



## ***Church Teaching and Civic Responsibility:***

***A Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Virginia to the Faithful of Their Dioceses***

***October 2006***

Dear Friends in Christ:

Each November, people throughout Virginia exercise their fundamental right and duty to vote. Although heading to the polls each year may seem routine and even mundane, what we do at the voting booth is actually quite remarkable. As voters, we decide the essential questions of who will lead us and what principles will guide their leadership. In a collective sense, what we are really doing is nothing short of expressing who we are and what we value. Therefore, the considerable opportunity we have to cast a ballot goes hand in hand with our equally considerable responsibility to reflect upon what is most important to us, and to gather all the information needed to make well-informed decisions. Just as a builder must lay a solid foundation before constructing a house, so too must we as voters prepare ahead of time for the important choices we will make. For followers of Christ, that preparation always means looking beyond partisan politics and superficial campaign slogans and sound bites, and reflecting prayerfully on the timeless teachings of our faith.

Explaining these teachings clearly is among the most fundamental of our responsibilities as bishops. This year, our teaching on public-policy matters has included pastoral letters, issued jointly by us to the faithful in our two dioceses, on stem-cell research and on the institution of marriage. Through our Virginia Catholic Conference, we have also given significant witness to a wide range of other important state issues in the areas of respect for life, economic and social justice, health care, education, and family life. And through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, we have spoken on many matters affecting human rights and dignity in national and international affairs – matters such as protecting unborn children, promoting world peace and economic development, and welcoming the immigrant.

All of these matters and many others are critical in every month of every year, but they become increasingly prominent in the dialogue that occurs during an election season. In a letter entitled *Faithful Citizenship in Our Commonwealth* that we released last fall, we articulated a moral framework within which we believe such matters should be assessed. We provide the main body of that letter below for your consideration again this year.

*In Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility, issued prior to the 2004 presidential campaign season, we joined our brother U.S. bishops in stating: “As bishops, we seek to form the consciences of our people. We do not wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing or opposing candidates. We hope that voters will examine the position of candidates on the full range of issues, as well as their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance. We are convinced that a consistent ethic of life should be the moral framework from which to address issues in the political arena.” Faithful Citizenship makes clear that, although the Church never tells its members to vote for any specific candidate, it does have the right and obligation to teach the truth about human rights and dignity and thereby inform the consciences of voters. The Church’s consistent teaching stands in sharp contrast to the fractious discourse that is so common in our country’s polarized electorate. Our Catholic perspective embraces the life and dignity of every member of the human family, without regard to the claims of any particular platform or interest group.*

*We must never abandon this moral framework in favor of divisive rhetoric that can cloud one’s ability to see each issue as Christ asks us to see it. But just as it would be wrong to reject a consistent ethic that values all human rights, it would also be a mistake to conclude that all issues are equal in moral gravity. In Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics, the U.S. bishops explain why the right to life is the foundation of all others: “Respect for the dignity of the human person demands a commitment to human rights across a broad spectrum . . . . We live the Gospel of Life when we live in solidarity with the poor of the world, standing up for their lives and dignity. Yet abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental good and the condition for all others. They are committed against those who are weakest and most defenseless, those who are genuinely ‘the poorest of the poor.’” Later in the same document, we observe, “[T]he command never to kill establishes a minimum which we must respect and from which we must start out ‘in order to say yes over and over again, a yes which will gradually embrace the entire horizon of the good.’ (Evangelium Vitae, 75).”*

*Viewed in tandem, Faithful Citizenship and Living the Gospel of Life provide useful guidance for political decisions in a culture that does not fully embrace our values. In casting ballots, we rarely find a candidate who supports*

*each of the Church's positions on legislation impacting human life and dignity. Faced all too frequently with imperfect platforms and imperfect candidates, we are nevertheless called to make decisions rooted in a rightly formed conscience. When members of our dioceses ask us for guidance in making such challenging decisions in so many different races, the question we hear most often is whether protecting unborn life to the greatest extent possible must be the decisive factor in one's voting choices, when the candidates in question differ on that issue but also differ on many other important social issues. In addressing this question, the best analysis we can offer is the one expressed by Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) last year during his dialogue with the U.S. bishops' Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians. Cardinal Ratzinger's comments to the Task Force included an explanation of Church teaching on cooperation in evil as it relates to individual voters. Making a clear distinction between the responsibilities of public officials and those of voters, he stated that a Catholic voter would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil (i.e., making the evil act one's own) only if he were deliberately to vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion. He further explained that when a Catholic does not share a candidate's position in favor of abortion, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted if there are proportionate reasons.*

*Assessing proportionality is a matter for the individual conscience. However, a conscience must be correctly formed before it can be properly followed. In other words, we must seek the "mind of Christ" in the voting judgments we make, just as we must do when contemplating any other moral decision in our lives. We urge each of you to inform your own consciences thoroughly, weighing all issues from the perspective of Church teaching and of their implications for our brothers and sisters in the human family. In doing so, it is important to recognize just how serious abortion is when considering whether there are proportionate (i.e., very serious) reasons for making other important issues the decisive factor in our voting choices. That means we must ponder the moral and philosophical reality that so-called "abortion rights" deny the most fundamental human right (and hence all rights) to an entire class of people; we must confront the almost incomprehensible fact that abortions extinguish the lives of 4,000 children per day (and well over one million per year) in the United States alone; and we must understand the difference in moral gravity between policies which are intrinsically unjust (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, and the deliberate destruction of human embryos) and policies involving prudential judgments about which people of good will may disagree concerning various means of promoting economic justice, public safety, and fair opportunities for every person.*

We reaffirm these observations from our previous letter and will continue to teach two basic truths -- that, no matter what the issue is, human dignity must be

the central consideration; and that, above all else, our laws must honor the right to life, without which no other right could even exist. Too often, today's political discourse and campaign rhetoric lacks a consistent moral framework that values every human being – born and unborn, rich and poor, native-born and immigrant. Yet, God asks each of us to do our best to discern His will before making the choices confronting us, without giving in to discouragement or cynicism.

As together we seek to foster reverence for the great gift of life by exercising our civic responsibility as followers of Christ in our Commonwealth today, let us pray for each other, for our Commonwealth, and for our country.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

*+ Paul S. Loverde*

Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde  
Bishop of Arlington

*+ Francis X. Di Lorenzo*

Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo  
Bishop of Richmond