

## Faithful Citizenship: Our Responsibility

**By The Most Reverend Glen John Provost, Bishop of Lake Charles**

In November of 2007, the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a document entitled, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." The purpose of this instruction for Catholics was "to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience" (#17).

In light of this document and the decisions that we as Catholics must make as responsible citizens, I add my own instruction. I will do so by addressing some questions that Catholics often ask.

1. What is conscience? According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act" (#1796). "Following your conscience" does not mean "doing as you wish." Conscience is not an arbitrary "feeling" or an "opinion." The Catechism continues, "Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator" (#1783). Each and every one of us has an obligation to inform his or her conscience correctly, according to the truth.

2. What is the purpose of any political process? Any legitimate political process seeks the common good. When Cain, after having killed his brother Abel, as recorded in the Book of Genesis, asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9), the answer is a resounding "Yes." Jesus reaffirmed that answer. He did so most notably in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The Good Samaritan overlooks the differences of culture and tradition, looks beyond the distinctions of foreigner and citizen, and assists someone who has fallen

victim to robbers and been left to die.

One's opinion or arbitrary "feelings", much less any narrow self-interest, is not reason enough to vote for a particular measure or candidate. The benefit of the common good must be first and foremost. The common good, as Genesis and the Parable of the Good Samaritan also remind us, involves not only our social well-being but also our true and highest good. With this in mind, the pursuit of the common good cannot be an excuse to abrogate a person's fundamental rights. Finally, let us make this observation about the political process. We must remember that in a democracy, the government reflects the society, for better or worse. As Thomas Jefferson observed, a true democracy presupposes virtuous citizens.

3. Does the Church tell me how to vote? No, it does not. Neither I nor anyone else in the Church is telling anyone how to vote. The Church would be negligent, however, if it did not teach particularly in moral matters.

As the Catechism says in quoting the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the mission of the Church is "to pass moral judgments even in matters related to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires it" (#2246). The Church is obliged by the teachings of Our Lord to communicate without compromise the truth in the area of morals, especially as they impact the common good of the society.

The Church is involved in this instruction also because it is a free member of the society. The Church also has rights.

4. What are some important moral judgments? The first and foremost is the right to life. A civilized society insures the basic freedom to live for each and every citizen. The obligation for the common good oblig-

ates all of us to assist the defenseless, whether they be children in the womb, persons weakened by age and illness or victims of human engineering. Life is fundamental. Therefore, acts that promote the destruction of innocent life, like abortion, are intrinsically evil. The taking of innocent life is never justifiable, and a law that permits this is flawed because it violates the common good.

5. Are capital punishment and war also pro-life issues? They certainly are. The difference is that capital punishment and war are not intrinsic evils. While capital punishment and war must remain rarely justified, self-defense and defense of the nation, which are both a right and responsibility, can motivate them. Abortion is never justified. In the matter of voting, one cannot justify a vote for a candidate who promotes an intrinsic evil, while appealing to that same candidate's opposition to war or capital punishment. To vote for a candidate with the purpose of promoting an immoral practice violates a good conscience. In doing so one directly wills and participates in choosing and bringing about evil. Voting for a "pro-abortion" candidate helps make possible the destruction of innocent life.

6. If all candidates favor abortion, but in different circumstances, then what choice is there? There is no justification for voting for a candidate who endorses the killing of the innocent without restriction or reservation. Faced with a totally "pro-choice" or "pro-abortion" roster, one could only vote for the candidate who proposes to do the "lesser evil."

7. Are social justice issues also pro-life issues? Issues such as poverty, housing, and education are part of pro-life concerns. One must always remember that social conditions presuppose the protection of human life. The protection of human life is funda-

mental. Without the protection of human life, society and its concerns about the common welfare of its citizens are in jeopardy. The right to life for every innocent person is inalienable and a fundamental principle for civil society and its laws. In the words of Pope John Paul II, as quoted in the bishops' document, "the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination (Christifideles Laici, no. 38)" (Faithful Citizenship #26).

All issues, as they involve the common good, are related. However, not all issues are equal. Some are fundamental, like life. Others require greater definition, like poverty. Still others are terribly complex, like war. All of them are important but not equivalent. Because they are important, they require careful consideration. Voting for a law out of self-interest or a candidate because of an arbitrary "feeling" or the candidate's appearance is out of the question for a conscientious voter.

The society cannot afford such superficiality. The Catholic voter must first find out exactly what positions a candidate is taking. Then, the voter should seek to inform his or her conscience, according to the truth and solid moral principles. The voter next must bring the decision to prayer. Finally, the voter must act responsibly.

**(EDITOR'S NOTE: This was first published in the May 23, 2008 Catholic Calendar. It can also be downloaded at [lcdioocese.org](http://lcdioocese.org). For more information on Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, go to [USCCB.org](http://USCCB.org).)**



The Most Reverend Glen John Provost, Bishop of Lake Charles, asks questions of the assembled students of Our Lady Immaculate Catholic School in Jennings on Monday, Sept. 29. Bishop Provost presided at the blessing of the school on the occasion of its Golden Jubilee. The school was founded in 1958 as Our Lady Help of Christians School and consolidated with Immaculate Conception School in September 1969 taking the name Our Lady Immaculate School.

### Did you know...

Bishop Glen John Provost is the third Bishop of the Diocese of Lake Charles. He chose as his episcopal motto **PRO VENTURIS SERIT**, "which is taken from Latin Antiquity and reflects the image of the sower and the seed in the parables of the Gospel. It expresses the Bishop's goal that in all that he does as a bishop, "he plants for those to come." The motto of our founding Bishop, Bishop Jude Speyer was "To Bring Glad Tidings." The diocesan television program which continues to air each Sunday morning was named "Glad Tidings" to follow his vision. Bishop Edward K. Braxton, our second Bishop, had as his motto "*Gaudium et Spes*" (Joy and Hope), the opening words of the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

**Hurricanes Audrey, Rita, and Ike are not the only tropical weather systems to have destroyed or damaged churches in Cameron Parish. Do you know how many times the courageous people of Cameron have had to rebuild their churches. Find out in our next Catholic Calendar.**

## Bishop Provost will celebrate Red Mass

LAKE CHARLES – The Most Reverend Glen John Provost, Bishop of Lake Charles, will celebrate the Red Mass at 12:05 p.m. Columbus Day, Monday, October 13 in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. On hand will be judges and attorneys from the five civil parishes which make up the Diocese of Lake Charles – Calcasieu, Cameron, Allen, Beauregard and Jefferson Davis – as well as other gov-

ernment officials.

The Red Mass refers to a Mass celebrated for judges, prosecutors, attorneys, law school professors, students, and government officials. The Mass requests guidance from the Holy Spirit for all who seek justice, and offers the opportunity to reflect on what Catholics believe is the God-given power and responsibility of all in the legal profession.

## Women's Prayer Luncheon Nov. 4

LAKE CHARLES – The inaugural Women's Prayer Luncheon with Bishop Glen John Provost will be held Tuesday, Nov. 4, in the Bucaneer Room of the Lake Charles Civic Center, located on the third floor.

Seating will be available at 11:30 a.m. and the luncheon will begin at 12:05

p.m. Those who wish to attend should call 439-7400 to register. Ladies attending are asked to send their checks for \$10 to cover the meal to Ms. Esther Gallardo, 612 Alamo Street, Lake Charles, LA 70601-8616. Please make the check out to **Diocese of Lake Charles**.

## October - Respect Life Month

# Hope and Trust in Life!

In April 2008, the United States was blessed by the pastoral visit of Pope Benedict XVI.

Americans discovered in our Holy Father a man of immense intellectual gifts, great wisdom and an unparalleled knowledge of today's geopolitical, social and cultural realities. They also discovered a kindly, gentle priest imbued with humility, with holiness and love. Still, he would be the first to say that the trip was not about him.

God sent Pope Benedict to us with a message, one that doesn't lend itself to the 10-second sound bites and rapid-cycling images of today's media. We Christians in the United States can benefit greatly from carefully reading his talks and homilies, from reflecting on his message and asking ourselves: "How does this message apply to my life?"

In his meeting with the Catholic bishops of the U.S., Pope Benedict affirmed that our country "is marked by a genuinely religious spirit," but this spirit is all too often confined to our places and times of worship:

*[The subtle influence of secularism can ... color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior. Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death?]*

The answers to these questions are obvious. But have we really considered the consequences of this gap between our profession of faith and our living it out? Under "America's brand of secularism," Pope Benedict explains:

*Faith becomes a passive acceptance that certain things 'out there' are true, but without practical relevance for everyday life. The result is a growing separation of faith from life: living 'as if God did not exist.' This is aggravated by an individualistic and eclectic approach to faith and religion: far from a Catholic approach to 'thinking with the Church,' each person believes he or she has a right to pick and choose, maintaining external social bonds but without an integral, interior conversion to the law of Christ. Consequently, rather than being transformed and renewed in mind, Christians are easily tempted to conform themselves to the spirit of this age (cf. Rom 12:3). We have seen this emerge in an acute way in the scandal given by Catholics*

*who promote an alleged right to abortion.*

By treating religious faith as an isolated set of beliefs that is irrelevant to our personal and political decisions, Americans have allowed a culture of death to take root and spread. While it is easy to cite politicians who publicly sever their "personal" religious beliefs from their voting behavior, each of us falls short of living out our beliefs perfectly and consistently.

What is meant by the expression "culture of death"? It is a pervasive attitude that accepts the intentional killing of an innocent human being as a solution to a social or economic problem. The broad acceptance of abortion, "mercy" killing, assisted suicide, population control measures, abortifacients marketed as "contraceptives," and the destruction of human embryos for research signal how far we still need to go to build a society where all understand that every human life is sacred because each of us is created, loved and redeemed by God.

Pope Benedict encourages us to be clear in our beliefs, act consistently with them, and be animated in our efforts to transform our culture.

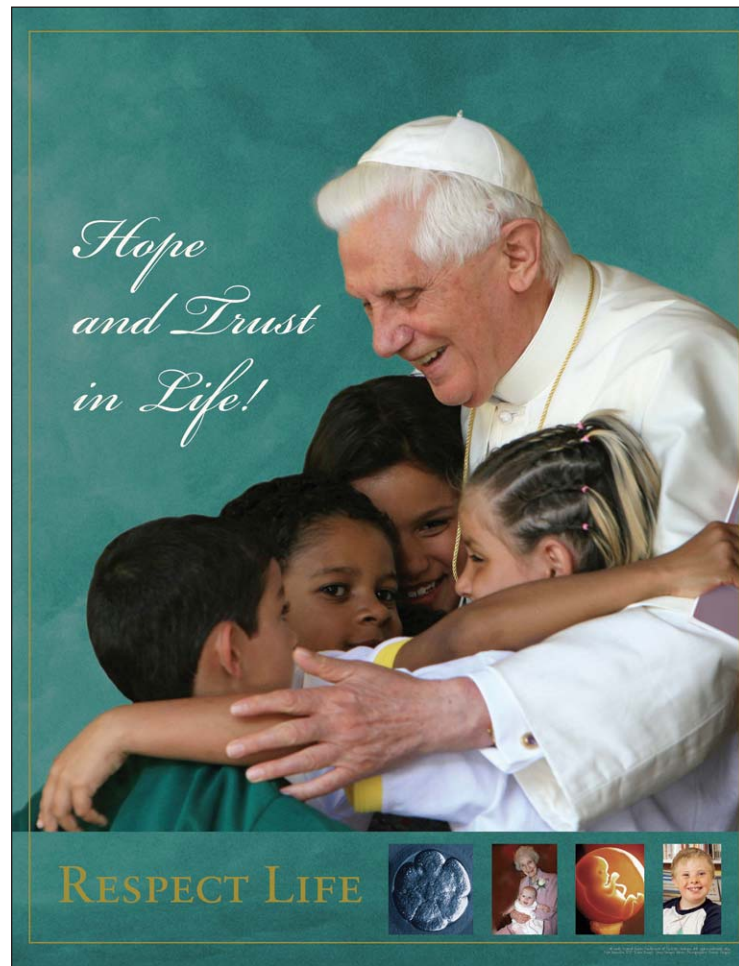
"The proclamation of life, life in abundance, must be the heart of the new evangelization," said Pope Benedict in his homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral. "For true life—our salvation—can only be found in the reconciliation, freedom and love which are God's gracious gift."

Therefore, he continued: "The Church ... is called to proclaim the gift of life, to serve life, and to promote a culture of life. ... This is the message of hope we are called to proclaim and embody in a world where self-centeredness, greed, violence, and cynicism so often seem to choke the fragile growth of grace in people's hearts."

Our Holy Father urged us to let our daily prayer to the Father—"Thy Kingdom come!"—bear fruit in the way we lead our lives and build up our families and communities. He added: "Praying fervently for the coming of the Kingdom ... means overcoming every separation between faith and life, and countering false gospels of freedom and happiness. It also means rejecting a false dichotomy between faith and political life."

Through the sacraments and meditative prayer, we can rediscover the truth and joy of Christian life fully lived for

God and for others. By letting the love of Jesus Christ permeate our lives and actions in defense of our vulnerable brothers and sisters, we can transform our nation, building a culture where all people can again hope and trust in life!



RESPECT LIFE

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