

LETTER TO PRIESTS



October 16, 2020

Dear Monsignors and Fathers,

1. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As we approach the November 3rd election, I am grateful that Catholics are fully engaged in the national conversation about the future of our country. This is an encouraging sign of the care and solicitude of the Catholic faithful for the common good. It is evidence of a generous response to the Church's call to social and political participation. This is also a time when the faithful are seeking guidance from you and other Church leadership on how to evaluate and weigh the relative importance of issues as they are deciding how to vote. Catholics often face difficult choices. In a society such as ours, it can be difficult to sort through the many considerations. I hope this letter will help you in your guidance of parishioners and constituents.

2. It is essential that Catholics properly understand the Church's social teachings in order to ensure that our witness in public life is coherent and consistent with the demands of the Gospel.¹ Specific guidance for Catholics engaged in voting and other political action is found in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* and in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*. I encourage all the Catholic faithful to study and apply the teachings of these documents as they prayerfully discern their political choices this year. The U.S. Bishops remind us that: "As citizens, 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; we should not let the party transform us in such a way that we neglect or deny fundamental moral truths or approve intrinsically evil acts."²

3. There are many moral concerns that Catholics bring to the public square, but not all concerns are equally fundamental or have the same weight.³ "This is why it is so important to vote

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2019), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ "In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose policies promoting intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions." *Forming Consciences*, 37.

according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods.”⁴ A well-formed Catholic conscience recognizes the special priority of opposing direct attacks on human life like abortion and euthanasia. Emphasizing these important issues, the U.S. bishops have stated clearly that in the hierarchy of social concerns, “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.”⁵

4. Saying that the threat of abortion is our “preeminent priority” means recognizing “the hard truth is that not all injustices in the world are ‘equal.’”⁶ As Archbishop José H. Gomez, the current president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has written: “Perhaps we can understand this better about issues in the past than we can with issues in the present. For instance, we would never want to describe slavery as just one of several problems in eighteenth and nineteenth-century American life. There are indeed ‘lesser’ evils. But that means there are also ‘greater’ evils — evils that are more serious than others and even some evils that are so grave that Christians are called to address them as a primary duty.”⁷ In the United States of America in the twenty-first century, abortion is an evil so grave that opposing it can indeed be called “a primary duty” of Christians.⁸

5. Recognizing that abortion is the preeminent threat to human life in our society does not in any way take away from our concern for all human life. As Catholics we are committed to caring for and defending human beings at all stages of life, recognizing that the lives of the unborn and the elderly, the sick, the poor, and the immigrant are “equally sacred.”⁹ However, this recognition of the fundamental equality of all human beings is different from the mistaken notion that all groups of human beings are equally under threat at this time in our nation’s history. In fact, unborn human beings face a unique and particularly grave threat in that a supposed right to directly kill them is protected by law and that this killing occurs on a massive scale. For these reasons, abortion “is not just one issue among many,” but must always be opposed.¹⁰

“In this context, it must be noted also that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.”
Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life,” Vatican, November 24, 2002, p.4, accessed October 13, 2020, (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html).

⁴ *Forming Consciences*, 34.

⁵ *Forming Consciences*, Introductory Note.

⁶ Gomez, Jose H., foreword to Thomas J. Olmstead, *Catholics in the Public Square* (Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict Press, 2016).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection... In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to “take part in a propaganda campaign in favour of such a law, or vote for it.” John Paul II, encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae*, March 25, 1995: AAS 87 (1995), 73.

⁹ Francis, apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, March 19, 2018: AAS 110 (2018), 101.

¹⁰ “The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed.” *Forming Consciences*, 28.

6. Because Catholics have a grave obligation to oppose any law or political program which permits abortion or euthanasia, this normally requires us to refuse to vote for politicians who support legal abortion.¹¹ Occasionally, there may be circumstances in which a Catholic feels obliged to reluctantly vote for a candidate who supports abortion in order to avoid supporting another evil which is proportionately grave.¹² The key word here is “proportionate.” The U.S. bishops remind us that “Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.”¹³ For example, it would not be permissible to vote for a candidate who supported slavery or segregation simply because the other candidate opposed a certain tax benefit or narrow government program. A voter who acted in this way would be treating two evils of very unequal gravity as if they were the same. In evaluating the moral positions of candidates, we must remember that abortion is particularly grave “because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed.”¹⁴ This suggests that an evil grave enough to justify voting for a candidate who supports legal abortion would also have to be a direct attack on human life with a comparable number of victims. In this context, it is important to remember that the number of victims of legal abortion in the United States approaches 900,000 per year.¹⁵

7. Voting is a decision of conscience. As Catholics, we have a responsibility to form our consciences according to the truth and not according to our private priorities. The U.S. bishops remind us that “Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere ‘feeling’ about what we should or should not do.”¹⁶ Rather, a well-formed conscience leads us to make decisions based on the truth about the human person and the proper order of moral values.¹⁷ Our discernment of these values is guided by the authoritative teaching

¹¹ “In this context, it must be noted also that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note*, 4).

¹² “Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods. A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases, a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil.” *Forming Consciences*, 34.

“There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.” *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Introductory Note.

¹⁵ The Guttmacher Institute estimates that there were 862,320 abortions in the United States in 2017. See “Induced Abortion in the United States,” Guttmacher Institute September 2019 Fact Sheet, May 08, 2020, accessed October 13, 2020, (<https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>). North Carolina reported 27,581 abortions in 2018. See N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, “2018 North Carolina Reported Induced Abortions by County of Occurrence and Residence,” accessed October 13, 2020, (<https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/vital/pregnancies/2018/reportedabortionscounty.pdf>).

¹⁶ *Forming Consciences*, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

of the Church.¹⁸ We are accountable to God’s law everywhere, including in the voting booth. Conscience also demands moral consistency in every area of our lives. We cannot be “personally opposed” to abortion or other intrinsic evils in our private life but refuse to oppose them in the public square.¹⁹ Such moral incoherence would eliminate Catholic witness in the world.²⁰ As the U.S. bishops remind us, our voting decisions may affect our eternal salvation.²¹

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "+ Peter J. Jugis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Peter J. Jugis
Bishop of Charlotte

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta Del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), no.1785; *Forming Consciences*, 5.

¹⁹ “There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called ‘spiritual life’, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called ‘secular’ life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social responsibilities, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture... “ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note*, 6. Cf. Vatican Council II, decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem*, November 18, 1965: AAS 58 (1966), 4.

²⁰ “The Church recognizes that while democracy is the best expression of the direct participation of citizens in political choices, it succeeds only to the extent that it is based on a correct understanding of the human person. Catholic involvement in political life cannot compromise on this principle, for otherwise the witness of the Christian faith in the world, as well as the unity and interior coherence of the faithful, would be non-existent.” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note*, 3.

²¹ *Forming Consciences*, 38.