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UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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Statement on Responsibilities of Catholics in Public Life

March 10, 2006
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A recent public statement by 55 Catholic and Democratic members of the House of Representatives offers an opportunity to address several important points about the responsibilities of Catholics in public life.

We welcome this and other efforts that seek to examine how Catholic legislators bring together their faith and their policy choices. As the Catholic bishops of the United States said in our June 2004 statement, "Catholics in Political Life":

We need to do more to persuade all people that human life is precious and human dignity must be defended. This requires more effective dialogue and engagement with all public officials, especially Catholic public officials. We welcome conversation initiated by political leaders themselves.

Therefore, we welcome the Representatives' recognition that Catholics in public life must act seriously and responsibly on many important moral issues. Our faith has an integral unity that calls Catholics to defend human life and human dignity whenever they are threatened. A priority for the poor, the protection of family life, the pursuit of justice and the promotion of peace are fundamental priorities of the Catholic moral tradition which cannot be ignored or neglected. We encourage and will continue to work with those in both parties who seek to act on these essential principles in defense of the poor and vulnerable.

At the same time, we also need to reaffirm the Catholic Church's constant teaching that abortion is a grave violation of the most fundamental human right – the right to life that is inherent in all human beings, and that grounds every other right we possess. Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation on the vocation and mission of the laity, *Christifideles Laici*, which the Representatives' statement cites, declares:

The inviolability of the person which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God finds its primary and fundamental expression in the *inviolability of human life*. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights -- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture -- is false and illusory if *the right to life*, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination.... The human being is entitled to such rights, *in every phase of development*, from conception until natural death; and in *every condition*, whether healthy or sick, whole or handicapped, rich or poor (# 38).

While it is always necessary to work to reduce the number of abortions by providing alternatives and help to vulnerable parents and children, Catholic teaching calls all Catholics to work actively to restrain, restrict and bring to an end the destruction of unborn human life.

As the Church carries out its central responsibility to teach clearly and help form consciences, and as Catholic legislators seek to act in accord with their own consciences, it is essential to remember that conscience must be consistent with fundamental moral principles. As members of the Church, all Catholics are obliged to shape our consciences in accord with the moral teaching of the Church.

As bishops, we too are bound by our own consciences to teach faithfully and to recommit ourselves to continued reflection and discussion on how Catholic faith and public service can work together to promote human life and dignity and advance the common good. Through dialogue, especially the irreplaceable dialogue between Catholic political leaders and their own bishops, we hope to promote a better understanding of how the Church's teaching on human life and dignity challenges us all.