

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**.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.