

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship part two

By Archbishop John C. Wester, People of God, September 2016

Picking up from my article in last month's issue, I would like to continue my thoughts on the US Bishops' Document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, which I encourage everyone to read and study. It is a wonderful teaching document encouraging us to engage in civic life, including exercising our important right to vote.

One of the foremost moral principles to keep in mind while voting is the sacredness of human life. The sanctity of the human person means that the Catholic church is outspoken in its defense and support of all human life, especially the most vulnerable. This is sometimes called "a consistent ethic of life" or protection of life from "womb to tomb." As Catholics we have a firm commitment to protect the unborn. Life is a tremendous gift from God, the giver of all life. We celebrate and welcome children in our midst, as Jesus did. We also recognize the dignity of the mother, and the difficult choices she faces when an unexpected pregnancy occurs. I applaud those mothers who choose to carry their child despite difficult circumstances. I want them to know that we stand with them and want to help them and their child thrive. I offer a special word for mothers who choose abortion: The Church offers healing and hope for you through the *Project Rachel* ministry, a post abortion healing ministry. We invite you to be reconciled with yourself, with God and with the Church. There is always hope and forgiveness. This is the miracle of our faith!

Our focus on the principle of the sacredness of life and the dignity of the human person is not myopic, but is panoramic. We focus on *both* protecting the life of the unborn *and* consistently supporting the well-being of the mother, child and family once a child is born. Issues like funding to support the developing child, with special focus on those early years between birth to age 5, access to affordable health care for all, educational opportunities for children, jobs with fair pay to provide adequate income to support a family, affordable housing and healthy food, and supports for elders are all issues to consider in light of the common good. Sanctity of life can also be undermined by pervasive poverty, racism, environmental degradation, and violence. These are also life and dignity issues that we need to carefully weigh when considering our vote.

Two other issues worth noting are the death penalty and physician assisted suicide. In both cases, we must be courageous and stand for the dignity of the human person. In 2009 New Mexico repealed the death penalty and replaced it with life in prison without parole. In light of recent violent and heinous acts, our Governor is considering action to restore the penalty of death for certain crimes. There is also a movement afoot to make physician assisted suicide legal in New Mexico. Both of these efforts represent contentious issues that stand against a consistent ethic of life. Both represent a denial that God can still act in a person's life, whether they have committed a terrible crime and are behind bars, or whether they are incapacitated, in pain or in some way disabled. We can certainly ease someone's pain and accompany them in their journey at the end of life, thereby allowing them to be a grace for others. God can act in and through anyone at any time, and it is not up to us to make that decision to take a life. To do so is an offense against the virtue of hope.

I know these are complex issues. We have to be careful not to become overwhelmed, lulled into complacency or overcome with fear. We have to act. All issues have to be carefully weighed. Our duty as Catholics is to have an informed conscience that enables us to vote for the best candidate, knowing that no one candidate can do all that we wish. From my perspective, the Catholic Church cannot have only one issue. There are many issues to consider. We give priority to the most vulnerable, especially those in the womb as we also consider so many other realities as we cast our votes this election season. We have to study and pray about how best to preserve the life and dignity of the human person in light of the preferential option for the poorest and most vulnerable among us. To that end I once again invite you to go to www.faithfulcitizenship.org to view the document, videos and other resources in both English and Spanish. Your vote can definitely make a difference in the lives of many.