

CONSCIENCE AND THE CATHOLIC VOTER – 4TH OF 8

“In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.”

- *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 13

Since participation in political life is a moral obligation, Catholics need to form their conscience with the mind and heart of the Church on issues of consequence. This outline is the fourth of eight, which will examine important moral and political issues. This fourth outline will provide an overview of the issue of religious freedom.

Religious Freedom

Catholics in America have long enjoyed the fact that in the Bill of Rights, religious liberty, with its rights of conscience, is the first freedom that is protected in our Constitution. Yet today, religious freedom, even in the United States, is consistently being challenged. As Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami, the acting chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty has pointed out:

Religious freedom is under stress throughout the world. Even in our Western liberal democracies, discrimination against religion in general and Catholic Christianity, in particular, is growing... “Yet, just as freedom of speech depends not only on one’s right to say what’s on one’s mind but also on the existence of institutions like newspapers, universities, libraries, political parties and other associations that make up what we call ‘civil society,’ so too freedom of religion ‘for the good of all’ must also encompass protecting those institutions that nourish the individual’s free exercise of religion. (Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami, <http://www.usccb.org/news/20-100.cfm>)

We can see this stress and hostility towards religion from cases against the Little Sisters of the Poor to faith-based adoption agencies, the accreditation of religious educational institutions, the grants and contracts of faith-based charities and small businesses, and the licensing of religious professions. Our cherished religious liberties are now at stake by our political choices. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has written:

In the United States, religious freedom generally enjoys strong protection in our law and culture, but those protections are now in doubt. For example, the longstanding tax exemption of the Church has been explicitly called into question at the highest levels of government, precisely because of her teachings on marriage. Catholics have a particular duty to make sure that protections like these do not weaken but instead grow in strength. This is not only to secure the just freedom of the Church and the faithful here but also to offer hope and an encouraging witness to those who suffer direct and even violent religious persecution in countries where the protection is far weaker. (The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, P. 30)

It is imperative then as Catholics that we defend religious liberty and the rights of conscience in our political choices. For religious liberty has its foundation in the dignity of the human person. As Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami points out:

The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person. Religious freedom is the human right that guarantees all other rights — peace and creative living together will only be possible if freedom of religion is fully respected. (<http://www.usccb.org/news/20-100.cfm>)

In summation, it is the duty of every Catholic to fight for religious liberty to ensure not only the right of conscience in the workplace, but so that families, Churches, and peoples of all faiths can work in accordance with their religious beliefs while they care for the common good, the poor and vulnerable, and God’s creation.

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