

Catholics are called to be faithful citizens and to infuse public life with the values necessary to protect human dignity, combat injustice, and promote the common good. Because of this duty, it is necessary that we, your pastors, reflect with you on the state of our public life and the choices Minnesotans face as we go to the polls in a year in which all state legislative and executive officers are up for election.

Right relationships

The task of politics is to foster justice and the common good. Despite our many differences, pursuing justice is a cornerstone political value shared by almost all Americans. In Catholic social doctrine, working for justice requires establishing right relationships between persons, where each is given his or her due. Justice requires that all parties embrace certain responsibilities toward each other. Paraphrasing Pope St. Paul VI, if we want peace, we must work for justice.

There are different types of justice. Commutative justice requires justice in commercial exchange. Distributive justice requires, among other things, that each person and family have access to the material resources they need not just to survive, but also to flourish. Economic justice means building an economic order on right relationships that foster both distributive and commutative justice. Social justice requires creating those conditions for all social actors, including schools, faith communities, and the government, to fulfill their social responsibilities.

Criminal justice should be built on criminals taking responsibility for the injustice perpetrated on victims, and society working through the penal system to rehabilitate and then restore offenders to the community. Other types of justice include racial justice, environmental justice, and legal justice.

When there is injustice in society, that is, when society fails to establish right relationships, the state can step in to help right what is wrong and to repair, in some measure, what is broken. That is a task of prudence, which is why it is important to carefully choose our elected leaders who, often at great sacrifice, take on the responsibility of making those decisions. They should be wise and virtuous. And voters, informed by Catholic social doctrine, should consider how candidates will work for the various types of justice across a spectrum of issues, including education, public safety, tax policy, migration, creation stewardship, and healthcare.

This year, in a special way, we call on Catholics to consider how a candidate will work for prenatal justice as a pre-eminent consideration in his or her voting calculus. Prenatal justice is not simply being anti-abortion, though that is the foundation of the prolife witness. Prenatal justice means establishing right relationships between the mother and the unborn child in her womb, between society and the unborn child, and between society and the mother and father of the unborn child. As life begins in the womb, so must justice. As we discuss below, there are responsibilities entailed by each set of relationships and good public policies that follow.

Fostering prenatal justice

The recent Dobbs decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, declaring that there is no right to an abortion protected by the U.S. Constitution, has returned the matter of abortion to the political process for deliberation.

Will states allow the continued killing of innocent human life? What are our responsibilities to the child and the mother? How do we foster right relationships between them and the broader society for the common good? These are questions elected officials must answer as they work to foster prenatal justice.

It would be a dereliction of duty for us as bishops to pretend as though the abortion question was not a focus of Minnesota's election discourse this year, especially as Dobbs has changed the abortion landscape in this nation. And as Pope Francis teaches, we cannot stay silent when nearly a million unborn lives are being cast aside in our country year after year through abortion.[1]

Right now in Minnesota, the situation is troubling: in spite of the fact that scientific inquiry has definitively determined that human life begins at conception[2], a woman can procure an abortion for almost any reason at any stage of pregnancy up till birth. To put this in perspective, in 2021 there were 222 abortions involving babies older than 20 weeks. Almost half of all abortions are paid for with taxpayer funds. Our laws allow an 11-year-old girl to get an abortion without even one parent knowing. There is no requirement in force that a licensed physician perform an abortion. And abortion proponents, including elected officials, are working proactively to shut down pregnancy resource centers.

Fostering right relationships requires that we determine what we, as a society, owe the unborn child in the womb. At minimum, that is the right an innocent human being has to life, as well as the protection of the law from being killed. It also requires welcoming the child into the world.

Part of that welcome is establishing right relationships between mother, father, and child. We must encourage marriage and family stability, and clarify that abortion is not about bodily autonomy and freedom, but about the life of another human being for whom the father and mother are responsible.[3]

It follows that if we are intent on protecting innocent children from abortion, and ensuring that parents meet their obligations, then, as a society, we must step in to ensure that mothers and fathers are supported when necessary due to economic hardship.[4] This means, among other things, policies that fund: nutritional supports for expectant mothers; adequate healthcare coverage during and after pregnancy for both mother and child; childcare assistance; housing supports; early learning assistance programs; and parenting education. Enacting paid family and caregiver leave laws would help people retain work and care for their newborns. Reconsidering whether our adoption policies are unreasonably burdened by excessive costs or barriers to participation is an imperative. We also need to continue to support pregnancy resource centers through programs such as the Positive Alternatives grants that help them walk with women in need during crisis pregnancies. Even beyond the pregnancy and years of early childhood development, we have a social duty to remove barriers to marriage, having children, and being able to raise them well. In short, we need to make family economic security the principal consideration in budget and tax policy discussions. By raising the family to the top of our state's policy priorities, we can help restore the family to its proper position as the foundational building block of society and the place where children can flourish.[5] In doing so, Minnesota can become the best place to bring children into the world.[6] And even if our state maintains a permissive abortion policy, putting families first will hopefully weaken demand for abortions.

In sum, working for prenatal justice transcends the false binary of pitting mother against child. Our public policy can foster right relationships and support the work of fulfilling our responsibilities to each other. It is in the fulfillment of our duties, even in difficult situations, that we grow in virtue and character and realize the best chance of true happiness.

Faithful citizenship

We encourage Catholics and other advocates for human life to step proactively into the political debate both winsomely and charitably, and to use creatively all peaceable levers of political power to prudently, and incrementally, transform our cities and our state into places that respect the human rights of the unborn by welcoming them in life and protecting them by law.

Part of that work is voting. A representative democracy such as ours requires that the citizenry elect good people into office and continue to inform their elected representatives of their views on important issues.

Unfortunately, many candidates are openly advocating for Minnesota to become an abortion sanctuary state with taxpayer-funded abortion on demand, as well as pledging to deregulate the abortion industry by removing safeguards put in place to protect women from medical malpractice or to protect teenage girls from ill-considered abortions. Far too many others, moreover, although professing to be pro-life on paper, are going out of their way to avoid talking about Minnesota's future as a potential abortion sanctuary or what should be done to limit abortion, preferring to avoid the subject altogether.

In this situation, it is incumbent on the Catholic laity to be especially proactive in speaking to candidates about prenatal justice and supporting legislative and judicial efforts to limit abortion. The effect of proactive engagement with candidates, not just in this election cycle but also during their term of office, will give courage and political will to those who support pro-life policies in principle, and moderate the pro-abortion extremism of other candidates and elected officials. Catholics cannot expect just laws will be enacted without their faithful citizenship and building relationships with legislators. That is what faithful citizenship is all about.

Combating abortion is a pre-eminent concern in public life

As Archbishop José Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has noted, calling abortion a pre-eminent concern does not mean it is the only concern.[7] Ensuring that every human life is welcomed in life and respected by law does not end at birth. As discussed above, we believe that our Catholic faith leads us to promote an eco-system of public policy that promotes human flourishing for mother and child from conception to natural death.

What we seek to emphasize here is that, just as the bishops of the United States have identified the ending of abortion as a preeminent policy priority[8], so too should Catholic voters make protecting innocent human life and stopping abortion extremism a preeminent consideration in our voting calculus.[9]

Archbishop Bernard Hebda Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis Bishop Joseph Williams Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis Bishop Andrew Cozzens Diocese of Crookston

ON

Bishop Daniel Felton	Bishop Donald Kettler	Bishop Chad Zielinski	Bishop Robert Barron
Diocese of	Diocese of	Diocese of	Diocese of
Duluth	Saint Cloud	New Ulm	Winona-Rochester
*****	******	*****	******

[1] "[R]egarding abortion, the point when human life begins is not a religious belief but a scientific fact -- a fact on which there is clear agreement even among leading abortion advocates. Second, the sanctity of human life is not merely Catholic doctrine but part of humanity's global ethical heritage, and our nation's founding principle." (USCCB, "Living the Gospel of Life," 23). [2] Mark Pattison, "Pope Francis 'has our backs' on pro-life cause, says archbishop," Catholic News Service, Jan. 24, 2020, available at https://catholicnews.com/pope-francis-has-our-backs-onpro-life-cause-says-archbishop/.

[3] We understand that sometimes pregnancy can be the result of sexual coercion and rape. These are difficult situations that require care and sensitivity. We do not condone abortion in these instances, but we recognize that fostering justice may mean society has a special responsibility to care for the mother and child, including economic supports or facilitating adoption. Our parishes will help women in these difficult situations.

[4] Though the overwhelming majority of abortions are procured because the mother does not wish to have a child, almost one in five are reportedly procured specifically due to economic hardship.

[5] See the Minnesota Catholic Conference "Families First Project" (familiesfirstproject.com). Policies such as a permanent state child tax credit are the cornerstone of this initiative.
[6] It should be emphasized that working for policies that promote human flourishing does not absolve anyone from the responsibility of working for an end to the state-sanctioned killing of innocent human life. "[B]eing 'right' in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community."

[7] "A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility towards the common good."
(Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Pertaining to the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, 4, 2002).
[8] "Pope speaks to U.S. bishops about pro-life issues, transgender ideology," Catholic News Service, Jan. 16, 2020, available at https://www.osvnews.com/2020/01/16/pope-speaks-to-u-s-bishops-about-pro-life-issues-transgender-ideology/. (Note Pope Francis's agreement with

U.S. bishops that abortion is a pre-eminent social and political concern). [9] "[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." (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Pertaining to the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, 4, 2002).

MNCATHOLIC.ORG/ELECTIONRESOURCES