

## A MESSAGE FROM BISHOP DAVID M. O'CONNELL, C.M.

It has become almost normative these days for political candidates of every stripe to end their speeches at campaign appearances, town halls or rallies with some form of the expression “God bless you and/or God bless the United States of America.” Perhaps you, too, have noticed its appearance more frequently than in the past. I actually wait for it now while watching television broadcasts of these events, especially in this election year.

Certainly, it is an admirable sentiment with which to conclude their comments, since phrases like “In God we trust,” “one nation under God,” “endowed by their Creator,” “so help me God” have long been an important part of the American vernacular throughout history. Is it a prayer, a religious wish or “just something to say” to audiences in a country founded upon Judeo-Christian principles? I regularly wonder about it, especially when the speech that precedes it contains elements that advocate policies or positions that hardly seem reflective or consistent with our divine origins, the goodness of God or the religious faith of any and all believers, not even to mention the tone and tenor of some remarks that lack basic civility.

I guess it is better to acknowledge God and conclude remarks asking for his blessing on our nation than not. We are once again in an election year anticipating the exercise of one of the most basic rights and responsibilities of an American citizen: the right and responsibility to vote. Regardless of which candidate or political party we support or endorse, the right to vote lies at the heart of our democracy. The free exercise of something so important should — by its very nature — be preceded by very careful thought and scrutiny. That goes for every citizen, whether they are believers in God or not. Let me share a few thoughts on the exercise of voting by believers, Catholics in particular, in the enterprise of what the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops refers to as “faithful citizenship.”

Our Holy Father Pope Francis has written, “Everything, including political life, belongs to Jesus Christ, and so participation in political life belongs to the mission of the Church (apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 181, November 24, 2013).” The Pope is not directing the Church and its pastors to tell Catholics “how” to vote but, rather, he is identifying and placing the responsibility to participate in political life into the arena of the Church’s mission. The Church is called to proclaim the Gospel and to educate baptized Catholics about the truth of its social and moral teachings, especially as they impact the common good. In this way, the Church’s mission includes — through all means at its disposal — helping Catholics form their consciences in light of their faith so that they might give witness to the Gospel.

“The Church does not wish to exercise political power or eliminate the freedom of opinion of Catholics regarding contingent questions. Instead, it intends — as its proper function — to instruct and illuminate the consciences of the faithful, particularly those involved in political life, so that their actions may always serve the integral promotion of the human person and the common good (Dicastery — formerly “Congregation” — for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life”, 6, May 24, 2002).” In 2007, the USCCB issued its first teaching document on Catholics engaging in political life entitled “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” (FCFC), updated every four years, usually before a presidential election.

The most recent Introductory “Note” for the document was approved by the full body of bishops at the November 2023 Plenary Assembly. The USCCB document is intended as a guide for American Catholics on political responsibility, and how to participate in public life in a way that is consistent with the mission of Jesus Christ and the Church. It applies Catholic social and moral principles and teachings to a range of issues and warns against using the idea of “conscience” to justify choices that advance personal, ideological, or partisan political interests contrary to those principles and the Catholic social and moral teachings they advance. The following commentary identifies some of those social and moral issues referenced in FCFC to guide our conscience formation.

### 1. Issues that directly affect human life

Every human life is sacred, from conception to natural death. That has been and remains firm Catholic moral teaching based upon sound human reasoning and is, therefore, our most basic principle as Catholics. FCFC asserts that “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed.” At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats that impact human life and dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty, the death penalty and so forth. Our efforts to protect the unborn remain as important as ever, for just as the Supreme Court has given greater latitude for state laws regarding abortion, state legislators have passed statutes not only keeping abortion legal through all nine months of pregnancy but opening the door to infanticide.



Additionally, abortion contaminates many other important life issues by being inserted into legislation regarding euthanasia and assisted suicide, embryonic stem cell research, health care for the poor and health care reform in general (“Introductory Letter,” FCFC). The Catholic Church teaches that all these practices have profound moral consequences.

## **2. Religious liberty**

The United States Constitution protects religious liberty in its First Amendment. It includes not only our freedom to worship but also our freedom to believe in and practice our faith as Americans ... or not to believe! The Church teaches that every effort should be made to preserve and support religious liberty. Individuals and communities of faith should not be subject to religious persecution, here or anywhere in the world, because of their faith.

## **3. Traditional marriage and family life**

There has been and continues to be a growing movement in our country to “redefine marriage.” The Church teaches that the faithful union of one man and one woman is the foundation of the family and, as an essential core element of a flourishing society and Church, traditional marriage and family life must be protected and preserved.

## **4. The disparity between rich and poor**

Most of the world’s resources are in the hands of a small percentage of its population. In the United States, federal budgets have moral implications and should prioritize the poorest and most vulnerable among us. Unemployment, homelessness and inadequate housing are evident throughout our nation, especially in major population centers, and need to be confronted and addressed to ensure economic justice for all.

## **5. Immigration reform**

Despite their legal status, undocumented persons in the United States deserve respect and human compassion. There has been and remains an ongoing immigration problem in our country that requires a humane solution by our elected government leaders.

## **6. Racism and inequality**

The Declaration of Independence affirms that “all men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The Church opposes all oppression and all injustice. The elimination of racism, bigotry, discrimination and inequality is a goal that needs to be achieved in our lifetimes.

## **7. Violence, hatred and crime**

Society has a duty to protect and defend its members against violence, hatred and crime. “Violence cannot be overcome by violence. Violence is overcome by peace! By peace, by working with dignity to help your homeland move forward (Pope Francis, “Remarks” at Phoenix Center, Bethlehem, May 26, 2014).”

## **8. Protection of the Environment**

Pope Francis has declared stewardship of the earth, our “common home,” a contemporary moral imperative. “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last 200 years ... We are not God. The earth was here before us and was given to us ... The idea of unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology ... is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and leads to the planets being squeezed dry at every limit ... Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good and making a new start (Pope Francis, encyclical “Laudato Si’: Care for Our Common Home,” 53; 67; 106; 205, May 24, 2015). Progress in protecting the environment lies in our hands but especially in the hands of those who govern us.

The preceding topics do not represent an exhaustive list of the social and moral issues of major concern to the Catholic Church in our country, clergy and lay faithful alike. War and peace, international relations, human trafficking, drug abuse, educational choice, health care reform, use of print, broadcast and electronic media, and a host of other social and moral concerns warrant our attention as Catholics. Careful study, civil dialogue and prayerful reflection should accompany our decision making as we consider our support for political parties, platforms and candidates for political office.

As American Catholics, we look to the Church and its official teachers for clear, careful and consistent presentation and application of principles that undergird, support and protect our Catholic social and moral teachings so that the common good, truth, justice and peace are enhanced, preserved and advanced in American society. We should not expect bishops, ordained clergy or other Church leaders to tell us for whom or against whom to vote. In fact, they should not. As American Catholics, we should look to the Church’s teachings to help form our consciences for the exercise of faithful citizenship. I recommend the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the USCCB’s documents referenced herein as excellent resources for that purpose. May God bless the United States of America!