



# Faithful Citizenship

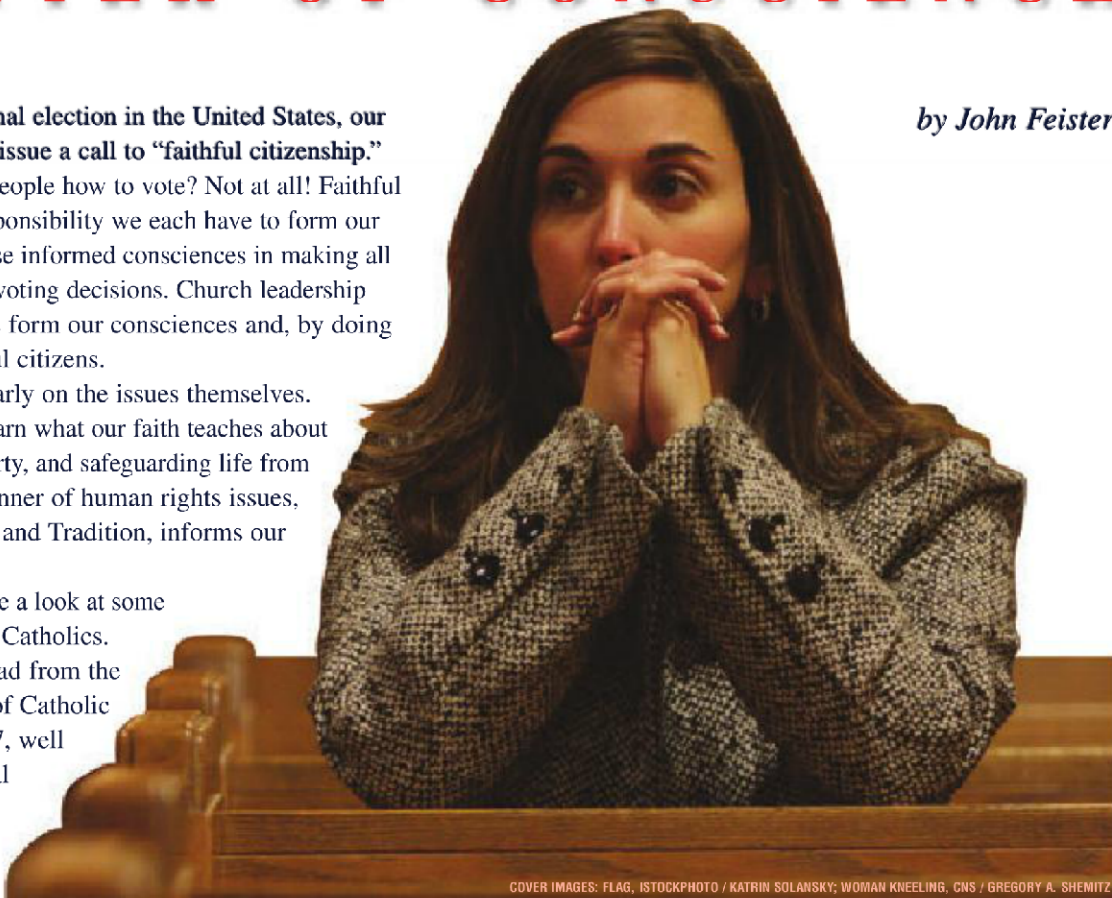
## A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

**B**efore every national election in the United States, our Catholic bishops issue a call to “faithful citizenship.” Are they telling people how to vote? Not at all! Faithful citizenship refers to the responsibility we each have to form our consciences, and to use those informed consciences in making all of our decisions, including voting decisions. Church leadership has an obligation to help us form our consciences and, by doing so, helps us become faithful citizens.

The Church speaks clearly on the issues themselves. We turn to the Church to learn what our faith teaches about war and peace, human poverty, and safeguarding life from “womb to tomb.” In all manner of human rights issues, our faith, in both Scripture and Tradition, informs our decision-making.

In this *Update*, we’ll take a look at some areas of special concern to Catholics. In doing so, we take our lead from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). In 2007, well before the 2008 presidential election, they issued *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*:

by John Feister



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**As Catholics who are American, we have a duty to participate in the “public arena.”**



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*A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States.* As we approach the 2012 election, rather than issue a new statement that would restate many of the same points, the bishops reissued the 2007 statement with a new introductory note.

That introductory note is the starting point for this *Update*. Then we'll take a quick look at the bishops' teachings on the issues themselves and point to where you can find more resources.

## American and Catholic

The introductory note to the 2011 statement reminds the faithful why the bishops issue these statements. The bishops, it says, urge Catholics “to contribute to civil and respectful public dialogue, and to shape their choices in the coming election in the light of Catholic teaching.”

We have a “dual heritage,” say the bishops, as Catholics *and* as American citizens. Americans are “blessed with religious liberty which safeguards our

right to bring our principles and moral convictions into the public arena. These Constitutional freedoms need to be both exercised and protected.” Our Church, through its institutions, must also “be free to carry out its mission and contribute to the common good without being pressured to sacrifice fundamental teachings and moral principles.”

The principle of the common good is one that ought to drive Catholics to participate in the political process, just as that same common good is a cherished American institution. What do we mean by “common good”? It's the conditions—spiritual, social and material—that are needed in a society in order for each person to recognize and realize his or her human dignity. Indeed, that concept was so ingrained in the founding of our nation that we still have four states officially known as “commonwealths.”

The bishops note, by the way, that it isn't solely an American initiative to bring Catholic teaching to bear on social issues. Within the long tradition of popes and bishops who cried out for justice, they quote the Second Vatican Council's document *Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae)* which says that “society itself may enjoy the benefits of justice and peace, which result from [people's] faithfulness to God and his holy will” (#6). The bishops add, “The work for justice requires that the mind and the heart of Catholics be educated and formed to know and practice the whole faith.”

Still struggling out of our economic recession, we hear these words ring especially true. Indeed, some basic American principles mesh exactly with what the bishops are talking about.

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” Thomas Jefferson's famous words in the Declaration of Independence, play out in all sorts of issues, especially when it comes to pro-life issues. “[L]iberty and justice for all,” the concluding words of our nation's Pledge of Allegiance, are especially pointed when we think of immigration issues, or any issue of poverty or social justice.

## Four guiding questions

The bishops guide us by addressing four major questions. One of my friends noticed that these are four of the classic questions of journalism: Why? Who? How? and What? (the other ones—Where? and When?—are obvious!). The bishops provide answers to: 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 speak about political and social questions? and 4) *What* does the Church say about Catholic social teaching in the public square?

**WHY?** In short, to be involved in social decision-making is a requirement of our faith. We are *obligated* to help form the moral fiber of our society. “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,” say the bishops.

Our vision of truth is shaped through both faith and reason. Both tell us that all people are people of dignity. Each member of our society deserves to be treated in such a way that honors this dignity. That vision of human dignity is “the core of Catholic moral and social teaching.” The *why* can be summed up in three words, a commandment from Jesus: *Love one another*. That command, however stated, cuts across religious and political boundaries.

**WHO?** To answer this question we come back to the common good. To be a responsible citizen is a virtue, say the bishops, one rooted in baptism. In baptism, *all* of us are called to bear witness to Christian values in public life (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1913-15).

*All* means not only the laity, but also the clergy, bishops, indeed the entire Church. Each of us may have her or his own role to play, whether teacher, activist, advocate or simply a concerned citizen. Public officials

of the Church stay out of partisan politics, though. The bishops quote Pope Benedict XVI’s *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*: “The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society is proper to the lay faithful” (#29).

**HOW?** In a word: *conscience*. And, as stated earlier, that conscience is one that must be formed by both Scripture and Tradition, by the teachings of the Church. But it also involves learning the facts of the matters we’re voting on, say the bishops.

There are actually three elements to a well-formed conscience, the bishops say. First, there is a “desire to embrace goodness and truth.” From that comes a desire to study Scripture (the Bible, commentaries, etc.) and Tradition (found most readily in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). The fruit of that study can then be applied to the facts at hand, but not without one final element: prayer. The bishops note what all Catholics and many others know: “Prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God.”

The well-formed conscience is then guided by the virtue of *prudence*.

Prudence allows us to sift through facts and feelings in order to discern what is right and just. It can call us to make courageous statements and even to take unpopular positions. “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,” say the bishops.

*How* takes up a long section of the bishops’ teaching. In brief, we seek to promote good and to avoid evil—easier said than done! Taking a firm stand against that which is in any way inhuman “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.” Both promoting good and eliminating evil are critical to our political engagement.

**WHAT?** In broad strokes, most issues fall into one of the following categories. They command our attention—as Catholics *and* Americans.

## The Big Picture

The U.S. bishops identify the following as “fundamental problems” of our day—and as significant issues in the upcoming election:

- **Abortion and “other threats”** to those who are weak or vulnerable
- **Threats to religious freedom**, namely “renewed efforts to force Catholic ministries—in health care, education, and social services—to violate their consciences or stop serving those in need”
- **Efforts to redefine marriage** away from “the permanent, faithful, and fruitful union of one man and one woman”
- **The current economic crisis** and all that flows from it
- **A “broken immigration system”**
- **“Wars, terror, and violence,”** with a special emphasis on “the absence of justice, security, and peace” in the Middle East.