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**Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Illinois
Elections, Conscience, and the Responsibility to Vote
October 2006**

Elections can be difficult for Catholics as we consider our choice of leaders and policies that will guide our nation and our state. In our effort to make elections more about fundamental moral choices than partisan bickering, we offer this brief statement urging Catholics to become more aware of Catholic moral and social teaching and to become more involved in the political process.

As Christian believers we are called to love our fellow citizens (and non-citizens and, even, our enemies). We ought to desire that every person flourish by participating fully in all the goods that perfect us as persons (religion, knowledge, play, work, friendship, etc.). The sum total of social conditions which allow people access to full participation in these goods is called by the Second Vatican Council the *common good*.

As citizens, we ought to desire the best possible political leaders to help us achieve the common good, and we have a responsibility to participate in the political process by voting. We must cast our vote through prayerful consideration and in accordance with our conscience formed by the Catholic faith. For Catholics, it is a matter of faith that the authentic moral teaching of the Church is true. Because God loves us, he has given us access to the truth about how we ought to live and love. The Scriptures tell us we ought "to put on the mind of Christ" (cf. Phil. 2:5), and our faith teaches that the teaching of the Church is the mind of Jesus Christ.

Thus as Catholic citizens, we inform and form our consciences as citizens in accordance with the principles of Catholic social teaching. The first and most essential principle of our social teaching is the dignity of every human person and each one's basic right to life from conception to natural death. Respect for human dignity is the basis for the fundamental right to life. This is a non-negotiable principle that is supported by our beliefs but is logically independent of our faith. Many non-Catholics think a society dedicated to the common good should protect its weakest members. Other principles include the call to community and participation, the centrality of the family, the dignity of work and rights of workers, the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, and the commitment to stewardship of the environment.

Catholics should always vote for that person most committed to being a public servant dedicated to the common good. This being said, it should be noted that any candidate who supports a public policy where part of humanity (such as the pre-born, the elderly, the handicapped, or the sick) is excluded from the protection of law and treated as if they were non-persons is gravely deficient in his or her view of the requirements of a just society.

Too often, the choice of candidates for elected office falls short of a vision of the common good as rich and full as Catholic social teaching. This may be discouraging, so we call on Catholics who understand and accept the Church's teaching to become more engaged in political life. We urge Catholics to run for office, work within the political parties, contribute time to campaigns and join diocesan legislative networks, community organizations and other efforts to apply Catholic principles in the public square.

The latest statistics indicate that 25 percent of American citizens are Catholic. In Illinois, we make up almost one-third of the population (31.5 percent). For Catholics, voting ought not to be seen as just an option or a privilege but a duty. By voting with an informed conscience, a renewed "Catholic vote" could become a political force for justice in Illinois and the nation.

For additional information, please go to www.catholicconferenceofillinois.org or call 312-368-1066. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website on Faithful Citizenship can be located at www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/index.htm.

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