

Voting according to your conscience

As Catholics, we are free to vote according to our consciences; the Church does not condone political parties. However, in order to vote with our conscience, we must first *inform* our conscience. We cannot simply vote for whoever makes us feel most comfortable, or for the candidate who gives us a personal sense of peace. We must be informed by the wisdom of the Church, in encyclicals, Papal letters, writings of saints, the Catechism, and of course the Gospel. We also have a duty to seek out - as far as possible - reliable news sources, so that we are informed about what it means if we vote for a particular candidate or party.

This document addresses the former, i.e. what the Church tells us we should prioritise in the political arena. It pulls together extracts from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (which is itself compiled from all the Church sources listed above), Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It is certainly not anything close to exhaustive - a whole library could be filled with relevant Church texts. I have also considerably culled the relevant extracts from these sources in order to make this document digestible. However, the sources and extracts chosen are those I believe to be particularly pertinent and edifying in the current political climate.

I have tried to offer a balanced and unbiased range of extracts, but naturally my personal biases have affected what I felt drawn to. I urge you to read these sources directly to get a full and unbiased view of what the Church says on these topics.

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Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

on *The Political Community*

“Both [the Church and the political community], although by different titles, serve the personal and social vocation of the same human beings.” (§425)

- “...minorities have the right to maintain their culture, including their language, and to maintain their religious beliefs, including worship services... Minorities are also bound by duties, among which, above all, is working for the common good of the State in which they live.” (§387)
- “It should not happen that certain individuals or social groups derive special advantage from the fact that their rights have received preferential protection.” (§390)
- “The human person... does not find complete fulfilment until he moves beyond the mentality of needs and enters into that of gratuitousness and gift, which fully corresponds to his essence and community vocation.” (§391)
- “The Christian vision of political society places paramount importance on the value of community, both as a model for organising life in society and as a style of everyday living.” (§392)
- “Authority must recognise, respect, and promote essential human and moral values.” (§397)
- “...whenever public authority... fails to seek the common good, it abandons its proper purpose and so delegitimises itself.” (§398)
- “Unjust laws pose dramatic problems of conscience for morally upright people: when they are called to cooperate in morally evil acts, they must refuse... It is a grave duty of conscience not to cooperate, not even formally, in practices which, although permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to the Law of God. Such cooperation in fact can never be justified, not by invoking respect for the freedom of others nor by appealing to the fact that it is foreseen and required by civil law.” (§399)

- “Resistance to authority is meant to attest to the validity of a different way of looking at things, whether the intent is to achieve partial change... or to fight for radical change in the situation.” (§400)
- “...cases in which [the death penalty] is absolutely necessary... are ‘very rare, if not practically non-existent.’... The growing aversion of public opinion towards the death penalty... constitute visible manifestations of a heightened moral awareness.” (§405)
- “The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.”
- “The Church’s social doctrine sees ethical relativism... as one of the greatest threats to modern-day democracy.” (§407)
- “It must be observed... that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political action, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power.” (§407)
- “...free elections [should] allow the selection and change of representatives.” (§408)
- “Information is among the principal instruments of democratic participation. Participation without an understanding of the situation of the political community, the facts, and the proposed solutions to problems is unthinkable.” (§414)
- “The dignity of the person and the very nature of the quest for God require that all men and women should be free from every constraint in the area of religion. Society and the State must not force a person to act against his conscience or prevent him from acting in conformity with it.” (§421)
- “Because of its historical and cultural ties to a nation, a religious community might be given special recognition on the part of the State. Such recognition must in no way create discrimination within the civil or social order for other religious groups.” (§423)
- “The Church respects the legitimate autonomy of the democratic order and is not entitled to express preferences for this or that institutional or constitutional

solution, nor does it belong to her to enter into questions of the merit of political programmes, except as concerns their religious or moral implications.” (§424)

Pacem in Terris

Encyclical by Pope John XXIII

“God Himself must come to man’s aid with His heavenly assistance, if human society is to bear the closest possible resemblance to the kingdom of God.” (§168)

- “Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and finally, the necessary social services.” (§11)
- “The family, founded upon marriage freely contracted, one and indissoluble, must be regarded as the natural, primary cell of human society. The interests of the family, therefore, must be taken very specially into consideration in social and economic affairs, as well as in the spheres of faith and morals.” (§16)
- “Women must be accorded with such conditions of work as are consistent with their responsibilities as wives and mothers.” (§19)
- “The amount a worker receives must be sufficient, in proportion to available funds, to allow him and his family a standard of living consistent with human dignity.” (§20)
- “When there are just reasons in favour of it, [man] must be permitted to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular State does not deprive him of membership of the human family...” (§25)
- “The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities. In working for the common good, therefore, the authorities must obviously respect its nature, and at the same time adjust their legislation to meet the requirements of the given situation. (§54)
- “The civil power must not be subservient to the advantage of any one individual, or of some few persons; inasmuch as it was established for the common good of all.” (§56)

- “...considerations of justice and equity can at times demand that those in power pay more attention to the weaker members of society, since these are at a disadvantage when it comes to defending their own rights and asserting their legitimate interests.” (§56)
- “The public administration must... give considerable care and thought to the question of social as well as economic progress, and to the development of essential services... Such services include road-building, transportation, communications, drinking-water, housing, medical care, ample facilities for the practice of religion, and aids to recreation.” (§64)
- “Truth calls for the elimination of every trace of racial discrimination, and the consequent recognition of the inviolable principle that all States are by nature equal in dignity.” (§86)
- “...men frequently differ widely in knowledge, virtue, intelligence, and wealth, but that is no valid argument in favour of a system whereby those who are in a position of superiority impose their will arbitrarily on others. On the contrary, such men have a greater responsibility to help others to reach perfection by their mutual efforts.” (§87)
- “So, too, on the international level: some nations may have attained to a superior degree of scientific, cultural and economic development. But that does not entitle them to exert unjust political domination over other nations. It means they have to make a greater contribution to the common cause of social progress.” (§87)
- “The fact is that no one can be by nature superior to his fellows, since all men are equally noble in natural dignity.” (§89)
- “...the best interests of justice are served by those public authorities who do all they can to improve the human conditions of the members of minority groups, especially in what concerns their language, culture, ancient traditions, and their economic activity and enterprise.” (§96)
- “...refugees are persons and all their rights as persons must be recognised. Refugees cannot lose these rights simply because they are deprived of citizenship of their own State.” (§105)
- “...among man’s personal rights we must include his right to enter a country in which he hopes to be able to provide more fittingly for himself and his

dependents. It is therefore the duty of State officials to accept such immigrants and [...] to further the aims of those who may wish to become members of a new society.” (§106)

- “The warning of Pope Pius XII still rings in our ears: ‘Nothing is lost by peace; everything may be lost by war.’” (§116)
- “...love, not fear, must dominate the relationships between individuals and between nations. It is principally characteristic of love that it draws men together in all sorts of ways, sincerely united in the bonds of mind and matter; and this is a union from which countless blessings can flow.” (§129)
- “A man who has fallen into error does not cease to be a man. He never forfeits his personal dignity; and that is something which must always be taken into account.” (§158)
- “If there is to be any improvement in human institutions, the work must be done slowly and deliberately from within.” (§162)
- “God Himself must come to man’s aid with His heavenly assistance, if human society is to bear the closest possible resemblance to the kingdom of God.” (§168)
- “May He banish from the souls of men whatever might endanger peace. May He transform all men into witnesses of truth, justice, and brotherly love. May He illumine with His light the minds of rulers, so that, besides caring for the proper material welfare of their peoples, they may also guarantee them the fairest gift of peace... may Christ inflame the desires of all men to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done them wrong. Through His power and inspiration may all peoples welcome each other to their hearts as brothers, and may the peace they long for ever flower and ever reign among them.” (§171)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

"The Church, because of her commission and competence, is not to be confused in any way with the political community... The Church respects and encourages the political freedom and responsibility of the citizen."

(§2245)

- Charity is the greatest social commandment. It respects others and their rights. It requires the practice of justice, and it alone makes us capable of it. Charity inspires a life of self-giving: "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it." (§1889)
- "The duty of obedience requires all to give due honor to authority and to treat those who are charged to exercise it with respect, and, insofar as it is deserved, with gratitude and good-will." (§1900)
- "Authority does not derive its moral legitimacy from itself. It must not behave in a despotic manner, but must act for the common good..." (§1902)
- "... the common good requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order. It presupposes that authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the security of society and its members..." (§1909)
- "The duty of making oneself a neighbor to others and actively serving them becomes even more urgent when it involves the disadvantaged, in whatever area this may be." (§1932)
- "The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design." (§1935)
- "There exist also sinful inequalities that affect millions of men and women. These are in open contradiction of the Gospel: Their equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more humane conditions. Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace." (§1938)

- “Solidarity is manifested in the first place by the distribution of goods and remuneration for work...” (§1940)
- “Political authorities are obliged to respect the fundamental rights of the human person. They will dispense justice humanely by respecting the rights of everyone, especially of families and the disadvantaged.” (§2237)
- “The love and service of one's country follow from the duty of gratitude and belong to the order of charity. Submission to legitimate authorities and service of the common good require citizens to fulfill their roles in the life of the political community.” (§2239)
- “Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes, to exercise the right to vote, and to defend one's country.” (§2240)
- “The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel.” (§2242)
- “Armed resistance to oppression by political authority is not legitimate, unless all the following conditions are met: 1) there is certain, grave, and prolonged violation of fundamental rights; 2) all other means of redress have been exhausted; 3) such resistance will not provoke worse disorders; 4) there is well-founded hope of success; and 5) it is impossible reasonably to foresee any better solution.” (§2243)
- “The Church, because of her commission and competence, is not to be confused in any way with the political community. She is both the sign and the safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person. The Church respects and encourages the political freedom and responsibility of the citizen.” (§2245)
- “It is a part of the Church's mission ‘to pass moral judgments even in matters related to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires it. The means, the only means, she may use are those which are in accord with the Gospel and the welfare of all men according to the diversity of times and circumstances.’” (§2246)

- “The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. Among such fundamental rights one should mention in this regard every human being's right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death.” (§2273)

Further reading suggestions:

- ❑ *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith
- ❑ *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: the U.S. Bishops' Reflection on Catholic Teaching and Political Life* by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)
- ❑ *Fratelli Tutti* (on Fraternity and Social Contact) by Pope Francis
- ❑ *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) by Pope Paul VI
- ❑ *Mater et Magistra* (on Christianity and Social Progress) by Pope John XXIII
- ❑ *Rerum Novarum* (Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour) by Pope Leo XIII