

## Catholic Social Teaching and Voting in the Upcoming Election

Who are you currently thinking of voting for and why?

Is your vote rooted more in a negative “there is no way I want that candidate to win” stance or more in a positive “this candidate embodies what I want in someone running for that position?”

Does Catholic teaching (principles of Catholic moral theology) influence your thinking? If so, how?

How do you reconcile your vote with candidates and platforms that are severely morally flawed? Why not choose to abstain from voting in that race?

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*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship:  
A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States  
with Introductory Note (2023)*

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

#### Four Parts:

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?
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#### **Why does the Church teach about issues affecting public policy?**

- In order to be faithful to the Gospel
  - Because there is an integral social dimension to redemption
  - To manifest the love God has planted in us for our common home and all who live both now and the future
  - The social-political reality today offers not only a challenge but a true opportunity to share the Church’s wisdom.
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### **PART I : Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: The US Bishops’ Reflection on Catholic Teaching and Political Life**

#### Four Steps:

- (1) Why does the Church teach about issues affecting public policy?
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### **Who in the Church should participate in political life?**

- It is the moral responsibility of all in the Church
  - Keeping in mind a vision that transcends party politics
  - Recognizing a distinction between the obligation to teach moral wisdom faithfully and the freedom of conscience to apply that teaching
  - The many ways to participate
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### **What does the Church say about Catholic social teaching in the public square?**

- The vision of the world God's revelation (Scripture/the Gospel) has for us
  - Understanding the core principles that have emerged over the last 135 years, which ground all Catholic moral wisdom on economic-social-political-cultural matters
  - Integrating CST wisdom into our everyday lives.
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**Summary:** Wherever the reign of God is, there needs to be visible, concrete, socially significant manifestations of justice. Catholic Social Teaching does not depend on one text or other of Scripture to prove it has biblical foundations. Rather, it is grounded in the whole of Scripture and the revelation of a God who wants to be in relationship with us, who covenants with us by inviting us into a community of faith and faithfulness in a way that obliges us to create a society of right relationships/justice visible to the world. If we do, we become part of God's fullness of life/shalom/ the reign of God breaking into the world. If we do not, then we create the brokenness we see in the world—within ourselves, families, communities, nations, environment—which are signs of sin and signals that such justice is lacking. To address such brokenness the Church offers a set of principles that has come to be called Catholic Social Teaching (Doctrine)

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## **Where and Why Does Our Catholic Social Teaching Tradition Arise and Develop?**

The Emergence of the Modern World and the Need for Moral Theology to Address Socio-Economic-Political-Cultural Injustices (Structures of Sin) and Not Simply Individual Actions

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### **The Emergence of the Modern World**

In western Europe we go in what seems a fairly rapid way from a communal-minded, relatively stable, hierarchical, pastoral/rural world which gives way:

- **Philosophically** (Descartes to Kant and the centrality of autonomous human reason)

- **Scientifically** (Copernicus, Galileo, and especially Newton: can discern unalterable laws on how world/universe runs; therefore faith has nothing to add to this scientific enterprise)
  - **Religiously** (Protestant Reformation and the centrality of the individual's own quest for and ability to understand God)
  - **Politically** (rise of autonomous nation-states, French, American and Glorious Revolutions and rise of individual political rights and freedoms, with a later reaction of rise of socialist ideals)
  - **Economically** (industrial capitalism, with concentration of wealth, a surplus of goods, selling rather than bartering, new form of property in capital, work as a commodity (wages))
  - **Social-Cultural:** acceleration of change, more rapid dispersal of information
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## **Where and Why Does Our Catholic Social Teaching Tradition Arise and Develop?**

- Individual auricular confession, Counter-Reformation reforms and their effects
  - Different emphases in ascetic-spiritual theology (virtue-centered, spiritual discernment) versus moral theology (focus on sin as concrete, confess-able actions by individuals, generally seen as violation of law/norm)
  - The challenge of rapid social change in the modern, industrializing world; and the realization that the Church leadership needs to address structural issues
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### **The Reality of What Comes to Be Called “Structures of Sin”**

- “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). [FCFFC, #10]
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### **Historical Development of Catholic Social Teaching/Doctrine**

#### **Phase I: The Church Responds to the Modern Industrial World: CST Related to Local/National Economic Realities**

Rise of “modern”, developing world, industrial capitalism and socialist alternatives as challenge to more stable agrarian, hierarchical, organic model of past

#### **Phase II: The Church Engaged with an Interdependent World: CST Expanding to Address International Political and Economic Realities**

The horror of two world wars, establishment of east-west political and economic blocs, arms race and Cold War, end of colonialism and addressing the needs of “underdeveloped” nations

**Phase III: The Church in the Emerging Post-Modern, Post-Industrial World: CST Adjusting to Global Nature of All Social, Political, Economic, and Cultural Realities**

Breakdown of East-West bloc and failure of communist socialism as economic, political model; failure of developmental model for emerging nations and increased disparity between rich/ poor nations, emergence of a global perspectives and realities; long pontificate of John Paul II

**Phase IV: The Church and Catholic Social Teaching in a World of Global Crises**

Recognition of devastating human effects due to climate change, huge economic inequalities, ongoing violence leading to greatly expanded immigration and refugee situations; pastoral need to address less than perfect situations/people with God’s mercy

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**Underlying Principles of Catholic Social Teaching/Doctrine**

*“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)*

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**THE TWO FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES**

- **Dignity of Every Human Being**
- **The Common Good**

**THREE KEY AUXILIARY PRINCIPLES**

- **The Universal Claim on All Goods Leading to a Preferential Option for the Poor (Marginal)**
  - **The Principle of Subsidiarity to Create Meaningful and Just Participation**
  - **The Principle of Solidarity to Overcome Divisions**
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**Characteristics of the Human Person**

- Unity of body/soul, material/spiritual
  - Open to transcendence
  - Unique and unrepeatable with equal dignity
  - Endowed with a freedom that is not to be coerced
  - Intrinsically social
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## Fundamental Dignity of Every Human Being

- Human Dignity is **Intrinsic**
- Human Dignity is **Inalienable**
- Human Dignity is **Inviolable**

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- *“Catholic teaching about the dignity of life calls us to oppose torture, 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.” (FCFFC, #45)*
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### 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)*

- Focused on basic goods/needs/rights and evaluated more in their absence
- Not “the greatest good for the greatest number”
- Not the majority-imposed good
- Not just economic well-being but social, political, cultural, familial, spiritual well-being

All the goods that protect the full dignity of every human person, integrally and adequately considered.

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### THREE KEY AUXILIARY PRINCIPLES

*“The universal right to use the goods of the earth is based on the principle of the universal destination of goods. Each person must have access to the level of well-being necessary for his full development. The right to the common use of goods is the ‘first principle of the whole ethical and social order’ and ‘the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine.’” (Compendium, #172)*

*The principal of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force. (Compendium #182)*

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## **The Principle of Subsidiarity to Create Meaningful and Just Participation**

*“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, #185)*

*“The characteristic implication of subsidiarity is participation, which is expressed essentially in a series of activities by means of which the citizen, either as an individual or in association with others, whether directly or through representation, contributes to the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community to which he belongs.” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #189)*

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- **The Principle of Solidarity to Overcome Divisions**

*“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)*

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

*“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. ... 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). [FCFFC, #17]*

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*By helping all develop a well-formed conscience and the virtue of prudence so as to make good moral choices*

- What is conscience?
  - How can we develop a mature, well-formed conscience?
  - Doing good and avoiding evil and the role of the virtue of prudence
  - Critique of the use of “intrinsically evil” language
  - Voting when dealing with issues such as “intrinsic evil,” “lesser evil,” “greater good”
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*“In the depths of one’s conscience, a human being detects a law which he/she does not impose upon themselves, but which holds one to obedience. Always summoning the person to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to one’s heart: do this, shun that. For a human being has in their heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of a human being; according to it the person will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a human being. There one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in one’s depths.” --Vatican II’s Gaudium et spes, no. 16*

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*“In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of humanity in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a human being who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.” Vatican II’s Gaudium et spes, no. 16.*

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### **Conscience is:**

- ❖ Who we are at the deepest level
  - ❖ Prudent judgment of actions as compatible with the best of who we are
  - ❖ Based on objective moral standards
  - ❖ Always to be followed, if well-formed and certain
  - ❖ Always a good, when well-formed, even if not always right
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**Conscience is not:**

- ❖ Feeling guilty or a lack of guilt
  - ❖ Simply one's subjective opinion or feeling
  - ❖ Always certain; one can have a doubtful conscience
  - ❖ Always right; one can at times follow one's conscience and make a morally wrong decision
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**FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE**

What is the goal of conscience formation?

AN INTEGRATED LIFE OF MATURE VIRTUE, SO THAT ONE'S DEEPEST SENSE OF SELF IS ABLE TO JUDGE AND PUT INTO PRACTICE WHAT IS OBJECTIVELY GOOD AND RIGHT

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**Four moments in FORMING CONSCIENCE as we make moral decisions, always grounded in prayer and openness to the Spirit of God**





## **Formation of Conscience:**

### **DO:**

- ❖ Get the best, objective and most accurate information on which to base a judgment
  - ❖ Seek out the wisdom of God's Word, of Church teaching and practice, of wise and mature people
  - ❖ Pray
  - ❖ Think, reflect, study
  - ❖ Seek to grow in maturity of conscience by looking at consequences of past actions
  - ❖ Surround oneself with supportive environments of mature, loving, wise people
  - ❖ Trust actions that come from good habits (virtues) and healthy, fully integrated parts of our lives
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### **DO NOT;**

- ❖ Presume you can make good decisions without the wisdom of others
  - ❖ Simply act as everyone else is acting so as not to be different
  - ❖ Make hasty decisions that can deeply affect you or others
  - ❖ Stop learning, studying, seeking advice, growing in wisdom and maturity
  - ❖ Separate oneself from communities and groups that exhibit good moral values
  - ❖ Trust actions that come from bad habits (vices) or hurting, unhealed and fragile parts of our lives
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## **Applying CST to Specific Voting Decisions**

*"While the bishops help form the laity in accordance with basic principles, they do not tell the laity to vote for particular candidates. On these often complex matters, it is the laity's responsibility to form their consciences and grow in the virtue of prudence to approach the many and varied issues of the day with the mind of Christ." (FCFFC, Introductory Note)*

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### **• Doing good and avoiding evil and the role of the virtue of prudence**

*"...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." (FCFFC #20)*

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*"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." (FCFFC, #42)*

*“Two temptations in public life can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity: 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.”*  
(FCFFC, #27-28)

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*“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. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the use of the death penalty, resorting to unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or a lack of health care, 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.”*  
(FCFFC, #29)

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*“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. 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.* “(FCFFC, #24-25)

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### **Understanding “Intrinsically Evil” Language in Moral Theology and Its Use in FCFFC**

*“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 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.” (FCFFC, #37)*

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*“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.” (FCFFC, #22)*

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*“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.” (FCFFC, #23)*

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*“A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, 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.” (FCFFC, #34)*

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*“There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position may 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.” (FCFFC, #35)*

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### **“INTRINSICALLY EVIL ACTS”**

- **As used in the Catholic Tradition:**

- 1) A short hand way to summarize that the object of the action cannot be made good by any good intention or extenuating circumstances
- 2) In and of itself, does not indicate the seriousness of the evil
- 3) Actions that are not “intrinsically evil” can be more or less serious than intrinsically evil ones.

- **As used in the FCFFC:**

- 1) A way to rank certain evils as greater than others, implying a more serious claim on our consciences to avoid
  - 2) At times in an absolute way but at other times in a less than absolute way
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## Applying CST to Specific Voting Decisions

### Voting the “Lesser Evil” and/or the “Greater Good”?

*“When all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, 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.” (FCFFC, #36)*

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Pope Francis’ Comments to Journalists, When Asked about the U.S. 2024 Presidential Election:

*“Both are against life. Both are against life. Both: the one who throws out migrants and the one who kills children. Both are against life.”...*

*“In the moral [teaching] about politics, in general, it is said that to not vote is bad. It is not good. You must vote, and one has to choose the lesser evil.”*  
*In this situation, he asked, “What is the lesser evil? That woman, or that man?” He said: “I don’t know. Each one, in their conscience, must think and [vote].”*

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### Catholic Moral Tradition’s Critique of Seemingly Commonsense Wisdom

#### “Lesser Evil”

- Political philosophical tradition more than Catholic moral tradition
  - Cannot directly intend an evil, no matter how small, because one thinks a greater good will ensue (“End does not justify the means”)
  - Cf. Principle of Double Effect
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#### “Greater Good”

Closer to our moral tradition, because one must always choose a good not an evil, but with caveats

“Greatest good for greatest number”? (Utilitarian understanding)

Better phrasing: “Greater Common Good”

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### Catholic Moral Tradition’s Critique of Seemingly Commonsense Wisdom

### Re-Visiting What It Means to Make a Mature, Conscience-Based Decision

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*“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.*

*This kind of political participation reflects the social teaching of our Church and the best traditions of our nation.” (FCFFC, #61-62)*

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### **More Specific Questions/Discussion**

- Can a Person in Good Conscience Vote for the Democratic Candidate? Republican Candidate? Third Party Candidate? Choose Not to Vote for That Office?
  - Who Am I Personally Voting for and Why?
  - Have We Truly Made a Conscience-Based Decision?
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[www.churchworldkingdom.org](http://www.churchworldkingdom.org)

[frdave@churchworldkingdom.org](mailto:frdave@churchworldkingdom.org)

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➤ Who Am I Personally Voting for and Why?

➤ **Have We Truly Made a  
Conscience-Based Decision?**













- Who Am I Personally Voting for and Why?
- Have We Truly Made a Conscience-Based Decision?