeping the peace, but to be *peacemakers*.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

**Response:** Help us to be willing to suffer for the sake of right rather than participate in unjust practices. Amen.

# Children's Examination of Conscience

1. Remember how much God loves you and how Jesus calls you to follow him.
2. Pray to the Holy Spirit.

*Holy Spirit, help me to understand how to follow Jesus each day, to know my sins—the times I have not followed Jesus, and be sorry for them with all my heart. Amen.*

3. Remember those times you have not followed Jesus. God is always ready to forgive us, if we ask. Think about the things you want to ask God to forgive in your life. Consider...

- + Did I talk to God today?
- + Did I say God's name with respect?
- + Did I go to Sunday Mass to praise God?
- + Did I respect and obey my parents?
- + Did I respect others as children of God?
- + Did I call someone a mean name?
- + Did I hurt someone's feelings?
- + Did I fight with anyone?
- + Did I steal?
- + Did I lie?
- + Did I try to bring God's love to others?
- + Did I share with my brothers, sisters or friends?
- + Did I help someone who needed me?
- + Was I friendly to people who are different from me?

Remember—we sin only when we do something on purpose or when we choose not to do the good things we are supposed to do.

4. Ask for God's forgiveness.

In your own words tell God you are sorry for your sins. You might also say this prayer:

*Dear God, I am sorry for doing wrong. I know you love me very much. Help me to be a caring person. Help me to change and grow in your love. Amen.*

Now your heart is ready. You can go with trust to meet the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Together you will celebrate the love of God who always forgives us!

## Examine for Teens and Adults

*'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets' (Matthew 22:36-40).*

### Reflection Questions

- + Is my heart set on God, so that I really love God above all things and am faithful to God's commandments? Are the things of this world like money, prestige, or status truly secondary to my faith in God?
- + Am I continuing to grow in my relationship with Jesus Christ? Do I pray regularly and read the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, to learn how to be a more faithful disciple of Jesus? Am I growing in my understanding of my Catholic faith?
- + Do I worship God regularly by celebrating the Eucharist with an active and conscious participation? Do I celebrate the healing and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year?
- + Have I been loving and faithful in my relationships, especially with my spouse, family members, and significant relationships?
- + Do I live my life guided by Catholic values, such as respect for dignity of others, respect for creation and the environment, love, care and compassion, forgiveness, honesty, integrity? Which values have I neglected to live faithfully?
- + Do I take seriously the call to serve those in need, to alleviate suffering, to share my gifts, talents, and possessions with others? Do I work for justice for victims of oppression, discrimination, and poverty?
- + Am I ready to forgive and work for peace in my relationships and in my world?
- + Do I live my Catholic faith and moral principles in the workplace and in the community? Are my decisions in the workplace guided by Catholic moral principles?

### Prayer for Forgiveness

Forgiving God, we are sorry for the wrong choices we have made. We are sorry for the times that we have been lost from you. We know that you forgive us and that you rejoice when we come back to you. We thank you for the feeling of peace that comes from your forgiveness.

Help us to forgive others. Help us to share your peace with the people around us. Amen.

## Soften Our Hearts

Try this simple prayer to help you be more compassionate and forgiving.

**Leader:** When the ones I love get under my skin and rub me the wrong way . . .

**All:** Soften my heart, O, God.

**Leader:** When anger rises and resentments build inside of me . . .

**All:** Soften my heart, O, God.

**Leader:** When I have been a victim of another's selfishness, and it just isn't fair . . .

**All:** Soften my heart, O, God.

**Leader:** When I have been forgotten, left out, or left behind by those who matter,

**All:** Soften my heart, O, God.

**Leader:** (Your own intention)

**All:** Soften my heart, O, God.

**Leader:** (Your own intention)

**All:** Soften my heart, O, God.

## 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment

The fifth commandment goes like this: "You shall not kill."

Try this simple exercise. Re-write the fifth commandment in your own words so that it reveals its full meaning to you. Also, write it in the first person, beginning with "I" rather than "you."

Here is an example: "I will show reverence and respect for all forms of life because I know that all life comes directly from God."

Share your re-written fifth commandment with others.

## It's Not Fair!

It is not easy to forgive one who has knowingly betrayed, abandoned, or deeply wounded us and not shown an ounce of sorrow. Have you experienced this sort of conflict? Perhaps you are dealing with just such a relationship now. If so, try these reflection steps:

### **Recall the encounter.**

What caused the conflict? What were the circumstances surrounding it? No interpretation at this point, just bring the salient facts to mind.

### **Name your feelings, then and now.**

How did you feel when the hurt occurred? What did you do with those feelings, e.g. talk to someone, pray about it, sulk, yell and scream? How do you feel about it now? Have your feelings changed since the event happened?

### **Carry it in a healthy way.**

Has this hurt taught you anything? If so, what? Learning is an indication of healing. Or is the hurt still raw and tender? If so, why do you suppose you haven't found some peace with it?

### **Pray about it.**

Ideally, reconciliation is a two-way street. Both parties recognize the hurt, one apologizes and the other forgives. But in this case the other isn't participating in the healing. Therefore, bring the hurt to God in prayer, and ask that you find peace in your heart.

## Spiritual Integrity

Truth is tied up with a person's integrity, and that integrity has a great deal to do with one's uprightness, honesty, and sincerity. Usually we think about these qualities in terms of our relationships with other persons. Take a moment, though, to think about your relationship with God, and the manner in which you nurture that relationship.

Do you remain open and honest with God?

Is your prayer forthcoming and real?

We tend to believe that God already knows everything about us, but nonetheless how often do we attempt to deceive God (and ourselves) with prayers and supplications that do not fully acknowledge our own shortcomings, or our own complicity leading to the current dilemma?

What must you do to be more honest in your relationship with God?

# Truth Subtleties

Depending upon how the word is used, “truth” takes on a variety of meanings. For example, can you sense the subtle difference between the phrase “to tell the truth,” and the phrase “to speak the truth”? How would you describe that difference? Perhaps you could say that one is a minimalist phrase: “to tell the truth.” For example, using the phrase in a sentence, one could say, “Peter was compelled to tell the truth when asked if he had completed his homework in time for today’s class.” The other phrase might be labeled prophetic. Using it in a sentence, one could say, “Archbishop Oscar Romero spoke the truth when he said, ‘Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.’”

Working by yourself or with others, reflect on each “truth” phrase below. Use the phrase in a sentence to articulate its meaning.

## **“Tell the truth”**

My sentence:

## **“Speak the truth”**

My sentence:

## **“Live the truth”**

My sentence:

## **“Live in the truth”**

My sentence:

## **“Person of truth”**

My sentence:

## **“Walk the way of truth”**

My sentence:

## **“Give witness to the truth”**

My sentence:

# Learn By Doing

A basic truth of the moral life is that we learn to love by loving. Make a short list of three people whom you choose to love today. Indicate how you will express your love.

| Name  | Loving Act |
|-------|------------|
| _____ | _____      |
| _____ | _____      |
| _____ | _____      |

We learn virtue by doing virtuous acts. What is one selfless, virtuous act that you can perform today? How about one for tomorrow?

We learn courage by performing courageous acts. In what areas of your life do you need courage? A troubled relationship? A job or career concern? How would you pray about your need for courage? Formulate your prayer and share it with one other person who will support you.

# Special Blessing

Try this simple ritual when you want to acknowledge and celebrate an individual.

[name], you are created in God's image and likeness.

**Response:** Amen.

[name], you are a person gifted with human dignity.

**Response:** Amen.

[name], you are loved and supported by many.

**Response:** Amen.

[name], we count on you to model God's image and likeness in the way you live your life.

**Response:** Amen.

[name], we count on you to share your dignity with all those you meet.

**Response:** Amen.

[name], may your life from this day forward shine brightly with the love of God and our community.

**Response:** Amen.

# Living Together in Harmony

St. Benedict articulated four essential characteristics for monks to live together in community. He called for mutual respect, patience, obedience to one another, and love. These characteristics are essential for any group of people who live together.

Use the chart below to reflect on your relationships with the persons with whom you live. In the left column put the names of those with whom you live. Listed across the top are the four essential qualities. Complete the sentence stem for each quality in the box for each person. Be sure to fill in the bottom row of boxes which refers to your whole household.

|                      | <b>Mutual Respect:</b><br>This person and I respect each other by | <b>Patience:</b> I can show patience with this person when | <b>Obedience:</b> I pledge my obedience to this person when | <b>Love:</b> I show how I love this person by |
|----------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Name:                |   |  |   |   |
| Our whole household: |   |  |   |   |

## How Do You Spell R-E-S-P-E-C-T?

On your own, or with a partner, take a few moments to spell out what RESPECT means. Use each letter to begin a phrase or sentence that describes respect and dignity for others. See the example below.

R

E

S

P

Expect the best from those you meet, and they will deliver.

C

T

Now, use each letter below to start a phrase or sentence to explore the meaning of DIGNITY.

D

I

Give each person the benefit of the doubt.

N

I

T

Y

# Human Dignity Activity

Dignity recognizes that we must love and care for humanity as a whole *and* for individual persons. It is a recognition that the gifts each has been given are to be shared with others who may need those gifts. Very simply, it means recognizing the face of Christ in each and every person.

## Talk About Dignity

- What are some stories of human dignity? Share some experiences that show that all persons are valuable and loved.
- When do you find it difficult to see the dignity of others?

## Make A List

Create a list of things you believe about human dignity. "We believe that human dignity . . .

- challenges us to see God in others and ourselves.
- means seeing the opportunities around us to help others.

## Make Another List

Create a list of ways to practice dignity, such as . . .

- make regular visits to a nearby nursing home.
- giving away something meaningful to us that will surely help someone else.

## Talk About Jesus and Dignity

- What did Jesus teach us about human dignity?
- How do we practice Jesus' kind of dignity particularly among those with whom we live?

## In the Bible

Check out one or more of these Gospel passages on dignity.

- Jesus challenges us to give to others and to see him in the needy. Read Matthew 25:34-40.
- Jesus is aware of the needs of those around him. Read Mark 8:1-9.
- Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Read Luke 16:19-31
- Jesus tells what kind of treasures to store. Read Matthew 6:19-21.

## Closing Prayer

O God, created in your image and likeness, you have gifted us with profound dignity. We are truly grateful. Help us to see your face in all whom we meet. Amen.

# Teaching Catholic Morality Online Resources

Morality Activities – Saint Mary’s Press Resource Center

(Hundreds of individual activities, articles, videos, and presentations – available for free)

<https://www.smp.org/resourcecenter/subject/Morality/5>

Classroom Activities – Ave Maria Press

<https://resources.avemariapress.com/resources/>

Morality Activities – Loyola Press

Making Good Moral Decisions: <https://www.loyolapress.com/faith-formation/activities/making-good-moral-choices-role-plays/>

Catechist’s Journey

<https://catechistsjourney.loyolapress.com/tag/morality/>

<https://catechistsjourney.loyolapress.com/category/catechetical-issues-topics/ten-commandments-morality/page/3/>

Catechist.com

<https://www.catechist.com/?s=morality>

Ten Commandments - Catholic Mom (scroll down to “Ten Commandments” heading)

<https://www.catholicmom.com/resources>

Sadlier Publishing

<https://www.sadlier.com/religion/blog/topic/rel-topic-morality>

10 Commandments Activities: <https://www.sadlier.com/religion/blog/teaching-the-ten-commandments-to-youth>

The Ten Commandments – Archdiocese of Seattle Faith Formation Resources

<https://seattlearchmedia.weebly.com/ten-commandments.html>

Ten Commandments Activity – The Religion Teacher

<https://www.thereligionteacher.com/ten-commandments-activity/>