

# An Appeal to Those Who Seek or Hold Public Office

In the midst of this protracted election season, a seeming division among the Catholic leadership in our country has emerged, representing different approaches to this year's document of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." Despite these differences, the Catholic bishops of the United States remain totally and universally committed to the foundational principle advanced in the document: Disrespect for any human life diminishes respect for all human life.

This conviction, which reflects the constant teaching of our Church, has also notably been a guiding principle of our nation since its founding – a unique fact not lost on Pope John Paul II who, as he departed Baltimore-Washington Airport in October 1995, heralded:

"At the center of the moral vision of [the American] founding documents is the recognition of the rights of the human person." The strength of the United States lies "especially [in its] respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life in all conditions and at all stages of development."

And during his visit to the U.S. this year, Pope Benedict XVI spoke in similar fashion:

"Democracy can only flourish, as your founding fathers realized, when political leaders and those whom they represent are guided by truth and bring the wisdom born of firm moral principle to decisions affecting the life and future of the nation."

And so I pose this question to all public servants – and surely those who are Catholic – as civilized human beings, as Americans, as faithful Catholics: Can we not all "begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing of, any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem"? (U.S. Bishops, 1998).

Some elected officials who are Catholic accept that life in the womb from its very conception is human, others muddle the issue, but from the dawn of Christianity

until very recently Western civilization has treated every life as sacred, and modern science increasingly supports that with overwhelming evidence.

For one to claim to be a loyal, practicing Catholic and to actively support public policies that advance the cause of abortion is to embrace a moral contradiction. Our Catholic faith teaches unequivocally that abortion unjustly destroys innocent human life, and that to engage in activities that explicitly cooperate in this moral evil is objectively a grave and mortal sin. As with any other member of the Church whose actions stand in serious contradiction to our faith, we reach out to them in prayer, asking that they seek a change of heart and the restoring grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation before approaching Holy Communion.

In his Encyclical on the Eucharist last year (“*Sacramentum Caritatis*”), Pope Benedict XVI specifically addressed “those who, by virtue of their social or political position must make decisions regarding fundamental values, such as respect for human life, its defense from conception to natural death, the family built upon marriage between a man and a woman ...” He called these values “non negotiable” and continued:

“Consequently, Catholic politicians and legislators ... must feel particularly bound, on the basis of a properly formed conscience, to introduce and support laws inspired by values grounded in human nature.”

The Pope here appeals to “Eucharistic consistency,” suggesting an “objective connection” between the reception of the Eucharist and the obligation to publicly witness our faith. Receiving Holy Communion is not a private devotion but a public act. In doing so, Catholics proclaim and give witness to their oneness, their “communion” with Christ and His Church.

Consider St. Paul’s dire warning in pleading for respect and reverence toward the Eucharist: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of irreverence toward the Eucharist as a sacrilege, a particularly grave sin against the first commandment.

Our Conference of Catholic Bishops has agreed overwhelmingly that there can be

differing pastoral approaches at this critically teachable moment. Some American bishops, after engaging public office holders to no avail on this serious issue, have opted to forbid their reception of the Eucharist within their jurisdictions. In so doing they are within their rights, and I respect their decision. However, and upon soul-searching reflection and prayer, I have decided that I will not take this public step. Let me note the following points in support of what I pray is a prudent decision on my part:

1. In contrast to and in spite of the measured tones of several bishops who have made this decision, many of the letters I have received and advertisements I have seen calling for this penalty reflect an uncharitable anger and even a vindictiveness that undermine the healing intent of those bishops' decrees.
2. At this stage, the divisive result of such an action in the Archdiocese of Baltimore both within and outside the Catholic community would, in my opinion, prove counterproductive to our evangelizing efforts and to our overall unity.
3. In this unique and highly charged atmosphere, it is likely inevitable that such a step, in spite of any appropriate attempts on our part to explain it, would be distorted as constituting an unwise and unwarranted intrusion of the Church in the political life of the community. It might even undermine pro-life politicians, suggesting that their position is simply a consequence of pressure from the institutional Church, rather than the result of the Church's clear obligation to defend the dignity of every human life.

How grateful we must be to those public figures (a good many of whom are not Catholic) who often put their careers on the line in defense of innocent human life. As for those Catholics unwilling to defend life, I would hope that prayer and the graces that would accompany discussion and persuasion would help bring about a conversion of mind and heart. We ask no politician to do anything unconstitutional or immoral in pursuing legal steps to avoid the killing of innocent human life and in defending women too often victimized and traumatized by a powerful abortion industry.

We ask all our public servants to reflect upon the words of St. Thomas More, the patron saint of those who hold public office. From the gallows which would soon

claim his life, he declared that he would die “the king’s good servant, but God’s first.” Whose servant, my admirable friends in public life, do you claim to be?

As a bishop of the Catholic Church, I must be authoritative in explaining the Church’s 2,000-year teaching on a matter as basic as life and death. I pledge not to be confrontational, however, and would welcome a private discussion of this message with those who seek or hold public office.

Finally, I ask for your prayer for me and our Conference of Bishops as we meet here in plenary session next month in efforts to provide just and effective moral guidance for our people and our leaders whom we seek to serve.