

**A PASTORAL LETTER**  
**TO THE CATHOLIC FAITHFUL**  
**OF THE DIOCESE OF COLORADO SPRINGS**  
**ON THE DUTIES OF CATHOLIC POLITICIANS AND VOTERS**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This coming November we Americans will participate in one of the most important national elections in recent history. The president, senators and congressmen who are placed in office by our votes will serve at a time in which issues that are critical to the very survival of our civilization will be at the top of the political agenda. As we prepare for these elections I consider it my duty as your bishop to write to you about these matters so that you might go to the polls this fall with a well-informed conscience.

The Church teaches that “man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions.” (1) Often we hear people claim that they are making decisions in accord with conscience even when those decisions defy the natural law and the revealed teachings of Jesus Christ. This is because of a widespread misunderstanding of the very meaning of conscience. For many, conscience is no more than personal preference or even a vague sense or feeling that something is right or wrong, often based on information drawn from sources that have nothing to do with the law of God.

The right judgment of conscience is not a matter of personal preference nor has it anything to do with feelings. It has only to do with objective truth. “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*. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.” (2)

All people have a grave obligation to form their consciences by adhering to the truth, precisely as that truth is found in the natural law and in the revelation of God. As Catholics we have the further obligation to give assent to the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Church because “to the Church belongs the right always and everywhere to announce moral principles, *including those pertaining to the social order*, and to make judgments on any human affairs to the extent that they are required by the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls.” (3) In other words, as people who profess the Catholic faith, we must “have the mind of Christ” in every judgment and act.

Among the many distortions and misrepresentations that prevail in the current debates about the relationship between religion and the social order (politics) is the assertion that faith and politics are to be kept separated. This, apparently, is based upon the American doctrine of the separation of church and state. In fact, the wall that separates church and state is the safeguard against both the establishment of a state religion and the imposition of sectarian religious beliefs and practices, such as particular denominational forms of worship or theological tenets. In no way does the American doctrine of separation of church and state even suggest that the well-formed consciences of religious people should not be brought to bear on their political choices.

The Second Vatican Council was abundantly clear on this matter. “Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. *This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.* Long since, the Prophets of the Old Testament fought vehemently against this scandal and even more so did Jesus Christ Himself in the New Testament threaten it with grave punishments. Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other.” (4)

When Catholics are elected to public office or when Catholics go to the polls to vote, they take their consciences with them. Pope John Paul II has consistently taught this as, for example, when he said that those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a “grave and clear obligation to oppose” any law that attacks human life. (5) The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has declared that, “in this context, it must be noted also that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.” (6) Anyone who professes the Catholic faith with his lips while at the same time publicly supporting legislation or candidates that defy God’s law makes a mockery of that faith and belies his identity as a Catholic.

In November we will once again have the privilege of exercising our most precious right as citizens – the right to vote. Our choices will be made from among an array of candidates who take a variety of positions with regard to many important issues. In the midst of what could be a difficult and confusing exercise it is very important to remember that not all issues are of equal gravity. As men and women of good will we strive to achieve true justice for all people and to preserve their rights as human beings. There is, however, one right that is “inalienable”, and that is the RIGHT TO LIFE. This is the FIRST right. This is the right that grounds all other human rights. This is the issue that trumps all other issues.

The November elections will be critical in the battle to restore the right to life to all citizens, especially the unborn and the elderly and infirm. As a result of the pro-life efforts of countless Americans the number of abortions performed in our country is now declining for the first time since the appalling Supreme Court decision of 1973 that made it “legal” to kill our children. We cannot allow the progress that has been made to be reversed by a pro-abortion President, Senate or House of Representatives. Neither can we permit illicit stem cell research that makes use of aborted babies. Any movement to promote and legalize euthanasia must be halted. Our votes have the power to stop these abominations.

There must be no confusion in these matters. Any Catholic politicians who advocate for abortion, for illicit stem cell research or for any form of euthanasia *ipso facto* place themselves outside full communion with the Church and so jeopardize their salvation. Any Catholics who vote for candidates who stand for abortion, illicit stem cell research or euthanasia suffer the same fateful consequences. It is for this reason that these Catholics, whether candidates for office or those who would vote for them, may not receive Holy Communion until they have recanted their positions and been reconciled with God and the Church in the Sacrament of Penance.

In recent months another issue has reached the level of our legislatures. It is so-called “same-sex marriage.” Those who now promote this deviancy often present it as a human right denied homosexual persons and thus illegally discriminating against them. But, in fact, no one has a right to that which flies in the face of God’s own design. Marriage is not an invention of individuals or even of societies. Rather it is an element of God’s creation. It is God who created us male and female. It is God who joined man and woman so that they could be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Every civilization known to mankind has understood marriage as the union of a man and a woman for the

procreation and rearing of children. And yet now, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, there are those who would want us to believe that all people of all times have been mistaken about the true nature and purpose of marriage. No one can simply redefine marriage to suit a political or social agenda.

Once again, we must be clear about this matter. The future of our world depends upon the strength of the family, the basic unit of society. The future of the family depends on the state of marriage. The family – father, mother and children – reflects the nature of God Himself, who is a communion of selfless and self-giving love. For this reason marriage and family life cannot be whatever we want them to be. They are only and always as God has created them. As in the matter of abortion, any Catholic politician who would promote so-called “same-sex marriage” and any Catholic who would vote for that political candidate place themselves outside the full communion of the Church and may not receive Holy Communion until they have recanted their positions and been reconciled by the Sacrament of Penance.

The Church never directs citizens to vote for any specific candidate. The Church does, however, have the right and the obligation to teach clearly and fully the objective truth about the dignity and rights of the human person. These teachings, in turn, must inform the consciences of voters. “By its intervention in this area, the Church’s Magisterium does not wish to exercise political power or eliminate the freedom of opinion of Catholics regarding contingent questions. Instead, it intends -- as is its proper function -- to instruct and illuminate the consciences of the faithful, particularly those involved in political life, so that their actions may always serve the integral promotion of the human person and the common good.” (7)

Dear friends in Christ, I exhort you with all my heart to take courage and proclaim the Gospel of Life to those who will stand for elected office this fall. It is by your prayers and by your votes that politicians who are unconditionally pro-life and pro-family will serve our country. Conversely, if our voices remain silent or if, God forbid, we vote contrary to our informed consciences, we will see our country led down a short path to ruin. We want freedom for all, but there can be no freedom without truth. In the words of our Holy Father: “When freedom is detached from objective truth it becomes impossible to establish personal rights on a firm rational basis; and the ground is laid for society to be at the mercy of the unrestrained will of individuals or the oppressive totalitarianism of public authority.” (8)

Let us all pray for those politicians who claim to be Catholic yet continue to oppose the law of God and the rights of persons that, by the grace of God, they will be converted once again to the full and authentic articulation and practice of the faith.

Finally, I wish to affirm my brother bishops who have proclaimed the truth of these critical matters and who have admonished those Catholic politicians who place themselves at odds with the truth of God. May that truth which is the foundation of genuine freedom prevail in our country.

Given at the Chancery on this first day of May 2004, the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Michael J. Sheridan". The signature is written in dark ink and is preceded by a small cross symbol.

Most Reverend Michael J. Sheridan  
Bishop of Colorado Springs

## **Endnotes**

- (1) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1782.
- (2) *ibid.*, 1783.
- (3) *ibid.*, 2032 and Code of Canon Law 747.2.
- (4) Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), 43.
- (5) John Paul II, The Gospel of Life (*Evangelium vitae*), 73.
- (6) Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Notes on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life”, 4.
- (7) *ibid.*, 6.
- (8) The Gospel of Life, 101.