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# THE ISSUES, THE CANDIDATES, AND YOUR VOTE

## CALLING FOR DIGNITY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

"A political society endures when it seeks, as a vocation, to satisfy common needs by stimulating the growth of all its members, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk." —Pope Francis, Speech to U.S. Congress, 9/24/15

In a speech before a joint session of the United States Congress in September 2015, Pope Francis referred to the purpose of politics as the defense and preservation of human dignity "in pursuit of the common good." On November 8, 2016, voters will head to the ballot box to select candidates best suited to lead communities, the state, and the federal government. At the top of the ballot, voters will determine the next president of the United States. Members of Congress, the State House of Representatives, two Michigan Supreme Court justices, members of the state Board of Education, and numerous local races will also be decided. The citizens who win these races will be responsible to their electorate for advancing the common good referenced in Pope Francis's speech.

Sorting through the rhetoric and divisiveness present during this pivotal election year is a difficult task. There seem to be endless speeches and debates, with many policy positions to sort through and reflect upon. In light of these challenges, Catholics might feel a temptation to become disengaged. Instead, now is the time for individuals of faith to engage in politics and to offer a voice concerned with the dignity of all persons, the protection of the most vulnerable, and the common good of society. Catholics are called to listen carefully and respond respectfully in political discussions, taking the time to participate in the election process and vote in November.

The candidates running for president have left much of the nation disappointed as voters want and expect more from those seeking the nation's highest office. Issues of trustworthiness, integrity, character, and experience have all factored into voter dissatisfaction. Yet Catholics are called not only to participate in the political process but also to evaluate candidate positions on a wide range of issues, including the dignity of human life, care for the poor, families and children, education, and religious liberty. As the U.S. bishops teach, "we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help transform the party to which we belong."<sup>1</sup> These convictions will help voters to make election decisions that provide for the common good, rather than advance a partisan interest. The next president will name a cabinet of advisors and nominate federal judges and Supreme Court justices. As the Court has recently issued monumental decisions on marriage, religious liberty, abortion, and immigration, it is important for voters also to consider the values each candidate brings to those decisions.

The aim of this **focus** is to present the Catholic Church's teaching on important policy issues, to assist Catholics in the formation of their conscience, and to encourage careful consideration of candidates and issues before voters participate in the 2016 election. This publication also serves as a reminder for Catholics that while there are a few days a year where voters participate in elections and select those who will serve in various offices, the call to faithful citizenship is a year-round task. ■

1. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2bpDhdV>



# FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP

## What does it mean to “vote my conscience?”

“The work for justice requires that the mind and the heart of Catholics be educated and formed to know and practice the whole faith.” —USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015

Catholics are called to make thoughtful, informed choices at the ballot box. While at times this may seem overwhelming, the Catholic Church urges each person to evaluate candidates and issues through an understanding of Catholic social teaching. By learning and internalizing these teachings, people of faith are able to develop a well-formed conscience to help with their decision-making process. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* articulates that a well-formed conscience is more than a feeling; it is actually the voice of God, revealing truth and informing one’s decisions.<sup>2</sup> Voting one’s conscience has to begin with an openness for the truth and a desire to do good. People of faith should study Scripture and the teachings of the Church, examine the facts around various choices and issues, and finally, pray about what God is asking of them with their vote.

## What issues do I need to consider when voting?

“The Church is involved in the political process but is not partisan. The Church cannot champion any candidate or party. Our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable.” —USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015

In their election document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the U.S. bishops remind Catholics to examine candidate positions on a wide range of issues, saying that “a candidate’s position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter’s support.” In these pages, Michigan Catholic Conference lists issues to consider and poses potential questions to use during the information-gathering process. Catholics with well-formed consciences may have different and legitimate responses to address social problems, especially in providing for a person’s basic needs. Despite these differences, all are called to “help build a more just and peaceful world.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Catholics must recognize that not all political issues are morally equivalent and thus should not be weighed the same when evaluating candidates. The bishops write that “the direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life...is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must be opposed.” Voters also are encouraged to consider factors like a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. To read more about conscience formation and voting, visit [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org). ■

# Human Life and Dignity

“All of us are called to respect life and care for it...It is the responsibility of the State, the Church and society to accompany and concretely help all those who find themselves in serious difficulty, so that a child will never be seen as a burden but as a gift.” —Pope Francis<sup>4</sup>

Catholic teaching on the dignity of human life offers a vision of encouragement and care. The Church regularly engages in work that recognizes the value of all people. These services include helping pregnant women who are struggling, caring for children in need of foster or adoptive homes, and serving the elderly and terminally ill with respect and compassion. Considering a candidate’s position on issues of human life is critical, as the policies they pursue can move the state and nation closer or further away from a society that values life and rejects violence. The U.S. bishops write in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* that officials and voters must always reject certain actions, such as the intentional taking of an innocent human life. These issues have a particular weight on one’s conscience. Voters should be aware that Michigan law currently prohibits use of the death penalty and assisted suicide. Legislation introduced during the 2015–2016 session to overturn both bans, however, demonstrates the need to continue evaluating candidate positions on these issues. ■

- Does the candidate support the protection of human life from conception to natural death?
- How does the candidate plan to oppose abortion and prevent taxpayer funding of abortion?
- Does the candidate oppose assisted suicide, the death penalty, and research that results in the destruction of embryonic human life?
- How does the candidate plan to address issues of violence, including gun violence?



# Marriage, Children, and Families

“A society grows stronger and better, it grows in beauty and it grows in truth, when it rises on the foundation of the family.” —Pope Francis<sup>5</sup>

A society’s strength rests on the strength of its families. Pope Francis has called the family “the fundamental cell of society,” as it is within families where individuals learn how to live with those who are different from them.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Catholic Church teaches that marriage is the basic foundation of family life. While every person, regardless of sexual orientation, is deserving of respect and compassion, the Church remains firm in her teaching that marriage is a unique love that only a man and a woman, each created in God’s image, can give as husband and wife. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to redefine marriage last year, the Church will continue to promote her teaching and the unique role that mothers and fathers play in the lives of children. Other issues that recognize the importance of families, support parents and children, and provide safe environments can also be helpful while evaluating candidates. ■

- Where does the candidate stand on policies that protect the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of the family?
- Does the candidate believe in protecting marriage as an institution that brings together one man and one woman in faithful union?
- How does the candidate plan to address issues that threaten families, including domestic violence and human trafficking?

# Religious Freedom

“All are called to be vigilant, precisely as good citizens, to preserve and defend [religious freedom] from everything that would threaten or compromise it.” —Pope Francis<sup>7</sup>

All Americans are guaranteed the right to exercise their faith in the public realm, regardless of their religion. This diversity of belief has helped to enrich community discussions and to bring people and organizations of faith forward to meet societal needs. The protection of religious liberty is an American right, not a partisan one, but it continues to be a significant concern. Recent policies have threatened the work of religious organizations, especially in the areas of health care and child placement. Questions remain about the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, especially with respect to religious institutions that recognize the true meaning of marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Conscience protections are also a critical priority to ensure that organizations and individuals of faith can continue contributing to the common good. Additionally, in the current presidential election, proposals have been raised to place restrictions on the resettlement of refugees from certain faiths. These proposals are inconsistent with American values. Elected officials are called to defend the freedom of religion, as well as the freedom of religious organizations to serve the public while maintaining their faith. ■

- Does the candidate support the right of religious individuals and institutions, such as hospitals, charity agencies, and schools, to operate in a manner consistent with their deeply held religious beliefs?
- Does the candidate oppose restrictions on refugee acceptance and resettlement into the United States on the basis of religion?



2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1776-1778, <http://goo.gl/mlBKFb>
3. See footnote 1
4. *Address to the Polish Authorities*, Pope Francis, 7/27/16, <https://goo.gl/v7yFBV>
5. *Vigil Address at the Festival of Families*, Pope Francis, 9/26/15, <https://goo.gl/Upd4GD>
6. *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, 11/24/13, <http://goo.gl/MDfbtU>
7. *Address at the White House*, Pope Francis, 9/23/15, <https://goo.gl/a308IZ>
8. *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis, 5/24/15, <http://goo.gl/HYZMnG>
9. *Michigan Economy at a Glance*, U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2016, <http://goo.gl/nKvNBH>
10. *Speech to Pontifical Academy of Life*, Pope Francis, 3/5/15, <https://goo.gl/HvYWLV>

# Preferential Option for the Poor

“[The preferential option for the poor] demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers.” —Pope Francis<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. bishops boldly write in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* that the “basic moral test for any society is how it treats those who are most vulnerable.” While Michigan’s unemployment rate of 4.6 percent in June 2016 is lower than it was a year ago at 5.3 percent, the figure does not take into consideration those that have given up looking for work or are still struggling to support themselves.<sup>9</sup> Society is full of marginalized persons, including those with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill, immigrants, and refugees. Candidates who win elected office in November will make decisions that impact those most in need. With respect to public funding, programs and policies should affirm the inherent dignity of each person while working to reduce poverty and dependency. Cooperation between business owners, employers, workers, and unions should allow for the creation of decent jobs, foster good working conditions, and advance the common good. Catholics are also called to consider ways to care for God’s creation, weighing one’s responsibility to the poor and to future generations impacted by environmental decisions in relation to current needs. ■

- Does the candidate promote policies that protect Michigan’s most vulnerable citizens?
- Does the candidate support social and economic policies that foster the creation of jobs, with decent working conditions and just wages?
- How does the candidate plan to address affordable housing and transportation for low- and moderate-income families and individuals?
- How does the candidate plan to address environmental concerns, especially in relation to their impact on the poor?

# Health Care

“All medicine has a special role within society as a witness of the honor that is due to elderly persons, and to every human being...There is no more important duty for a society than safeguarding the human person.” —Pope Francis<sup>10</sup>

Catholic social teaching calls access to health care an essential safeguard of human life, which affirms each person’s inherent value. Access should be provided to all in need and not be denied based on someone’s age, geographical location, or condition. While expanding opportunities for access, health care policies must also respect the dignity of human life and protect conscience rights of health care institutions, providers, and payers. In California, state health department regulations — policies that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has allowed to continue — are mistakenly requiring all employer health plans, including those of churches, to cover elective abortions. In other areas around the country, providers have similarly been pushed to violate their religious beliefs while offering care. Although the Affordable Care Act has extended health care insurance to millions who were previously uninsured, a large number of people still remain without insurance. Candidates promoting greater health care access, especially for low-income populations, are urged to consider policies that respect the sanctity of life and the religious principles of health care workers, providers, and payers. ■

- Does the candidate support increased access to affordable health care for low- and moderate-income individuals and families?
- Does the candidate advocate for the provision of health care while at the same time respecting human life, human dignity, and religious freedom in our health care system?





# Immigration, Migration, and Refugees

“It is important to view migrants not only on the basis of their status as regular or irregular, but above all as people whose dignity is to be protected and who are capable of contributing to progress and the general welfare.” —Pope Francis<sup>11</sup>

Legal status, immigration reform, and policies regarding refugee resettlement have already taken center stage this election. Without particular attention to the root causes of the issues that lead to movement or displacement, such as religious persecution, war and violence, economic depression, lack of employment opportunities, and poverty, these conversations can quickly devolve into attacks. In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, Catholics are called “to care for and stand with newcomers,” including immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and victims of human trafficking. Conversations at the policy level, especially regarding immigration reform, should examine what can be done to address root causes of migration, to keep families together and safe throughout the process, and to allow more opportunities for migrants to enter, live, and work in the United States legally. The bishops also teach that all governments have a legitimate role in intercepting unauthorized migrants and keeping their national borders safe. With regard to refugee policies, Catholics can help create a tone of civility by evaluating the resettlement process and seeing the human face of the crisis. ■

- Does the candidate support a comprehensive immigration reform proposal that offers a path to citizenship, treats workers fairly, and prevents the separation of families?
- Does the candidate support comprehensive immigration reform that maintains the integrity of our borders, respects the laws of the United States, and addresses factors that compel people to leave their own countries?

# Education

“School is the first society that integrates the family. Family and school...are complementary, and therefore it is important that they cooperate in mutual respect.” —Pope Francis<sup>12</sup>

Providing quality educational options for parents and students is vital, as education is critical for a child’s academic, social, physical, and moral development. For low-income children, education has also proven to move children and families out of poverty. The Catholic Church teaches that the family is the first place where children learn values, and thus parents have a primary role in providing for the education of their children. In this role, parents are called to make decisions about the type of education that is the best fit for their children, whether that be in a nonpublic and/or religious school, traditional public school, public charter school, or schooling at home. Having a range of quality options serves students and encourages all educators to focus on the needs of children and families. Unfortunately, while different types of education are offered in the State of Michigan, true educational choice is denied to parents through the state constitutional ban on aid to nonpublic schools. Tuition tax credits, opportunity scholarships, and education savings accounts that have found wide success in other states, especially for low-income families, are not allowed in Michigan. All students deserve quality opportunities to help in their development, regardless of their circumstance, where they live, or the type of school they attend. ■

- Does the candidate support expanding school choice options such as tuition tax credits, opportunity scholarships, or similar programs?
- How does the candidate propose to improve the quality of public education, especially for low-income students?



11. *World Day of Migrants and Refugees Message*, Pope Francis, 1/17/16, <http://goo.gl/RkOGZf>

12. *Address to Students and Teachers of Italy*, Pope Francis, 5/10/14, <http://goo.gl/v4y6ZB>

# Restorative Justice

"It is painful when we see prison systems which are not concerned to care for wounds, to soothe pain, to offer new possibilities." —Pope Francis<sup>13</sup>

Violence and crime are not solved with a one-size-fits-all approach. Across Michigan, policies that help victims heal, keep community members safe, and encourage genuine accountability and rehabilitation in offenders serve as guiding principles for the criminal justice system. During the 2015–2016 legislative session, state lawmakers examined a variety of reforms that use alternative sentencing when appropriate and prepare parolees to return to their communities in healthy and productive ways. One package of bills specifically addresses juvenile justice policies to shift towards a more rehabilitative approach, recognizing the differences in emotional and psychological development between youth and adults and helping juveniles find a more constructive path. When considering candidate positions regarding prison reform, examining the root causes of crime, as well as the significant barriers that individuals face after serving their time, should be part of the evaluation. Catholics and all people of goodwill are called to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of victims, who have been strongly impacted by crime and who need support on their path to healing and reconciliation. ■

- Does the candidate support sentencing guidelines and parole practices that reflect an individual's potential threat to society, rather than mandatory minimum sentencing?
- Does the candidate support prisoner rehabilitation and re-entry programs that include continuing education, adequate personal identification, transportation, housing, and employment assistance?

13. Address at Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, Pope Francis, 9/27/15, <https://goo.gl/mSJRV>

## focus

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# ELECTION TIPS AND REMINDERS

- Study Catholic Social Teaching. The document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* is a great resource and can be found at [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org).
- Research the candidates and issues that will be on the November ballot, including reading campaign websites, listening to speeches, and evaluating voting records. Call a candidate's campaign office and ask where he or she stands on certain issues if the positions are hard to determine.
- Pray for good decision-making while considering the candidates and issues on the ballot.
- Pray for the election and for all those who are running for office so that they will keep in mind the common good of all and make wise choices.
- Continue to urge elected officials to support the common good by joining the Catholic Advocacy Network (CAN). CAN is an email-based grassroots network that allows Michigan Catholics to stay connected to current issues and communicate instantly with their elected officials. Sign up at [www.micatholic.org/can/](http://www.micatholic.org/can/).

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