



# Religious Freedom, Conscience and the Sanctity of Human Life

This is the second in a series of reflections related to the upcoming election offered by the leaders of the four dioceses in Kansas.

The intention of this reflection (and those to follow) is not to endorse or oppose a particular candidate, political party, or political action committee. Instead, it is to show how human reasoning enlightened by our Catholic Faith shapes our thinking, choosing and acting in daily life, including the most basic obligation of citizenship: voting.

## **The Role of Conscience**

People often hear the advice that they should “follow their conscience.” But what does that mean? For many people, conscience is based on what they feel about what is right or wrong; they perceive conscience as an opinion about a particular matter. For others, conscience is based on their political view or what appears personally beneficial. Most people think conscience is something private, subjective and personal.

As a Church we recognize that conscience is much more than a feeling or opinion. Conscience is a conscious effort to seek the truth about a matter and then to make decisions accordingly. To put it another way, conscience is the process a person undertakes to make judgments about what is true and right based on God’s revelation to us and the light of reason. The Second Vatican Council described conscience as a person’s “most secret core and sanctuary” where one is “alone with God.” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965, #16) It is in the conscience that a person hears the voice of God and for this reason, the judgment of one’s conscience must be faithfully followed. To betray one’s conscience is to betray oneself and God. We believe that, in the end, God will judge us based on our conscience. That is, we will be judged based on our attempt to act with integrity and according to what we understand to be right.

## **Respect for Religious Liberty and Conscience**

Religious Liberty is the first freedom in our nation’s Bill of Rights. Religious Liberty is the foundation of our democracy and way of life. In the past, our nation has

understood that respect for Religious Liberty includes recognizing the individual conscience of each person. The recognition of conscience allows each person to act with integrity by being true to the call from the “core and sanctuary” of one’s heart where one is “alone with God.” Sadly, this regard for conscience is now being disregarded as evidenced most recently in the “Contraceptive Mandate” issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The original policy announced by HHS on August 3, 2011, which was reaffirmed on January 20, 2012, meant that almost all employers (including Catholic employers) would be forced to offer their employees health coverage that includes sterilization, abortion inducing drugs and contraception. In response to the enormous pressure from many people of faith and criticisms from every direction, the President announced on February 10th an accommodation to respond to the concerns raised by so many.

**“Unfortunately, the President’s accommodation does not solve the moral dilemma created by the HHS Mandate.”**

Unfortunately, the President’s accommodation does not solve the moral dilemma created by the HHS Mandate. The accommodation retains the narrow definition of “religious employers.” While the accommodation broadens who would be “exempt” from the Mandate, it continues to propagate a very narrow understanding of who qualifies as religious. If allowed to stand, this is a dangerous precedent.

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The accommodation, while broadening organizations and entities which will not have to list these services in their health plan, mandates that their insurers will have to provide them at no cost. Somehow, these so-called services have to be funded. It is difficult to believe that insurers will not build them into their premiums.

The accommodation will require all insurers to provide contraception, abortion drugs and sterilizations. This mandate will force Catholic individuals and entities (e.g. Catholic Health Systems) out of the health insurance business. Moreover, the accommodation means that even religiously exempt organizations will not know what that exemption really means until late into 2013.

Self-insured plans, where the religious organization is both the employer and insurer, will evidently be required to provide morally objectionable services. Similarly, there is no exemption for Catholic employers and other employers who find the HHS Contraceptive Mandate morally objectionable. Nor does the accommodation provide any protection for individuals who have a conscience objection to the Mandate.

The President's proposed accommodation does not solve the numerous moral problems and infringements on religious freedom and conscience created by the HHS Mandate.

## **Formation of Conscience**

To make decisions in conformity with God's love and truth, a conscience must be formed. If not well-formed, a conscience can lead a person to make erroneous judgments about what is right, good and true. There are various reasons why a conscience may mislead or misguide a person. Some of the sources for bad or erroneous judgments include ignorance, neglect of the truth, habitual sin, lack of conversion, bad example of others, or rejection of the Church and her teaching.

**...the Church teaches that the education of a well-formed conscience is a "lifelong task."**

This is why the Church teaches that the education of a well-formed conscience is a "lifelong task." (Catechism

1784) Catholics have a responsibility to form their conscience. This is done in a variety of ways including consulting Christian sources of truth and wisdom, such as Sacred Scripture, especially the words and actions of Jesus. Growing in the knowledge of moral law, the documents of the Church and the lives of the saints are other important resources for conscience formation. Regular prayer, participation in the sacraments, and asking for the grace of ongoing conversion to what is true is a part of the development of a well-formed conscience. The more we pray in communion with God, the more sensitive and open we become to hearing God speak in the depths of our hearts.

## **Conscience and the Dignity of the Human Person**

Following our conscience requires that we search for the truth and then act accordingly. One of these truths is that human life is created in God's image and likeness. This means that there is something holy and God-like in every human being. This means God has a relationship with every human being whether they are fully aware of it or not.

Those entrusted with an office of public service have a duty to uphold the dignity of each person, who is made in God's image, first of all by defending their right to life itself. Without this first right, all other rights are meaningless. Those in public life are also required to work for policies that uphold the dignity of the human person by assisting the poor and providing access to health care, education and employment opportunities for everyone.

Over 25 years ago Pope John Paul II observed that a culture of death has taken root and spread in the world. A culture of death is a pervasive attitude that accepts the intentional killing of a human life as a solution to a personal, social, or economic problem. God's Word in Sacred Scripture and our Catholic tradition proclaims that it is always and everywhere a grave moral evil to destroy directly or kill innocent human life. Catholics entrusted with civil or secular authority have a strict obligation to oppose intrinsic evil and never to cooperate with intrinsically evil acts that intentionally kill innocent human life.

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For voters, acknowledging that every human life is made in God's image means choosing leaders that promote the sanctity of human life and defend it against modern day threats. This promotion of human life begins at conception and continues until natural death. It is incumbent on conscientious voters to be knowledgeable about the moral stance taken by candidates for public office. While voters must choose between many competing interests and preferences, they ultimately must confront the fact that one million unborn children die due to abortion in America every year. This reality gives the abortion issue a moral weight and an urgency that no other issue can currently lay claim to.

Appropriate attention to these considerations is especially imperative during an election year when we choose a President. It is the President who appoints Supreme Court Justices as well as other federal judges who will make decisions affecting the dignity of human life. Sadly, as Americans, we have witnessed over the years many court decisions that have dismissed or ignored the inherent dignity and sanctity of human life. As a result our nation and society has suffered immensely from the loss of innocent human life.

In the face of such unjust laws and policies, we are called to be heralds of God's truth and love, especially as it pertains to the most fundamental of rights – the right to life. We are called to exercise humility in the face of God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all life. We do not own our life, but are merely stewards of our life and that of others entrusted to our care. We must show ourselves to be good and responsible stewards of life.

For the Church, upholding this truth means confronting the attitude that accepts the intentional killing of innocent human life as a solution to social or economic problems.

The acceptance of abortion, "mercy killing," assisted suicide, abortifacients marked as "contraceptives," and the destruction of human embryos for research reveals how far we have to go to build a society where we appreciate every human life as sacred.

### **Love One Another as I have Loved You (John 15: 12)**

The journey from a cultural attitude that disrespects the dignity of all human life to a society where every life is cherished must be informed by the truth of Calvary. The cross manifests the great value that God has placed on every human life. God's love revealed in His Son, Jesus, challenges us to love others to the point that we are willing to die to our personal pride and selfishness – our tendency to view others as obstacles or things to be used. It also means informing our consciences by sincerely searching for moral truth pertaining to all issues that may threaten the dignity of human life. A well-formed conscience will show us how "to do good and avoid evil." (Catechism 1777)

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A rich young man asked Jesus, "What good must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus replied that one must learn to love God, and "love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt. 19: 16-19) This is the model God has given us. It is a model of love and solidarity with those entrusted to our care. When we live out this model of discipleship, we can inspire others to do the same, and in the words of Blessed John Paul II, we can help "build a world where human life is always loved and defended, every form of violence banished."

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