

# CHURCH, STATE AND AN ELECTION YEAR

**Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm**



*"We need to participate for the common good. Sometimes we hear: a good Catholic is not interested in politics. This is not true: good Catholics immerse themselves in politics by offering the best of themselves so that the leader can govern."* **Pope Francis, Sept. 2013.**

We all know that our country is in the throes of unprecedented political upheaval. Many people are constantly asking me and other religious leaders what we Catholics are supposed to do in the midst of such turmoil. My intention with this article is to offer you some very concrete assistance so we, as Catholics of the United States, can be both responsible citizens and followers of Jesus in the Catholic tradition when Election Day comes this November.

Catholic history in the United States is complex and fascinating. From the very first days Catholicism was met with skepticism and open opposition. Waves of immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought their faith traditions with them and built monumental churches that were public statements that "we are here to stay and want to be part of this wonderful ideal." Consider the history of the Church in Chicago through architecture alone. Begin near the



**Old St. Peter's, Clark at Polk, Built in 1865**

in three directions and people from many countries created a kaleidoscope of

communities who embraced democracy, endured immeasurable sufferings yet remained very faithful to Catholic customs. Myriad changes in our country throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries presented difficult challenges as to how we can simultaneously be Catholic and a good citizen of the U.S. Read the life of Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, MN and you will see a priest from the Emerald Isle who became a powerhouse as both a religious and a civic leader. Fascinating!

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has recently updated a most helpful guide for all of us Catholic voters: *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (English & Spanish editions available). You can purchase a copy here at St. Peter's Gift & Book Shop or read (or buy) it online at [usccb.org](http://usccb.org), the web site of the USCCB. The bishops write in the introduction: *This statement represents our guidance for Catholics in the exercise of their rights and duties as participants in our democracy. We urge our pastors, lay and religious faithful, and all people of good will to use this statement to help form their consciences; to teach those entrusted to their care; to contribute to civil and respectful public dialogue; and to shape political choices in the coming election in light of Catholic teaching. The statement lifts up our dual heritage as both faithful Catholics and American citizens with rights and duties as participants in the civil order.*

I do encourage you to seriously pour through this document from our bishops. Topics they discuss are 1) reflections on Catholic teaching and political life, 2) applying Catholic teaching to major issues of our times, 3) goals and challenges for citizens, candidates and public officials. It is extensive but you will find it extremely helpful.

The bishops' introduction reveals why it has been updated since 2007 to take account of recent developments in U.S. domestic and foreign policy: abortion, euthanasia, redefinition of marriage, materialism to the detriment of the poor, anti-Christian (and other religious groups) attacks around the world, redefinition of religious freedom that impinges on how the Church can serve, economic

policies that fail the poor, devastating failure of the immigration system and refugee crisis along with addressing war, terrorism and violence. That is an immense list and why the bishops had to follow up on the previous document after 9 years of changes, especially in light of what Pope Francis has called an “integral ecology” (*Laudato Si’*, nos. 137-155). This document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, is meant to be read in its totality and in the context of prayer. You will find it extremely helpful to become an even better citizen of our very imperfect yet richly blessed country. Go to the USCCB web site and watch a 32 minute video that will enlighten and clarify issues.

One of the reasons the U.S. bishops updated *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* was to incorporate the progress made in recent years by the Magisterium of the Church under both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. The Magisterium is the teaching arm of the Catholic Church consisting of the pope and bishops who are in communion with the “correct and true teachings of the faith.” (*Catechism of Catholic Church*, #100) Sacred scripture and sacred tradition “make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, entrusted to the Church.” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, ch. 4, #9)

A section of *Forming Consciences...* is **Making Moral Choices** [#31-43] and clearly helps a reader incorporate progress made in issues that surround the contemporary Catholic voter; issues of life are not the only ones we must all consider when voting now. *Decisions about political life are complex and require the exercise of a well-formed conscience* [author’s bold] *aided by prudence. This exercise of conscience begins with outright opposition to laws and other policies that violate human life or weaken its protection. Those who knowingly, willingly, and directly support public policies or legislation that undermine fundamental moral principles cooperate with evil.* [# 31] I put well-formed conscience in bold print because it is critical that we READ and LEARN and PRAY in order to prepare for Election Day.

Why such effort? For one thing, we all have to live with ourselves and live with the

decisions we make. All our decisions. The bishops even help Catholic voters in that horrid pickle we can face: when “*all candidates hold a position that promotes an intrinsically evil act.*” #36 is enlightening and can alleviate anxiety.

Remember those pastoral words I quote at the beginning of this article by Pope Francis: “*We need to participate for the common good.*” Under the umbrella of **common good** the bishops write extensively about human rights, the dignity of work and protecting the rights of workers and how all of us bear a responsibility to care for God’s creation (quoting from Francis’ *Laudato Si’*).

**Part II** of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* elucidates Catholic teachings and clarifications about ALL issues of life, how Catholics are to “avoid war and to promote peace,” and include a section on marriage and family life. If a particular issue causes you anxiety, consider the pastoral care our bishops show us by also writing about health care, immigration, Catholic education, promoting justice, countering violence and any form of discrimination.

**Part III** covers the goals of political life and continues to list and address the “challenges for citizens, candidates and public officials.” The entire document concludes with footnotes and an extensive list of further pertinent readings from papal and Church documents from the past 50 years. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* is a rich resource for all Catholics in the United States who will be voting in November 2016. We have no reason to enter a polling place feeling as though we’ve been media-washed, ignorant or uninformed; we can and absolutely must vote as good citizens of the U.S. and as faithful members of the Body of Christ. I hope that this summary of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* will be helpful in preparing to vote in November. There will be more articles in the days ahead in parish bulletins, including St. Peter’s in the Loop, and diocesan publications. Please use the resources given us by the Church to develop an **informed conscience**. May the Holy Spirit guide all of us voters in the United States to choose leaders who will do all they can for the common good of all citizens.

Our city of Chicago, as you know, is plagued with horrid, seemingly out of control violence and layers of racial hatred. Amplify that by another 49 states and the past few months in the political arena and we've ended up with what I consider to be an embarrassing portrait of "The Land of the Free." Friends from other countries ask me what people here truly DO care about, if not even the lives of innocent children. The media often present us with an unbalanced view (depending on channel, etc.) of this year's candidates and platforms. I believe that years of clamoring for more and more freedom in myriad areas of our common life have led us to a point where many people are completely devoid of freedom. Many children can't play in their own yard without being concerned about bullets; unborn humans often have no voice. Entire groups of people are considered worthless and the monster of racism rears its ugly head daily. Anger is often a cover for fear. Consider that dynamic the next time you watch the news. A few years ago it became acceptable to "floor it" on yellow; now it's acceptable to run a red light "because I need to go." How many have died and still suffer because of pure selfishness and lack of concern for the common good? Freedom without responsibility is not freedom.

When I saw a recent video clip of a political rally surrounded by police in full battle riot gear, I was revolted. There is something inherently wrong and amoral with that scene. We do have a right to express our opinions and even justified anger via acceptable channels. But when potential leaders bring anger to the surface and actually encourage people to express shared hatred, I lose all respect for those persons regardless of party affiliation. We friars constantly pray for a spirit of common sense and civility among all people during this election year that has been wrought with a complete lack of manners and common decency. Debates were turned into free national advertising and self-promotion that produced little or no evidence of care for the poor, elderly, immigrants, ecological justice and many other pressing needs in the U.S.

I do love our country and the blessings

that were won for us and have been given us. However when the "little ones" so beloved by St. Francis, St. Clare and thousands of Franciscans for eight centuries are disregarded, I believe it is time that we concretely address the darkness and the ugliness on public display these days. We are not allowed to politicize in pulpits (check the USCCB guidelines for that) but I do believe it is high time we address some of the **behaviors** rampant in this land of ours.

The Lord Jesus came to reveal a God of peace and reconciliation. Our present Shepherd of Rome is turning heads around the world and across boundaries because he LIVES what he PREACHES ~ the extraordinary, loving and respectful peace that flows from the heart of God and draws people together. Please embrace the Franciscan way of being people of forgiveness and love for all of God's holy children, all that the universe holds. Read and learn what our Catholic leaders have given us so we can walk into the political arena with **well-formed consciences** and make decisions that will ensure all citizens are cared for and make other nations look at the U.S. with respect and a mutual desire for peace. We have but one Sister Earth and must forge her future together. God's People deserve the very best, so let's give them exactly that! Peace to you ~

Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm

**The Friars and Staff of St. Peter's  
cordially invite you to**

**St. Peter's 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Gala  
Thursday, July 14, 2016  
5:00 – 8:00 pm  
The Union League Club of  
Chicago  
65 West Jackson Boulevard**

**Business Attire  
Sumptuous Hors D'oeuvres & Open Bar  
Silent Auction 5:00 – 6:45  
Live Auction – 6:30 – 7:00  
Tickets \$150**

Reservations: Carolyn Jarocz, 312.853.2376