

Faithful Citizenship

Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good

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The Common Good and Issues in U.S. Politics

A Critical Catholic Approach

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Introduction

[1] Over forty years ago, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that “the political realm rises directly out of acting together, . . . it is the organization of the people as it arises out of speaking and acting together” (177). This speaking and acting together, the sharing of words and deeds, brings people out of their isolation into the polis or city. It beckons them off of their islands of narrow privacy into the common life where the human good can be most fully realized. Politics, therefore, is a key sphere for the attainment of good lives. The common good that can be attained in political life is closely linked with the well being of each person. As Aristotle saw every human being as *zōon politikon* (a political or social animal) and as John Donne declared no person is an island, so Arendt argued that the speaking and acting together that occurs in politics is essential to the attainment of authentic human freedom.

Both Social and Intellectual Solidarity Are Needed

[2] My reflections on the common good and issues in U.S. politics today have been influenced by this perspective from Hannah Arendt on the importance of speech and action together that brings political life into existence. Even more, my thoughts have been shaped by the ancient theme in Western and Christian moral thought that holds that citizens have a moral responsibility to act in ways that promote the common good of the larger society rather than simply pursuing their own individual goods. Over two millennia ago, Aristotle argued that the good of the community should set the direction for the lives of individuals, for the common good is higher or more “divine” than the particular goods of private persons (1094b). In a Catholic Christian context, St. Thomas Aquinas argued that a right relation to God requires commitment to the common good of our neighbors and of all creation (1975: Pt. III, sec. 17). For Christians, the pursuit of the common good follows from the Bible’s double commandment to love God with all one’s heart and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Indeed Aquinas held that the prime purpose of all civil law is the advancement of the common good. For Aquinas, justice is the central moral virtue that directs a person’s actions toward the good of fellow human beings and “the virtue of a good citizen” is the justice “whereby a person is directed to the common good” (1981: II Part 2, q. 58, art. 6).

[3] In the Catholic tradition, therefore, active commitment to the common good is essential to good political life. Arendt sees such commitment being actualized both in deeds and in words, both in the actions carried out by citizens working together to create a common life and in the speech of fellow members of a community deliberating and arguing with each other about what their action should be. I have elsewhere called these forms of interaction the *social solidarity* that enables diverse peoples to participate actively in contributing to and benefiting from patterns of interdependence that affect them and the *intellectual solidarity* that connects people to each other as they deliberate in a genuine conversation across the boundaries that have divided the world in the past and that continue to divide it today.

[4] In my judgment, both of these forms of solidarity are very much needed in the political life of the United States today. My thesis in this essay is that the Catholic church in the United States has been making important contributions to the active social solidarity that is needed in the United States today, but that it is failing to make the contributions the church is capable of making through the deliberation that I call intellectual solidarity. Indeed, I will argue that despite the positive contributions of church leaders in the areas of social solidarity and social justice, church leaders are failing to enter into serious intellectual engagement with those who disagree with official church teaching on issues such as abortion and some areas of medical and sexual morality. This failure in intellectual engagement is weakening the common good of both U.S. society and of the Catholic community itself. In making this argument I will focus particularly on the public role of the U. S. Catholic bishops. To use Arendt’s terminology, the bishops clearly see that being linked together in a community of shared action for social justice and social solidarity is essential to attaining the common good. The bishops repeatedly stress the social solidarity that draws people together in action to overcome poverty, unemployment, lack of health care, and a degraded environment. On other key issues, however, such as matters concerning the protection of human life or

involving human sexuality, the bishops often resist intellectual exchange, debate and deliberation with those who hold positions different from theirs, both in the church itself and in the larger society. This lack of the intellectual solidarity that arises with free deliberation is undermining the common good of the church itself and is weakening the church's ability to contribute to the common good of the larger society. In making my argument I will draw mostly but not exclusively from statements by the U.S. bishops, especially their 2007 document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

Catholic Contributions to Social Solidarity

[5] The commitment of the bishops to promoting the social solidarity that supports economic justice is evident in much of their recent teaching. This emphasis has deep roots in the Catholic tradition. For example, Thomas Aquinas calls the virtue that leads people to work for the common good of the community "general justice." He contrasts it with "particular justice," the virtue that specifies obligations to individuals. The obligations of general justice can be contrasted with the obligations of individual parents to the good of their children or the duties of particular employers to protect the good of their employees by paying a just wage. These latter concerns are of course indispensable in any life that is virtuous. But they are not the whole of virtue. The meaning of justice, taken in its full sense, calls for commitment to the good of the larger community. It calls for addressing the ways the structures of society that include or exclude some people on the basis of class, race, or gender. Thus justice goes beyond one-on-one fairness and honesty. Social justice is a social virtue; it governs the patterns and organization of social life, ordering them toward the common good of the community.

[6] A number of recent commentaries on American public life have questioned whether such commitment to the common good is alive in the United States today, and even whether it is possible in our society. We have seen the appearance of books with titles such as *The Fall of Public Man* and *Why Americans Hate Politics*. A book titled *Bowling Alone* uses the declining participation in bowling leagues as a symbol for what the author sees as the collapse of public, political life in the United States in recent decades. Some authors see this evanescence of the common good as a necessary consequence of the pluralism of American life today. Pluralism, by definition, means we disagree about what makes a good life for individuals. Thus, philosophers like the late John Rawls have argued that agreement on a shared or common good is simply not possible (201). In fact, when groups of people diverge in their cultures, traditions, and ways of life, they can appear as threats to each other. Interaction with people who are very different from ourselves can appear more like a "common bad" than a good to be shared in common. Defense of one's turf becomes the first requirement of the good life. Or less ominously, the research of my colleague Alan Wolfe suggests that the experience of pluralism is leading many Americans to place a high value on a form of live-and-let-live tolerance. We prefer what Wolfe calls "morality writ small" rather than the larger goals of social or general justice and social equality that might lead to conflict (1998: esp. 54, 63, and 309). In light of the terrible bloodshed of past and present religious wars and ideological conflicts, this is encouraging.

[7] But is this enough? I do not think so, nor do a number of other analysts. We have increasingly heard pleas that a revitalization of the ancient theme of the common good is

very much needed if the United States is to navigate the turbulent waters of early twenty-first century politics. For example, William Lee Miller, a Protestant scholar and specialist in the development of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has suggested that a recovery of commitment to the common good may be “the necessary base for a true republic in the interdependent world of the third century of this nation’s existence. Miller further observed that Catholicism is the most likely source from which a recovery of commitment to the common good might arise, for the Catholic community is “the largest and intellectually and spiritually most potent” bearer of the idea of the common good (288-89).

[8] The U.S. bishops agree that the Catholic tradition has resources that can help address some of the urgent issues facing U.S. society today. Let me give specific examples of how the bishops are helping the church contribute to the common good through the social solidarity that U.S. society very much needs. The bishops’ 1986 pastoral letter on *Economic Justice for All* (1992) presented the broad outlines of a biblical and Christian vision of justice. It stressed that this vision of justice calls for action that guarantees everyone the minimal levels of nutrition and health care required to secure their human dignity. Overcoming the unemployment that leaves many people on the margins of society is also a requirement of justice. The protection of the dignity of every person is understood to be a social project. Indeed the bishops proposed a profoundly relational or solidaristic understanding of what it is to be human. Human dignity can be realized only in community. Thus to be left out or excluded from active participation in community is to have one’s basic dignity undermined or violated. The good of an individual person is thus woven together with the social good. Human rights are defined in a relational way also. They are called the minimum conditions for life in community. Thus action for the protection of human rights must be action that aimed to enhance the participation of persons in social interaction and social institutions. All persons who seek work should thus be enabled to find a job within a reasonable time period. Young people should have access to the education that will enable them to develop their minds and to grow in freedom. Thus freedom is itself a social product, at least in part. Protection of the health of individual persons is also in large part a social undertaking. In both advanced and developing societies today, health care is increasingly dependent on access both to a healthful environment and to preventative and basic therapeutic forms of health care. All these goods are increasingly shared or common goods, so the well being of individual persons is increasingly dependent on the creation of patterns of social life that enable persons to attain them.

[9] Pope John Paul II has pointed to the importance of the way full human lives are lived in common with others in his frequent discussions of the moral basis of democracy. Democracy depends on participation by all citizens in the communal relationships that give people a measure of real power to shape their environment. It requires mutual cooperation, mutual responsibility, and what Aristotle called civic friendship (1067a, b). In more contemporary language, it requires social solidarity with others. In Arendt’s terms, people need to be able to act together, and those who are left out of this social interaction have their freedom and dignity undermined.

[10] Pope John Paul II defined solidarity as a moral virtue expressed in “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (1992: no. 38). Such commitment to the common good is directly opposed to the deep economic divisions in our

society, such as those between core cities and suburbs or between isolated rural areas and the domains of high tech growth. As the U.S. bishops put it, the most basic requirement of justice requires working for “*the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons.*” Or in negative terms, “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were nonmembers of the human race” (1992: no. 77). Such exclusion is the very opposite of solidarity, for it marginalizes persons and whole groups from participation in the common life of the larger community. There are so few decent jobs in many urban ghettos that people simply give up looking for work. As the bishops put it in 1986, they are effectively told by the community: “we don’t need your talent, we don’t need your initiative, we don’t need *you*” (1992: no. 141). This leads to what Cornell West has referred to as the “eclipse of hope” – a “profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair” (5, see 12-13). When human beings are told repeatedly that they are simply not needed, it takes extraordinary self-confidence to keep trying. Such messages, built into class structures of American life today, lead to the drugs and violence of many American urban centers today.

[11] When citizens “tolerate” such conditions when remedial steps could be taken, the common good is undermined and injustice is being done. One can hardly think of a more effective way to deny people active participation in the economic life of society than to leave them facing unemployment for years, even over generations. In a society as rich as ours, such people are effectively being told they don’t count as members of our community at all. Their good is not part of any commonwealth. As the U.S. Bishops put it in 1986, “The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons” (1992: no. 88). The urban poor are citizens of the American republic and we have a duty to treat them as such. To begin doing so, we need a renewed commitment to a good that must be there for us all if it is to be there for any of us – the common good. When we begin to act together toward this shared good, we will on a path marked out for us by the deepest traditions of Western and Christian thought. We will be on the path toward an American public life healed of some of its deepest wounds and on the way to a new realization of the good that is common.

[12] The challenge of social solidarity and the common good also arises on the international level. The much discussed phenomenon of globalization points to new links among nations and peoples that are developing today on multiple levels – the political, the economic (including trade, finance, investment, production, and consumption), the social-cultural (through mass media and the internet), and the environmental (see Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton; Nye and Donahue). From the standpoint of Catholic social thought some aspects of this thickening web of interdependence must be judged negative, others are positive. The negative face of globalization is evident in the continuing reality of massive poverty in some developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, despite the growth of the overall global economy. To be sure, markets and trade can be engines of improved well-being. But many people, perhaps the majority in the poor countries of sub-Saharan Africa, lack all access to these markets and so do not benefit from them. Social exclusion and marginalization again appear as the markers of the injustice that causes poverty.

[13] In the face of African poverty, the key question is how to move from patterns of global interaction that leave out whole peoples and large parts of a whole continent to patterns

based on inclusion and reciprocity. Pope John Paul II called this “globalization in solidarity, globalization without marginalization” (1998: no. 3). This is a form of interdependence shaped by what the United States Catholic Bishops called “basic justice” – the minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community that is required of persons to live in dignity (1992: no. 77). Inclusion and participation based on equality are the fundamental marks that should be shaping the social, economic, and political institutions of our globalizing world. In 2007 the bishops appealed for a kind of global solidarity that overcomes the scandal of poverty and underdevelopment and that leads to the building up of the global common good (2007: no. 88).

[14] In other words, if we are to begin the task of securing minimal justice, we need to overcome the divisions in both U.S. domestic life and in our global society that exclude many people from sharing in the common good that our action together is generating. We need to make a fundamental “option for the poor” and for the excluded or marginalized. In 2007 the bishops put it this way: “While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst (2007: no. 50).

[15] The church in the United States seems to have been notably successful in communicating this message that concern for the poor is a central part of the Christian life. The recent study by William D’Antonio and his co-authors of the actual beliefs held by American Catholics concluded that in 2005 84% of American Catholics believed that “helping the poor” is “very important” to their lives as Catholics. This is the same percentage that held that “belief in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead” is very important to their Catholic identity. It is notably higher than the 47% who believe that “the Catholic church’s teachings that oppose same sex marriage” are “very important” or the 44% who believe that “the Catholic church’s teachings on abortion” are “very important” (24).

Issues of Life and Sex: Lack of Intellectual Engagement

[16] These data open the door for some reflection on why the leadership of the church seems to have been more effective in enabling its members to grasp the implications of commitment to the common good for their concern for the poor than it has in leading them to accept the bishops’ teachings on abortion and same sex marriage. The bishops’ 2007 statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* repeatedly states that abortion is an “intrinsically evil” act that can never be justified. In the bishops words,

There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called “intrinsically evil” actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia (no. 22).

This is extraordinarily strong language. It is not unique to the recent statement of the U.S. bishops, for very similar language can be found the teachings of Pope John Paul II and in a statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when it was headed by Cardinal

Josef Ratzinger before he became Pope Benedict XVI (John Paul II 1995: 73; CDF: 4). Given the strength and clarity of these declarations, the central question becomes why less than half of American Catholics see them as “very important” to their lives of faith.

[17] One answer, of course, could be that the Catholics who are not prepared to conclude that actions such as abortion, euthanasia, and embryonic stem cell research are intrinsically and always evil are not, in fact, faithful Catholics. The same might be said of those Catholics who support politicians who do not seek to ban abortion, euthanasia, and same sex marriage: they are being unfaithful to the teachings of the church and, for that reason, should leave the church. There are some very disturbing data in the recent *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that suggests that a number of Catholics may be reaching this conclusion themselves.

[18] The Religious Landscape Survey is the most extensive ever done on religious membership in the United States. It has revealed that, though the Catholic population is relatively constant due to the large numbers of Catholics among recent immigrants, there has been a dramatic rate of departure from the church by those who were born Catholic in the United States. As the Survey puts it: “Approximately one-third of the survey respondents who say they were raised Catholic no longer describe themselves as Catholic. This means that roughly 10% of all Americans are former Catholics” (Pew Forum Key Findings). In fact the survey shows that the Catholic church has experienced a greater net loss of those raised within it than any other religious community in the United States. Thus in the words of my colleague at Boston College, Alan Wolfe, non-immigrant Catholic membership is “in free fall” (2008).

[19] I am not in a position to offer a definitive explanation of why so many Catholics have been leaving the church of their youth. To be sure, changing from one religious community to another has long been accepted in American culture and it is a more accepted part of American life today than it was in the past. So assimilation to the cultural openness to religious change is surely part of the reason for high level of Catholic outward mobility from the church. Another possible explanation is that Catholic doctrine, especially Catholic moral doctrine, is more demanding than that of other religious communities and makes demands that are particularly burdensome in the context of the ethos that prevails in the United States today. Pope John Paul II would likely have agreed with this interpretation, for his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* set forth a vision of a world marked by a dramatic conflict between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death.” The phrase “culture of death” appears twelve times in this encyclical. If so many are leaving their church because they are more at home with the “culture of death” than with the demands of the “culture of life,” one could conclude that the church is in fact better off without those who have departed. Those who remain will be a faithful remnant still committed to exercising a positive role as faithful citizens in a society that needs to be challenged and even confronted.

[20] But before concluding that this is the right way to understand the high Catholic departure rate, we need to reflect carefully on whether it is really the right interpretation of what is happening and why. It will be salutary to remember how the pastoral strategy adopted by French Catholic leaders toward the church’s relationship with the state before and during the French revolution contributed to the rising tide of secularization that helped

marginalize Catholicism from both politics and culture in France. The papacy and French episcopacy found it difficult to see the positive values embodied in the movement for democracy and focused on the negative challenges to the public role of the church being advanced by the revolution. Papal and episcopal support for the continuation of close links between church and throne was one of the factors that contributed to the secularism that marks French culture today. In addition, until Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, through much of the nineteenth century the church failed to respond to concerns about the condition of the working classes in the face of rising industrialization. Thus, inadequate pastoral strategies in the past have led to notable reductions in Catholic belief and practice and to reduced influence of the church in intellectual and social life. Decline in belief and practice in the past has not only been the responsibility of unfaithful laity. The opposition of pastoral leadership to democracy, religious freedom, and human rights was one of the principal causes of secularization and declines in church membership in much of Europe. Subsequent developments in Catholic thought, especially at Vatican II, have shown that this opposition was a pastoral and theological mistake, rooted in papal and episcopal failure to understand how modern freedoms could be embodiments of the gospel. Is it thinkable that something analogous to this is happening in the United States Catholic community today?

[21] In my judgment, the approach taken by the U.S. bishops is insufficiently attentive to the deep commitment most Americans have to living in ways that respect persons with whom they disagree and to extending tolerance to the opinions of those with different religious and moral commitments than their own. In the view articulated by Pope John Paul II, this high valuation of tolerance has led American society to become far too open to practices such as abortion, and too ready to consider the possible legitimacy of euthanasia. The Pope argues that Western cultures today tend to elevate the freedom of individual choice to the level of the highest, even the only, value. He further maintains that this philosophy has the negative consequence of protecting the freedom of action of those who possess power, while it subjects the weak and the powerless to severe threats to their dignity and even their lives. *Evangelium Vitae* sees abortion and euthanasia as key symptoms of this threat. In addition, the encyclical sharply criticizes inadequate response to global poverty, war, and the plight of refugees. It traces the failure to deal with these urgent matters to this philosophy as well.

[22] John Paul II saw abortion and euthanasia as particularly symptomatic of this problem, however, because of the way that individual freedom of choice is related to debates about the role of civil law in relation to these issues. Abortion and euthanasia are not new phenomena today, but the call for “legal recognition” or “legal approval” is new. Thus the “sign of the times” that so alarms John Paul II is the fact that these forms of life-taking are increasingly not regarded as crimes but as “legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights” (1995: 18). It is hardly surprising that the U.S. bishops have appropriated this teaching of the pope.

[23] I have myself argued at some length that an ethic based on the single value of tolerance is not enough to sustain the common good of American and global society today. Indeed my book on *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* contains a chapter entitled “Problems Tolerance Cannot Handle” that sets forth a proposal for how to revitalize active commitment to the common good in the United States today (Hollenbach: chap. 2). However, my proposal on how to pursue this revitalization does not in the first instance call

for the passage of legislation that would coercively ban practices judged morally unacceptable in the official teachings of the church. Rather, I call for serious engagement among those who hold different assessments of these issues in an effort to understand each other's position so that, perhaps, new agreement might be reached. This is the virtue I have called intellectual solidarity. It is the virtue that calls us to develop better understandings that reach across cultures through listening as well as speaking in a genuine dialogue with those who are different. It requires intellectual commitment that seeks to understand each other, as well as pursuit of insight into the ways the structures of our society are working and what they are actually doing to the most vulnerable. It calls for developing well-rounded proposals on how to transform the institutional centers of decision-making in our increasingly interconnected societies so they serve *all* members of the human race. In short, it calls for long-term, serious work that takes commitment to the common good as its loadstar.

Intellectual Humility as a Condition of Public Effectiveness

[24] But note well, this virtue of intellectual solidarity can only be developed in an atmosphere of respect for freedom and from a stance of intellectual humility. Nothing will prevent its development more surely than the view that one already knows all that one needs to know to develop coercive legislation that will genuinely serve the goods of all members of society. To move quickly and without the required dialogue to categorizing broad categories of actions as "intrinsically evil" and to be banned by coercive law as soon as this can realistically be achieved is not to respect the freedom nor to assume the posture of humility required by intellectual solidarity.

[25] I fear this lack of respect and humility can be discerned in some aspects of church teaching today. One can ask whether the level of certitude that characterizes some contemporary church teaching about how to approach abortion, euthanasia, and a number of other issues through the legislative and political processes may not amount to a form of hubris. If this is so, it may be part of the explanation for the high rate of departure from Catholic church membership in the United States today.

[26] I am aware, of course, that the bishops leave some room for prudential judgment about how their commitment to eliminating what they see as intrinsically evil acts should be translated into public policy. For example they say

There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may 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 (2007: no. 35).

At the same time, however, the bishops maintain that despite their desire to avoid taking stances focused on a single issue such as abortion, it is also the case that "a candidate's position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support" (2007: no. 42).

[27] There is some evidence that a small number of issues including abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, and to a lesser extent gay marriage, have become the

overriding issues that trump all others and that have been leading a number of bishops to intervene directly in the political process. Some bishops have objected to political candidates speaking at church related institutions because of their positions on the issue of abortion alone. For example, Archbishop José Gomez of San Antonio objected to Hillary Clinton having spoken at St. Mary's University because her position on life issues is "not consistent with the teaching of the Catholic Church." At the same time, Archbishop Gomez explicitly stated that Governor Mike Huckabee's positions on abortion and embryonic stem cell research "are not in opposition to the teaching of the Catholic Church" and that church teaching judges that the war in Iraq and on capital punishment "as not carrying the same moral weight as abortion" (2008a and 2008b). Clearly abortion is here trumping the war and capital punishment in the eyes of Archbishop Gomez. Comments rejecting the stance of Republican candidate Rudy Giuliani on abortion have also been voiced by a number of bishops; so intervention in the campaign has touched both Democrats and Republicans. It has not, to my knowledge however, led to critical comments being made about candidates because of their positions on the Iraq war, the death penalty, poverty in the developing world, or health care in the United States. For example, Cardinal Edward Egan of New York issued a statement regretting that former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had received the Eucharist during a mass celebrated by Pope Benedict during the pope's visit to New York. Cardinal Egan said he had had an understanding with Giuliani that he would not receive the Eucharist because of his position favoring freedom of choice regarding abortion. It is noteworthy that Cardinal Egan did not mention Giuliani's strong support for the Iraq war, nor did he mention that Mr. Giuliani has been divorced and remarried several times.

[28] There is evidence, therefore, that for at least some high ranking bishops the issues presented as "intrinsically evil" *de facto* outweigh the other serious moral matters treated in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. This seems especially true regarding abortion. The basis for this priority is explicitly, though perhaps inadvertently, set forward when the bishops write that that "resorting to unjust war" and "an unjust immigration policy" are "serious moral issues that challenge our consciences." But the bishops' statement then goes on to note, "these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters for principled debate" (2007: no. 29). I say this must be an inadvertent statement, because a war or an immigration policy that is unjust cannot be a matter of principled debate in Catholic moral thought. If a war or immigration policy is unjust, it is simply immoral, period. There is no such thing as a morally acceptable unjust war; this is self-contradictory language. What has happened here, it seems, is that war, whether just or unjust, is being judged not important enough to make the kind of apodictic claim on conscience that abortion is judged to make. Nor are other considerations, such as efforts to secure justice for women, seen as relevant to the abortion debate. The issue of abortion is simply overwhelmingly important for public policy and all debate about this is apparently closed.

[29] A sizable percentage of American Catholics do not accept this cut-and-dried, take-it-or-leave-it approach to the complex issue of abortion, nor to some of the other matters declared intrinsically evil by the bishops. For example, a broad group of Catholic members of the U.S. congress have been seeking to develop a policy position that significantly reduces the number of abortions by providing economic and other forms of support for women who face problematic pregnancies. Others have argued that a serious effort to reduce

abortion needs to help prevent problematic pregnancies by providing greater access to contraception for sexually active young people. The bishops themselves state their support for “laws and programs that encourage childbirth and adoption over abortion and by addressing poverty, providing health care, and offering other assistance to pregnant women, children, and families” (2007: no. 65). Serious commitment to working for the common good and to overcoming the deep splits that divide our society on the abortion issue would appear to call the church and the bishops to engage in sustained efforts to work with those who are seeking to find new policies that reduce abortion. Unfortunately the practical implication of the use of the language of “intrinsic evil” in the condemnation of abortion means that such collaboration is approached with suspicion and is too rarely pursued.

[30] Whether the number of abortions can be reduced more effectively by taking economic and other preventative measures that reduce pressures on women to consider abortion or by passing legislation that simply bans abortion outright is clearly a matter of practical wisdom. Reaching a judgment on such a matter calls for exercise of the classic virtue of prudence. Discussion and debate about such issues with those who hold positions on them that are different from one’s own is an exercise of the virtue I have called intellectual solidarity. It is my fear that the bishops’ current approach may well undermine both of these virtues. I also fear that at least some of the Americans who were born and raised Catholic but who no longer are so have left the church because they think that its bishops are leading it in a direction that is lacking in prudence and therefore unvirtuous. If that is that case, we face a serious crisis indeed.

The Christian Message on Politics: Good News and Hope

[31] Let me conclude with a final comment about the tone of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. I regret to say that I find the statement lacking in even a minimal presentation of the deep and broad Catholic vision of what a good society could look like. The bishops’ 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* included a rich description of the Old Testament’s vision of a society formed by covenant with God and by Jesus’s proclamation of the coming reign of God. This biblical vision was correlated with an understanding of justice and the common good that saw all persons as active participants in the life of the national and global communities. Only against the backdrop of this rich vision were more detailed moral norms presented. Thus *Economic Justice for All* had the capacity to awaken peoples’ imaginations to the beautiful vision of what human life can be when it is lived in response to the gospel. Perhaps it was the imaginative encounters with the biblical vision that were stimulated by the biblical and liturgical renewals of the years since Vatican II, and that influenced *Economic Justice for All* in 1986, that has led concern for the poor to be near the top of many American Catholics’ understanding of what is most important to their religious identity.

[32] Sad to say, I find this powerful imaginative vision of life in covenant with God and in hope of the coming Kingdom almost entirely lacking from the recent efforts of the U.S. bishops to help Catholics see how their faith should affect their lives as citizens. Instead of such vision, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* presents us with relentlessly moralistic lists of dos and don’ts, prescriptions and proscriptions. At some level of moral discourse such prescriptions and proscriptions are fully appropriate. In my judgment, however, they are not what are needed from church leaders in the current cultural situation of the United

States. The need today is for hope and for a vision that points the way to a civic and global community that is truly worthy of our loyalty. Lists of evils, intrinsic or otherwise, and condemnations of actions or persons, are just what we do not need from the church and its leaders, if we are to inspire action for the common good.

[33] The gospel still beckons, and the Christian vision lived in community still sustains the action of many faithful Catholics in their lives as citizens. My hope is that a deeper appropriation and communication of that vision can expand their number. We need to be more than a faithful remnant if the church is to live out its vocation in the United States of today.

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