



Vote your
Conscience

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To our Shepherds, the United States Catholic Bishops, with prayers for their “preeminent priority.”

Vote Your Conscience

1. Nothing Is Impossible with God

WE HAVE a beautiful chapel here at Relevant Radio®. Actually, we're blessed with a lot of beauty wherever we look. Green Bay in Wisconsin is a pleasant city in a beautiful part of the country. You don't have to go far to see all the glories of nature: the lake and the river and the forests and hills and streams. It's a very Catholic city, too. We have a beautiful Cathedral, and a lot of love has gone into building and decorating our parish churches.

But of course, our own little Chapel of the Nativity will always be something special to us. We've done our best to make it a welcoming place for prayer and meditation, and a beautiful

place where you can walk in and see the love we feel for Christ and His Mother.

And probably the first thing you'll notice when you go in is an encouraging message from God.

Right behind the altar is a beautiful wooden crucifix. Below it is the Tabernacle, and there's a vigil lamp hanging on the wall, always lit to tell us that our Lord is present. And above that crucifix are gold letters that spell out this important reminder:

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

Do you recognize those words? They're based on the story of the Annunciation. "Nothing will be impossible with God," was what the Archangel St. Gabriel himself said when he appeared to the Blessed Mother and gave her the good news that she would be the Mother of God.

It was big news. It's pretty much always big news when an angel shows up. Angels don't come to tell you that there's a BOGO on ice cream at the Pick 'n Save, or the 41B bus is going

to be ten minutes late. They come to tell you that your life is going to be turned upside-down. And if you get an *archangel*, that means the whole world is changing.

No wonder Mary was a bit worried when Gabriel showed up. But he told her it was good news:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

The news was that Mary was going to have a son, and he would be the promised Messiah, the Son of God, the one everybody had been waiting for generation after generation.

And Mary didn't say, “I don't believe you,” which would not have been polite to say to an

archangel. But she was curious. She could identify one little difficulty. She had never been with a man, and clearly she expected to keep it that way:

But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”

And the angel said to her in reply, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.”

God had a plan for that, Gabriel told her. And he also had another bit of good news, just to show that God really could do any amazing thing he wanted to do:

“And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” (Luke 1:30-37.)

There it is: *nothing will be impossible with God*. Elizabeth and Zechariah had wanted a child all their lives, but they had never been able to have one. Then, when it was way too late for nature, Elizabeth was pregnant. An angel had come to announce this miracle, too, because the child would be John the Baptist, who would be “filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15).

Zechariah actually didn’t believe the angel, and he was struck dumb until the child was born. Mary didn’t make that mistake. We all remember her reply, because it’s the model for every Christian’s faithful response to God:

Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38.)

That was the right response. Let God do what God does.

That doesn’t mean Mary wouldn’t have work to do. She was going to have a child! That’s more

than enough work for anybody, even if your son doesn't happen to be the Messiah. She was going to have to nurse him, and change his diapers, and teach him to walk, and get worried sick when she couldn't find him (see Luke 2:41-51). She would do her part in God's plan. But she would trust that God *had* a plan. She would trust that nothing would be impossible with God.

That's the trust we have to have all through our lives. But we need it especially when we're coming up to an important election. We need to trust that God *can* give us the wisdom to make the right decision ourselves. And we need to trust that God *will* take care of us once we've made our decision, even if things don't seem to go our way.

And this is a very important election. We're coming into this election at a time of crisis. I can say that even if you're reading this book years from when I wrote it. I know you're reading it at a time of crisis.

How do I know? Just think of our history. Has there ever *not* been a crisis?

Just in my own lifetime, we've had the Cold War, a president assassinated, Vietnam, race riots, Watergate, the Iranian hostage crisis, the collapse of communism, two Gulf Wars, the Balkan Wars, 9/11, a war in Afghanistan, the world economic crisis in 2008, and of course COVID-19. There's the biggest crisis of all, the abortion crisis, which has been going on for most of my adult life. And I had to leave a lot out, because I wanted to make this a book you could read in a couple of hours.

So there's always a crisis. That's how I know we're at a time of crisis—because we're fallen sinners living in a fallen world, and that's what life is like until the New Jerusalem. Until the end of time, we know that the devil is doing his best in this world. "Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour." That's what St. Peter told the churches in Asia Minor, and it's as true now as it was back in the first century. Every Christian everywhere has to deal with times of crisis.

But that's also a message of hope, St. Peter said. We all face that prowling devil, so we're in good company. "Resist him, steadfast in faith, knowing that your fellow believers throughout the world undergo the same sufferings. The God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory through Christ [Jesus] will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you after you have suffered a little." (1 Peter 5:8-10.)

We have the same reason for hope those early Christians had. No matter the outcome of the elections, we as children of God, we as baptized Christians will still sing *alleluia* the day after the elections because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. And he has opened the gates of heaven to all of us, and that is very, very good news. Nothing on the front page of the Chicago Tribune or the Washington Post will cancel that good news. "We know that all things work for good for those who love God," Paul wrote in Romans 8:28. The result of the election will be good for us in the long run, because God will make it good for us.

Besides, we have something those Christians in Asia Minor didn't have. We have an election—a mechanism by which we can choose our leaders and decide what course our country takes. In the Roman Empire, the important decisions were made by one man at the top. In our country, *we* make the decisions.

Or at least we do if we *use* that right. Just about every president in my lifetime has been chosen by a minority of the American people, because way too many people stay home on election day. If we do that, we're leaving the decision up to somebody else. We might as well be living in the Roman Empire.

Catholic Christians make up the single largest religious group in this country. If we all showed up at the polls, that prowling devil would hardly stand a chance.

But is it right to mix religion and politics?

That's an important question, and I think Our Lord gave us an answer to it. It's all about rendering unto Caesar.

2. Render Unto Caesar

IT WAS one of those little traps they were always setting for Jesus. It was very frustrating to the Pharisees that Jesus seemed to be able to wiggle out of just about any trap they set. So they obviously put some thought into this one, as Matthew tells us:

Then the Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap him in speech. They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion, for you do not regard a person’s status.”

The delegation from the Pharisees and the Herodians started with some flattery. By the

way, flattery is usually a bad sign. It means people are up to something. And sure enough, these people were up to something. It was time to spring their trap:

“Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?”

To understand why this was such a clever trap, you have to understand something about the political situation Jesus lived in.

Judea, Samaria, and Galilee were all part of the Roman Empire in those days. But Judea had been an independent kingdom until fairly recently. To most faithful Jews, the Roman Empire was an evil occupying power. Rebellions were always simmering, and even the people who weren't actively rebelling hated the Roman government. The Pharisees definitely were against cooperating with the Romans in any way. And on the other hand the Herodians, followers of Herod Antipas (who was in charge of Galilee), were in favor of the Roman government.

So what could Jesus say? If he said, “Yes, it’s lawful,” then the Pharisees could say, “See? He’s just a Roman stooge.” But if he said “No, it’s not lawful,” the Herodians or their Roman allies could arrest him as a traitor. He was trapped either way.

And Jesus was perfectly well aware of what they were up to.

Knowing their malice, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.” Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?”

They replied, “Caesar’s.”

At that he said to them, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” When they heard this they were amazed, and leaving him they went away. (Matthew 22:15-22.)

They were amazed for good reason. Jesus had evaded their trap once again.

What kind of answer was it, though? It seems simple, but if you start to think about it, you realize you have to think about it some more. In a sense, it's an answer, but it's *not* an answer. It's a riddle. What is Caesar's? What is God's?

I think if I were to translate that answer into more concrete language, I'd say that what Jesus told them that day was this: "I gave you a brain. *You figure it out.*"

Because what *does* belong to Caesar? Well, I suppose *things* belong to Caesar. He has a palace. He has a horse. Maybe all the coins do belong to him, because his picture is on them, after all.

But then what belongs to God?

Everything!

And that includes the things that belong to Caesar.

But Jesus leaves us to figure that out. It's up to you and me to come to that answer ourselves.

Now, we have a choice that the people of Judea didn't have. They could pay the tax or rebel against Caesar and see where that went. We can pick our Caesar. And even more impor-

tantly, we can pick the people who will make the laws that even our Caesar has to obey.

So when we do that—when we vote for our lawmakers and our president—we have to remember that everything belongs to God.

We also have to remember that we have a duty to submit to those authorities we place over us. When Paul was writing to the Romans, he told them that they had to respect authority.

Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed, and those who oppose it will bring judgment upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear to good conduct, but to evil. Do you wish to have no fear of authority? Then do what is good and you will receive approval from it, for it is a servant of God for your good. But if you do evil, be afraid, for it does not bear the

sword without purpose; it is the servant of God to inflict wrath on the evildoer.

Now, Paul knew that authority doesn't always work for good, and the Romans who heard his words knew it too. He was writing to people who lived in the capital city. They'd seen Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius, and now they had Nero to deal with. Nero! That was the authority they should be subordinate to! If any people had an opportunity to observe the wickedness of authority close-up, it was the Christians in Rome.

But authority is absolutely necessary in a world of sin. It's important for us not to put ourselves above authority, as if we could live without government. That isn't God's plan.

Therefore, it is necessary to be subject not only because of the wrath but also because of conscience. This is why you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Pay to all their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, toll to whom toll is due, re-

spect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. (Romans 13:1-7.)

Now, we have to remember that Paul was willing to break the law. In fact, he would end up being executed by exactly the authorities he told the Romans not to resist—the Roman government itself, under Nero. So when he says that we shouldn't resist authority, he obviously doesn't mean that we should do everything the authorities tell us to do. If they tell us to do something morally wrong, we have to refuse.

But we also have to be ready to take the consequences if we refuse. Paul refused to stop doing what was right—namely preaching the Gospel. But he didn't pick up a sword and fight when the authorities came to get him. You see Paul with a sword in art, but that's because martyrs are traditionally shown with the instrument of their martyrdom. The sword Paul is holding is the sword the Roman authorities used to kill him.

If those early Roman Christians had a duty to be subordinate to *Nero*, we certainly have a duty to be subordinate to the authorities we choose

for ourselves. And that's all the more reason why it's important for us to choose the right authorities.

Now, obviously, what we want is for all our leaders to be perfect Christians who understand the teachings of Jesus and apply them to every decision. And while we're wishing for things, we could ask for a pony, too.

Even if we had a whole Congress full of perfect Catholic Christians, though, there would still be debates and disagreements. We live in a complicated world, and we can't always foresee what will happen as a result of our decisions. I've seen a roomful of bishops arguing about how to present Catholic teaching to the people. Did they disagree about the teaching? No, they all believed exactly the same things. They were disagreeing about what would be the most effective way to bring their message to the public.

It would be a lot easier if God would just tell us what to do every time, wouldn't it? But then life wouldn't be worth living. Without choices, we can't really be human. We were made in the image of God (see Genesis 1:26), and that means

we can make choices. More than that, it means we *have* to make choices. We couldn't be human without our choices. We couldn't love God if we didn't *choose* to love God.

Over the years, many, many people have asked me, "Father, how should I vote?" And I can't give them an answer. The Church can't tell you which candidate to vote for. The only answer is the one we learned from Jesus: God has given you a brain, and you need to use that brain. The Church will always be here to remind you of what Jesus taught, and then you have to take it from there.

But decision-making is a skill, and just like any other skill, you can train yourself to get better at it. There's a word for that decision-making skill. It's an old-fashioned word we don't use much anymore, but we should get used to it. The word is *prudence*, and it's the virtue that tells us what to do when we need to make a decision.

How do we build up our virtue of prudence?

Well, the best way to build up any virtue is to go to the source of all virtues. Let's learn about prudence from Jesus.

3. The Virtue of Prudence

JESUS said a lot of things that make us think, and a lot of things that make us uncomfortable. And he often said them just when he was getting a big audience. It's almost as if he wanted to tell them, "I'm not here just to entertain you. I'm here to change your life completely. Are you ready for that?"

He really got explicit about it when a big mob of people started to go around with him wherever he went. If Jesus were trying to be popular, he would tell these people what they wanted to hear, and he'd get a bigger mob. Instead, Luke tells us what he actually did say to them:

Great crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and addressed them, "If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers

and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:25-27.)

This isn't the sort of thing that makes you popular. Hate your father and mother? Hate your wife and children? Hate your own life?

Now, Jesus had a way of making outlandish statements to get people's attention. Surely he doesn't mean we should actually hate our father and mother. Remember the story of the rich young man (see Mark 10:17-27). The man asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus recited the commandments: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.’ ” It's right there in the commandments that Jesus recited: “honor your father and your mother.”

And the rich man was pretty sure he'd been following the commandments. But he had one thing holding him back. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, 'You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'"

The rich man just couldn't do it. He had too many possessions tying him down. And that was when Jesus told his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to pass through [the] eye of [a] needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

There's one of Jesus' outlandish images: a camel going through the eye of a needle. "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God."

So back to the big crowd. They've just heard Jesus say this: "If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

What does he mean by that?

You don't actually have to be crucified to be a Christian. But you have to be *ready* to be crucified. You don't have to hate your family. But you have to be ready to say, "If I *have* to make a choice between my family and God, I choose God."

You have to count the cost of discipleship. Are you ready to pay it?

So Jesus went on to teach the crowd with a couple more examples.

Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work, the onlookers should laugh at him and say, 'This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.' Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with

twenty thousand troops? But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms. In the same way, everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:28-33.)

When you start a project, you count the cost. This is Jesus teaching us about the virtue of *prudence*.

Prudence is the virtue of being able to weigh all the factors that go into a choice and come out with the right decision. For example, I have insurance on my car in case it gets into an accident. Now, everyone has to have liability insurance, but I also have insurance to repair the car if it needs repair. That insurance costs me a certain amount of money every year. But I have to do a lot of traveling, and it would cost a lot of money if I suddenly had to have the car put back together—money I might not have. Then I wouldn't have transportation, and then I wouldn't be able to work.

So the *prudent* choice is to make those insurance payments now, so that I won't be left with a much bigger problem later.

Now, that decision could go the other way if some of the circumstances changed. Suppose I had an old wreck of a car that was only worth a couple of hundred bucks. Then it might make sense to cancel the insurance for everything but liability. The insurance payments might be more than the benefit if I needed to make a claim.

When we're making a prudent decision, we have to give all the different factors their proper weight. When it's a matter of money, we can just use a calculator. With other decisions, though, it's a little harder.

When we look at what Jesus told the crowd that day, it's easy to think that the *prudent* thing might be to give up on following Jesus. He just told us we might lose our families. He just told us we might be crucified. Those things weigh pretty heavily on one side of the scale.

But there's a big weight on the other side of the scale, too. And that's what Jesus didn't men-

tion to the crowd right away. They have brains, though. They can figure it out from some of the other things he taught them. On the one side, you have some very unpleasant things: breaking with your family, even getting crucified. You wouldn't like that. But on the other side you have the fiery furnace:

Just as weeds are collected and burned [up] with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42.)

Now we have a clearer picture. Crucifixion lasts for a day. Hell lasts forever. If you have to choose between the two, hell has a lot more weight in your decision. You choose crucifixion. Yes, sometimes the *prudent* choice is to be crucified.

I didn't say prudence was going to be easy.

And it's not something you're born with. We've all been children, and we've all known children. Children don't always make the best decisions. The reason children aren't allowed to make all their own decisions in life is because it takes time to develop the virtue of prudence. Going to school pays off sometime in the distant future. Playing hooky pays off right now! Until you learn to give their proper weight to the different sides of your decision, you need someone like Mom who can do that for you.

But when you're an adult, you don't have someone else making the decisions for you anymore. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). Now we have to make our own decisions. Prudence is the art of making the best decisions with the information we have.

So is that all there is to it? We just weigh things in the balance, and then we know what to do?

No, there's more to it than that. Prudence can help you know how to reach the result you want. But how do you know *what* result you want?

That's where conscience comes in.

4. The Purpose of Conscience

“ALWAYS let your conscience be your guide.” Some of us remember that as a line in the song “Give a Little Whistle” from the Walt Disney movie *Pinocchio*. But it’s been a saying in English since long before that. *Pinocchio* came out in 1940. I just looked for the phrase “let your conscience be your guide” in Google Books, and all sorts of things came up.

From 1930, a lawyer interrogating a witness in a court transcript: “Do you recall being told to let your conscience be your guide and go back to tell the truth?”

From the commencement speaker at the graduating exercises of the Peirce School of Business and Shorthand in 1890: “If you carry out these principles and let your conscience be your guide, success is assured.”

From an 1843 novel: “Let your conscience be your guide to stay or fly.”

Whenever people use that phrase, they seem to mean that you can't go wrong if you listen to your conscience. Isn't that a comforting idea? You have this thing that's always inside you, your conscience, that will tell you the right thing to do if you listen to it. And then all you have to do is follow your conscience. Do what it tells you. You'll do the right thing!

Unfortunately, it's a little more complicated than that.

Yes, you do have a conscience. Part of being human is having that moral sense built in. But if you don't develop your conscience, it won't tell you the right thing to do. In fact, it can lead you completely in the wrong direction.

So what is this thing called conscience?

Let me get philosophical for a moment. Briefly, conscience is the *proximate norm of morality*. Yes, those are technical terms, but let me try to make them clear.

Conscience is the faculty that points out to us what is wrong and what is right, what is to be

done and what is to be avoided, to help us carry out the first moral principle of human judgment. What is the first principle of human judgment? Do good and avoid evil. It's as simple as that.

The word "proximate" means "near and immediate," according to Johnson's Dictionary. When I say that the conscience is the *proximate norm of morality*, it means conscience is what's closest to you at hand to help you decide what is right and what is wrong—what is good, what is bad, what is to be done, and what is not to be done.

Conscience can be clear, or it can be cloudy. You can have a convicted conscience or you can have a doubtful conscience. And before we act on a doubtful conscience we need to remove that doubt.

The judgment of conscience can be what is known as *subsequent*, which is after the action, or *concomitant*, meaning at the same moment as the action, or *antecedent*, which is before the action. So the conscience can work before we do

an action, while we're doing an action, or after an action.

We have to listen to our conscience. But we have to *form* our conscience, because the conscience by itself can make either good decisions or bad decisions—good judgments or bad judgments. Yes, we have to follow our conscience. Conscience is indeed *inviolable*. But conscience is not *infallible*. Woe to the person who follows the conscience that's leading them in the wrong way!

Think of your conscience as something like a computer. I have a laptop computer that can do anything. It can calculate satellite orbits. It can write books. It can order pizza.

The thing is, it doesn't do any of these things by itself. It needs software. Without software, it's just a black slab of plastic.

My computer can also do bad things if it gets the wrong software. If a virus took over my computer, it could become part of a botnet sending scam messages to people all over the world. Not a very nice thing to do, but the computer doesn't

know that. It's just doing what the software tells it to do.

Your conscience is the same way. It's a powerful tool. But it doesn't work at all unless you program it right. You have to *form your conscience* before you can use it.

This is more important than most people realize. Your conscience can lead you into monstrous evil if it gets the wrong programming. It will still be a powerful tool, but it will be a powerful tool that the devil is wielding.

Think of the terrorists who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. They were people with strong consciences—so strong that they decided to *die* for what their consciences told them was right. They didn't decide they were going to be evil. They were going to be good! They were going to be heroes!

How could they believe that? It was because they let their consciences be pushed and prodded into the wrong shape. It didn't happen all at once. They had to work at it. And they had to let other people work at it for them. They had

formed their consciences—but they formed them wrong.

Think of the thousands of German soldiers involved in shipping Jews off to death camps during the Nazi horror. Did they decide to be evil? No. They obeyed orders, as good soldiers should. They did their duty, even when it was hard. They followed their consciences. They had formed their consciences—but they formed them wrong.

There's a movie with Al Pacino called *City Hall*. I thought it was a powerful film. It's about the life of the politician ever seeking to increase his power, his status, his standing—supposedly so he can serve the common good. There's a revealing moment in the movie when his young protege, who's very talented, very smart, becomes disillusioned with his boss, the mayor, because he realizes his words are hollow, that he's cut too many deals. In other words, that he has a poorly formed conscience.

This is a real danger to any politician, whether in civil life or in big institutions—or I would say even in the Church. It's a danger to

anyone who plays the politician, in business or schools or wherever. And in the movie the mayor understands what his protege is going through—and worst of all, knows that he’s right. He remembers being young and enthusiastic like that. But he had to make deals to keep up his position—because, of course, the people needed him.

“Your power? What good are you to the people without it? But down deep you know there’s a line you can’t cross, and after a thousand trades and one deal too many, the line gets rubbed out.”

That’s your conscience failing. That’s what happens to your conscience when you let the wrong ideas move into your brain. You end up forming a conscience that tells you it’s just fine to do the wrong thing, because it’s for the right reasons.

This is why “let your conscience be your guide” is only half the story. The other half is all about how you train your conscience so that it *can* be your guide. That’s what we mean when we talk about “forming your conscience.” And

that's what we'll need if we're going to make the right decision on voting day.

5. How to Form Your Conscience

I'VE BEEN saying you have to form your conscience. But how do you do that?

Well, here's a secret. Your conscience is going to get formed whether you work at it or not. It will probably get *badly* formed, but it will get formed. And what will form it? Everything around you.

Take a look at the world you live in. It's filled with messages. Everywhere you look, you see words. Here's a loaf of bread in front of me, and on the packaging it wants to tell me how to live a good life. According to this bread, living a good life means eating a lot of whole grains, and this bread is full of whole grains. It sounds like my moral duty is to eat this bread, and not somebody else's bread.

If you ride the subway, you see advertisements for everything from concerts to charities

to banks. If you walk down the street, you see slogans on people's T-shirts. Every one of these is a message. You may not even realize it's penetrated your brain, but when these things are around you day after day, they seep in. That's what advertisers count on. That's why advertisements exist.

What do you hear if you start paying attention to the sounds around you? Is there music? What is the music telling you?

If you know me, you know I'm a big blues and jazz fan. I love to hear music. I love to play music. Music is part of being human. It's more important to most of us than we realize. But the music often comes with a message. I can't tell you how often I've been at a picnic, or walked past a family cookout, and I've seen a family with young children having a good time—and I've thought to myself, Don't they hear what that music is saying? How can they have that music on when their young children are right there? I think sometimes adults get so used to popular music that they don't even think about what the lyrics say. But children hear them. And when

they hear them over and over, they learn from those lyrics. They learn that this is how the adult world works.

What's the last thing you watched on television? What message did it leave you with? There's a lot of good stuff to watch on television these days. But I have to admit, I cringe at a lot of what I see. It sometimes seems as though Hollywood can only see Catholic Christians as either idiots or villains. When you get that message delivered to your brain over and over and over again, what happens? Doesn't it start to change the way you think?

Wherever we go, there are hundreds of messages trying to grab our attention. And even if they don't get our full attention, we notice them. They become part of our world. And after a while, they become normal.

Those messages are forming your conscience—whether you like it or not. They're forming an idea in your mind of what's true, what's right, what's normal. The more you let them go by without thinking, the more they control what you think.

We in the media business talk a lot about the frequency of the message. Good parents know it's all about the frequency of the message. Teachers know it's all about the frequency of message, and coaches know it's all about the frequency of the message. You have to repeat it. Repeat it, repeat it, and repeat it.

That's the way you get a message into someone's head. If I hear a message once, I'll forget it. Or I'll garble it in my memory. Even if it gets into my mind for a moment, it will be gone soon. But I can still repeat commercial jingles that were on the radio when I was a child, and I get every word right. Why is that? It was all about the frequency of the message. Those advertisers made sure that little song played every time their product was mentioned, over and over again, for years. And it worked.

So the bad news is that there are all sorts of people trying to form your conscience, and they're not all trying to form it for good. A lot of them are just trying to make you buy what they have to sell. But there are others who are trying to make you think that the eternal truth, the way

God wants us to follow, is old-fashioned and outdated. It's not the way things are today. You need to get with the program and catch up to the times. And you may not want to believe that, but if you're getting that message over and over and over again, it's going to sink in. It's going to form your conscience. And it's going to form it wrong.

So how do we form our consciences the right way, when the world around us is working so hard to form them the wrong way?

We form our conscience by listening mindfully to the Word of God. And we listen over and over and over.

Well, where is the Word of God? It's in the Sacred Scripture. It's in the Bible, the New Testament and the Old Testament.

Pope Francis is often encouraging people to read a few minutes a day from the New Testament—from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—to remind themselves of the words of Jesus. “Each day, let us read a verse or two of the Bible. Let us begin with the Gospel: let us keep it open on our table, carry it in our pocket, read it on our cell phones, and allow it

to inspire us daily.”¹ In fact, the Pope even established a new celebration: the Sunday of the Word of God. It happens every year on the third Sunday in ordinary time. This Pope is big on Bible reading.

And for good reason. If we do that every day, even just a few verses at a time, Jesus’ words become the message that surrounds us. They become the thing we hear over and over again.

And so we should turn to the Word of God in the Sacred Scriptures. In the Old Testament and New Testament. Read it, think about it, read it, think about it, read it, think about it until it sinks in and becomes part of our moral gyroscope.

I’m reminded of those stunning words that God spoke to Moses as recorded in the sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, and this is after he had given him the Ten Commandments on those two tablets, and he told Moses,

Take to heart these words which I command you today. Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at

home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them on your arm as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9.)

Through Moses, the Lord is telling the people, you have to make these commandments the constant background to your life. You have to drill them into your memory. You have to drill them into your children's memories. Repeat them over and over, and make sure that, no matter where you go, there's something to remind you of these commandments.

God knows all about the frequency of the message. That's what drills are about.

I know all about drills from being in sports. I remember spelling drills and multiplication drills, too. The principle is the same: you repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat until you've got it. And when I say "you've got it," I mean that it just becomes instinctively part of you. You don't have to think when someone asks you, "What's

six times seven?” You don’t have to remember how to hold the ball when you’re going to shoot a basket. These things are just part of your brain now, and they’re ready when you need them.

So this is good advice in Deuteronomy. Make the law part of your life wherever you look, and you’ll counteract all those other influences that are trying to form your conscience.

How do you do that? By staying in touch with Scripture, as Pope Francis said. He was really giving us the same advice as Deuteronomy: make Scripture part of your life, every day, until it’s a natural part of your thinking.

Now, there are two places above all in Scripture where you’ll find the good influences you’ll need. One of them is the Ten Commandments, and the other is the Gospels.

So let’s start with a detailed look at the Ten Commandments.

6. The Ten Commandments

GOD REVEALED the Law to Moses when the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai. Moses took what God told him to the people of Israel, and those laws became the basis of their life.

But there's one exception—one part of the Law that didn't follow that pattern. The Israelites heard the Ten Commandments directly from God.

It scared them half to death. And we can see why. The presence of God on the mountain was a very frightening thing.

On the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud blast of the shofar [a ram's-horn trumpet], so that all the people in the camp trembled. But Moses led the people out of

the camp to meet God, and they stationed themselves at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely enveloped in smoke, because the LORD had come down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blast of the shofar grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking and God was answering him with thunder. (Exodus 19:16-19.)

You'd be frightened, too. And the noise and fire and thunder continued as the mighty voice of the Lord spoke the words of the Ten Commandments.

That was enough for the Israelites. They decided they were *way* too close to God right now.

Now as all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blast of the shofar and the mountain smoking, they became afraid and trembled. So they took up a position farther away and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not

let God speak to us, or we shall die.” Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and put the fear of Him upon you so you do not sin.” (Exodus 20:18-20.)

From then on, Moses was the mediator. God told him what to tell the people, and he brought God’s word to them, so they wouldn’t be literally scared to death.

So it turns out that the Ten Commandments were the only part of the Law that the people of Israel actually heard from the voice of God himself. But the Ten Commandments are the core of the Law. All the rest of the laws are really about how to implement these ten basic principles. The Israelites had heard the fundamentals, and they had heard them from God himself.

And as we saw when Jesus talked to the rich young man, these commandments are fundamental for Christians, too. These commandments are a basic guide to the moral life. They’re in the Bible twice: once in Exodus 20, and once in Deuteronomy 5.

Now, it may surprise you to know that Christians and Jews don't all number the Ten Commandments the same way. We all agree that there are ten of them, but we don't agree on how to divide them up. So there's one numbering that's traditional for Jews, and another that's traditional for Catholics and Lutherans, and another used by Reformed and Anglican Christians. So if you talk about the sixth commandment, and someone tells you it's the seventh commandment, maybe you're talking to a Presbyterian. We all agree, though, that these are the basic rules for living the life God wants us to live.

Can you recite them? Maybe it would be a good idea to have them in your memory, ready when you need them.

So let's go through them—in the Catholic numbering, of course—and see what they tell us about how to live life the right way.

1. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall not have other

gods beside me. You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or serve them. For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their ancestors' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but showing love down to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The first commandment tells us how to organize our priorities. We put God first. Everything follows from that. Nothing gets ahead of God.

It's easy for us to look at this commandment and say, "Well, I don't make statues of Osiris or Kukulcan or Athena, so I'm fine." But the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that there's more to idolatry than making statues of pagan gods.

Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc.²

That's a pretty comprehensive list. Do you miss Mass because you want to make some extra overtime? Watch out! You might be starting to put money before God. Do you do something you know you shouldn't because it feels good? Whatever you put *before* God *becomes* your god. That's having another god besides God.

2. You shall not invoke the name of the LORD, your God, in vain. For the LORD will not leave unpunished anyone who invokes his name in vain.

It really seems old-fashioned to say, "Watch your language." But really, watch your language.

The names of God and Jesus are holy. If you use them casually, or even as curses, what are you saying about God? What message are other people getting from you? “Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the person through whom they occur” (Luke 17:1). It matters what message other people get from us.

3. Remember the sabbath day—keep it holy. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God. You shall not do any work, either you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your work animal, or the resident alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

This is a commandment that helps us stick to the first one. At least one day of the week, we

have to stop running after whatever *this* world tells us is important and pay attention to God.

4. Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

There are a lot of things to notice about this short commandment.

First of all, you might notice that this commandment shifts the focus from how we treat God to how we treat each other. The Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets, and traditionally the division happens here, so that the second tablet is about our relationships with other human beings.

You might also notice that this is the only commandment in the list that comes with a blessing attached. If you do *this*, *this* good thing will happen.

That's not a coincidence. The Israelites were going to have to establish a whole new country, a whole new government, when they got to the

Promised Land. Where do you even begin when you have to make a new country?

The answer is right here: you begin with the family. The family is where all of society begins. If you have a population with strong families, you have the beginning of good government, and with that you have peace and long life.

That's why this commandment is so important. The family is the basis of society, and the government needs to make sure that the family is protected. But where it starts is in our own families. How can we expect to have a government that honors the family if we don't honor our own families? How can our government have any legitimate authority if we don't even respect the authority of our own parents?

Now, this authority isn't unlimited. The Ten Commandments are organized the way they are for a reason. God comes first. Remember what Jesus said: I have to be ready to give up on my own family if it's the only way not to give up on God. If my mother tells me to rob a bank, that's where "Honor your father and your mother" stops.

But unless something extreme comes up, we have an obligation to give our parents obedience and respect. And our obligation doesn't end when we're grown up. A stable society, with long life for all of us, depends on our respecting the wisdom and experience of our elders.

5. You shall not kill.

This is pretty explicit. We can never take an innocent life.

You'll notice I said an *innocent* life. Now, if someone is trying to kill your family, and there's absolutely no other way to save their lives, then killing the aggressor may be a necessary consequence of the actions you take in self-defense, and no one will say you violated this commandment.

But it leaves us no excuses when we're talking about innocent lives. That's very important, because it's so easy for us to make excuses. Well, we say, it's unfortunate, but the greater good means that *those* people have to be eliminated. They're in the way. It's too bad, but they don't fit

with our kind of civilization. It's too bad, but that woman's life would be ruined if she had to raise that child. It's too bad, but that man is really sick, and he'd be better off if he could die with dignity...

No. *You shall not kill.* It's as simple as that.

We have to think about this commandment when we think about war, too. Aggressive war is never legitimate. Sometimes war is forced on us as the only way to save lives, but we have to be very sure all the alternatives have been exhausted.

6. You shall not commit adultery.

Again, the family is the basis of society. "Honor your father and your mother" dealt with the duties of children; this one deals with the duty of parents to provide a stable family for their children.

That's the purpose of marriage—to form that safe nucleus of society. Infidelity strikes at the very heart of that safety.

7. You shall not steal.

It probably doesn't need any argument to say that stealing is bad. Private property is one of the fundamental rights of all people. But it's worth pointing out that not all stealing is illegal. It's stealing any time you figure out a way to take advantage of people without giving them what they justly deserve in return. If food is scarce, and you charge people through the nose for a bag of rice, that's a violation of this commandment. If you corner the market on some vital drug and jack up the price just because you can, that's a violation of this commandment. The police may not be able to arrest you, but God is watching.

8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Everything in society depends on our being able to trust each other. Mike Birck, who founded Tellabs, had a simple three-point plan for success:

1. Tell the truth.
2. Try your best.
3. Do the right thing.

With those three things, he said, you'll be successful. And Mike Birck certainly had a lot of success. He would have told you it was because he stuck to those principles.

Telling the truth is important. Transparency is important. A lie may get you what you want right now, but the trust you lose can never be replaced. And trust, as Mike Birck could tell you, is good for business.

But Christians have an even stronger reason for being truthful. If people can't trust us about ordinary everyday things, how can they trust that we have the truth about God? We're all responsible for spreading the Gospel, and we can't do that if people don't trust us.

Now we come to the commandments about coveting, and this is where the numbering gets most complicated. As we saw before, the Ten Commandments are in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. They're the same commandments, but the wording is slightly different, and

the list of things not to covet is in a different order. Catholic tradition uses the word order in Deuteronomy 5:21.

9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

You might think this was taken care of by “You shall not commit adultery.” But this commandment takes it even further: “Don’t even *think* about it.”

That’s important because the temptation of concupiscence—strong desire, especially sexual desire, for something we shouldn’t have—is just about the strongest temptation we can face. We need to practice purity of heart, or we might find ourselves tempted beyond our strength.

10. You shall not desire your neighbor's house or field, his male or female slave, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The same thing goes for other temptations that applies to carnal concupiscence. Covetous-

ness of some sort—wanting what we shouldn't have—is the root of almost every other sin. If we can keep away from covetousness, we probably won't even have to worry about the other eight commandments.

These ten rules are the foundation of the moral life for every Christian. They're a good set of rules to memorize and repeat every day. God had a good reason for telling the people of Israel to write them down everywhere they were likely to look.

But as Christians, aren't we free from the Jewish Law?

Yes, we are. But, as Jesus taught us, that doesn't mean we go off and do anything we want. We're free from the Law because, as Christians, we're held to a *higher* standard.

7. The Gospel

THE PHARISEES were always coming up with little tests for Jesus. We already saw how the one about the tax didn't work. But that certainly wasn't the only one they tried. Not long after the tax question, they came up with another one. Meanwhile, the Sadducees, traditional enemies of the Pharisees, had also been trying to catch Jesus saying something stupid, so he hardly got a break. As soon as the Sadducees were done with him, here came the Pharisees again.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them [a scholar of the law] tested him by asking, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

He said to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your

soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:34-40.)

“The law and the prophets” means the Old Testament. The Law is the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The rest of the books are the Prophets.

So Jesus says that the whole Old Testament boils down to these two commandments: Love God with your whole heart (see Deuteronomy 6:5), and love your neighbor as yourself (see Leviticus 19:18).

In another place, he boils it down even smaller.

So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12.)

You can boil the whole Old Testament down into one sentence? That's really striking. But it's not a new idea. There's an ancient story about another Jewish teacher, the famous Rabbi Hillel, who lived just a little before Jesus. Some jokester asked Shammai (another famous rabbi) and Hillel to teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. Shammai got angry, but Hillel stood on one foot and said, "Whatever you hate, don't do that to other people. That's the whole law. The rest is commentary, so go study it."

So there you are. The Old Testament is a big book, but you can recite the whole thing while you stand on one foot. (I wouldn't recommend trying to win any bets with that, by the way.)

The reason the Old Testament is so big, though, is that loving God and loving our neighbors aren't natural things to us in our fallen state. What I *naturally* love is *me*. It takes a lot of training to teach ourselves to love God and neighbor. That's why Jesus himself had the commandments ready whenever somebody asked him how to live a good life.

But Jesus had a different interpretation of some of those commandments. Take the one about killing. “Thou shalt not kill.” That’s simple. I haven’t killed anybody, not ever, not in my whole life. I’m good with that one.

Until Jesus comes along and says this:

You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, “You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, “Raqa” [a really bad insult] will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, “You fool,” will be liable to fiery Gehenna. (Matthew 5:21-22.)

This changes things. I thought I was just fine—but now I’m breaking the commandment even if I just get angry!

And how about adultery? You may have been perfectly chaste, in the sense that you never had sex with anyone outside marriage. Great! You’re

fine with that commandment. But then Jesus comes along and says this:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28.)

Even if it’s just inside my own head, I’m still breaking the commandment!

We already got a hint of this idea in the ninth and tenth commandments—the ones about coveting. But Jesus is extending it explicitly to all the commandments. *Don’t even think it.* Just being angry with your neighbor makes you want to kill him, and then you’ve already broken that commandment. Just lusting after someone makes you want to violate the commandment against adultery, and then it’s as good as broken.

What Jesus demands is *purity of heart.*

These new interpretations of the commandments are in the Sermon on the Mount, which is a good basic instruction manual for the Chris-

tian life. It takes up three chapters in Matthew, chapters 5 through 7, and it packs a lot of uncomfortable things into that little space.

But how do you really live that way? Well, Jesus has some suggestions. For example, after he tells us that even anger will get us in trouble, he gives us this advice.

Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:23-26.)

As Christians, we should be the ones who cut through old grudges and reconcile with our

neighbors. We should be the ones who overcome anger. Even when it's hard. You'll notice Jesus doesn't spend a lot of time sorting out whose fault this dispute is. It doesn't matter. *You* should be the one who ends it.

As for the commandment about adultery, Jesus has some advice for us there, too. After telling us that even lusting in our hearts is equivalent to committing adultery, he goes on:

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna. (Matthew 5:29-30.)

Once again, Jesus is giving us a really striking image to get the idea stuck in our minds. How important is purity of heart? Really, really important. More important than your hand or your

eye. Why is it important? Because the standards for getting into heaven are very high.

I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20.)

That makes it sound impossible! The Pharisees obeyed every rule in the book. They memorized all the little laws in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, and they stuck to every one. Then they made up rules about how to obey the rules, and they stuck to those, too. We're supposed to work harder than *that*?

But then we remember that Jesus told us there were really only two rules. Love God, love your neighbor. If we can get those right, we're set. St. Augustine boiled the whole Gospel down into one sentence: Love and do what you like. You can do anything you want if you've really *internalized* love of God and love of neighbor, because you simply won't want to do anything wrong.

So what Jesus is really talking about here is *forming your conscience*. He wants you to look out for thoughts, not just deeds. And he wants you to do that because you need to have an *automatic* instinct to avoid what's wrong. That's a well-formed conscience.

If you put the work into forming your conscience, it gets easier and easier. Instead of memorizing lists of rules like the Pharisees, you know what's right and what's wrong without having to think about it. Your conscience goes to work when you have a difficult decision and helps you find the right answer. That's what conscience is for. But you have to put the work in first.

When you look at Jesus's whole ministry, you see that this was really the thing he came to teach us. The Law was a kind of external conscience. It was there to keep us from doing the things we shouldn't do, because the people of Israel had shown that they couldn't be left alone without those rules. But Christ came to show us how to get out from under the Law by being *better* than the Law.

Before faith came, we were held in custody under law, confined for the faith that was to be revealed. Consequently, the law was our disciplinarian for Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a disciplinarian. (Galatians 3:23-25.)

That was how St. Paul explained it to the Christians in Galatia. The word we translate “disciplinarian” refers to a slave who took the children to school and made sure they kept out of trouble. As St. Paul sees it, the Law was doing just that: it was leading us safely to school, keeping us out of trouble until we finished our education. Now we’ve been through Christ’s school, and we’ve become grown women and men who don’t need someone to keep us out of trouble anymore.

But you might ask a reasonable question. Jesus lived at a time and in a place where camels were everyday sights. The problems and experiences people had back then were very different

from the ones we have today. They didn't even have Facebook! How can I be sure I'm applying his teachings to my own problems in the right way?

Jesus anticipated that question. He knew there would have to be teachers as long as there were people, teachers who could take the simple basic principles of faith and show how they applied to the conditions of our time. He trained his Apostles for years, and they trained other leaders after them.

And that succession has never been broken. The bishops in the Church today stand at the end of a long chain of bishops that goes right back to the Apostles, who were chosen personally by Jesus Christ.

So when we need to know how Jesus' teachings apply in our own world of today, we can rely on the teaching of the Church.

8. The Teaching of the Church

WHEN I want to know how to understand the teachings of Christ as they apply to some problem we have today, I go to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

And I was just thinking how lucky I am to be living at a time when I can do that.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church was a monumental project by all of the bishops all over the world that took them seven years. When St. John Paul the Great authorized the Catechism, it had been more than *four centuries* since the Church last published a universal, comprehensive catechism.

The world has changed a lot since the Roman Catechism was published in 1566. Nothing in the Christian faith has changed, but we have to apply it to different conditions. In 1566, you could spread ideas by printing them in books, but it

took days or weeks to get a book from one end of Europe to the other. Today an idea can be on the other side of the world faster than I can think it. We're still the same imperfect sinners humans have always been, but we have different tools, different customs, and even different languages.

So I feel lucky to be able to turn to the Catechism and find the eternal teaching of the Church presented in a way that deals with our 21st-century problems. I encourage all Catholics to have a copy of the Catechism —to read it, to underline it, to be familiar with it.

But of course the Catechism is just one of the ways the Church teaches us. And if you want to make good decisions, in the way you live your life and in the way you vote, you should pay attention to all of them.

Our own local bishops are the teachers in our own dioceses, and they can help us understand our local problems. Even in America, the problems in Los Angeles are very different from the problems in Chicago, which are very different from the problems in Scranton. Again, it's not

that there's any difference in the faith. But the different conditions mean that we have different problems to apply Christ's teachings to.

For problems that affect the whole country, the American bishops will come together and issue a statement to guide us. You can find these statements on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The teacher for the whole Church, of course, is the Pope. The Pope has a number of different ways of teaching.

Every pope publishes major documents that address a specific problem Christians are facing.

For example, Pope Francis wrote an encyclical in 2015 about "global environmental deterioration," warning us that we have a responsibility to take care of the planet that is everybody's home. Was he making up something new? No. He was showing us how the teachings in Scripture and the tradition of the Church apply to one of the problems we're facing today.

In 2018, he wrote an Apostolic Exhortation about "the call to holiness in today's world," re-

minding us that every Christian is meant for sainthood. Was that a new idea? No, but the Pope wanted “to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities.”³

The Pope also gives us daily homilies, and I think it’s good to listen to them as often as we can. He often takes us out of our comfort zone, making us face problems we’d rather ignore.

But why should we pay attention to the Pope? Isn’t he a human being like the rest of us?

Yes, he is. But Jesus has given his Church a precious gift. He promised to send the Holy Spirit to keep us on the right path. And so, when the Pope teaches us about the faith, *he can’t be wrong*.

You’ve heard about “papal infallibility,” I’m sure. Maybe you’ve heard jokes about it. And maybe you’ve wondered about it.

In my experience, most people don’t seem to know what it means when we say the Pope is “infallible.” It doesn’t mean he’s always right about everything. It doesn’t even mean he’s a good person. In my lifetime we’ve had a string

of great popes, but no one who knows any history would say that we've never had a bad one. There have been some really terrible people who became popes, and they did a lot of damage to the Church and to the world.

But even the worst popes never taught incorrect doctrine as the teaching of the Church. And that's what we mean when we talk about papal infallibility. The circumstances under which the Pope is infallible are very limited. If the Pope says, "I think it's going to rain tomorrow," he's just as likely to be wrong about that as I am. But when he's teaching on matters of faith and morals, and when he's speaking *ex cathedra*, the Pope cannot be wrong. "*Ex cathedra*" literally means "from the seat"—the "seat" being the Throne of Peter. When the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, he's speaking as the head of the entire Church of Christ, not as some guy from Argentina who happens to live in Rome.

The Pope's infallibility is just an expression of the infallibility of the teaching authority of the whole Church. That teaching office is called the *Magisterium*.

“It is this Magisterium’s task to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error.”⁴ That’s the way the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains it.

What that means is that we don’t have to guess what’s true about the faith. We can *know*. We can have the true faith, without error, by listening to the teaching of the Church.

That’s *amazing*, isn’t it?

All right, but here’s the bad news. We can know what the true teaching of Christ is. But we can’t always know how it applies to every situation. Voting, for example. The Church isn’t going to give us a list of candidates to vote for.

There are good reasons for that. One is that freedom is one of the first principles of Christianity. “For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Another is that Christians can actually disagree about politics. Yes, it’s true: you can think we should spend government money on parks,

and I can think we should spend that money on public transit, and we can both be Christians. I *wish* I could tell everybody who disagreed with me that they were objectively wrong, but I can't. It's not the Church's business to make those decisions. Those are things we have to work out with our neighbors, and in our society the way we work them out is by voting.

What the Church *can* do is remind us of what Christ taught us. There are certain things that are intrinsically evil. We have a commandment that says "You shall not kill." Taking innocent lives is wrong, and no political expediency makes it right. We have a duty to the family, and nothing that puts the family in danger can be right. Catholics and others have to be able to practice their religion without interference from the state. On most political issues we can compromise, because they don't affect the fundamentals of moral truth. But we have to draw a heavy line around those fundamentals and make sure our government doesn't cross it.

I'm not going to lie to you. I know decisions in the real world are tough. I've given you three im-

portant tools to help form your conscience for the hard work it's going to have to do: the Ten Commandments, the Gospel, and the teaching of the Church. But I've saved the best for last.

9. Prayer and the Sacraments

I'VE TALKED about forming your conscience by learning what Scripture and the Church have to say about the problems we face. But some of those problems are still hard. Wouldn't it be nice if I could just give you the number of a Conscience Hotline to help you with those difficult decisions? And wouldn't it be great if I could give you something that would help you summon up the strength to do the right thing once you know what it is?

Well, I can.

We *do* have a hotline that goes straight to God. It's called prayer. And we *do* have a source of extraordinary strength. It's called the sacraments.

Prayer is a conversation with God. I think we sometimes forget that. It's easy to think of prayer as going one way—I say something, it goes up to God, and we're done. But we also

have to be ready to listen, because the conversation goes the other way, too.

You're studying the Scriptures and listening to the teaching of the Church. That's great. But ask for the light of the Holy Spirit to understand them.

"Pray without ceasing." That was St. Paul's advice to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

I'm not just talking about prayer of petition or a vocal prayer such as grace before meals and the Angelus and the Rosary. Those are good and important, and I encourage everybody to have a regular prayer routine. But we should also be praying when we hear or read the Scriptures, or the teaching of the bishops and the Pope. We should be pondering these things and asking, how does that apply to me? We should be talking to the Lord about the events and circumstances of our day.

Here's a question to exercise your conscience in prayer: Lord, when did I see you today?

I remember a priest who lived in Akron, Ohio. He was pastor of Saint Mary's Church in Akron. His name was Father John Hilkert. He was a

very, very good and holy priest. At dinner one night he said, "I think Jesus came to my front door 20 times today. And he always asked the same thing. He was asking for \$30 for bus fare to get down to Kentucky."

I said, "Well, Father, what did you do?"

He said, "Well, I gave it to Jesus, of course."

He could see Jesus in that visitor who was knocking at the door. You or I might have seen just a dirty beggar. But Father Hilkert had practiced looking for Jesus. He had learned to ask that question in his prayers, "Lord, when did I see you today?"

This is the question we most need to ask every time we pray, and especially every time we go to confession: What have I done for Jesus today? Pope Francis points out that God loves our conversations with him, but what really makes our worship pleasing is when we share his gifts with our brothers and sisters.

We may think that we give glory to God only by our worship and prayer, or simply by following certain ethical norms. It is

true that the primacy belongs to our relationship with God, but we cannot forget that the ultimate criterion on which our lives will be judged is what we have done for others. Prayer is most precious, for it nourishes a daily commitment to love. Our worship becomes pleasing to God when we devote ourselves to living generously, and allow God's gift, granted in prayer, to be shown in our concern for our brothers and sisters.⁵

And that's what we talk to the Lord about in our prayer: the circumstances and events in our life—and how the Lord was present in them. Sharing his gifts with our brothers and sisters is exactly what we're doing when we vote—if we vote the right way.

So prayer is one of the most important things we can do to form our conscience. And the Church also gives us the sacraments. The most important one in forming your conscience, I think, is the sacrament of confession. Frequent confession is a great remedy to root out the sins

of pride, envy, lust, and selfishness, which many times are a real barrier for our conscience.

That's one of the strongest pieces of advice I have for you: Before you vote, go to confession. Clean out your conscience. Get rid of all the dust and grime in there, so it can work the way it's supposed to work.

And of course, don't neglect the Eucharist. Going to Mass and receiving the Eucharist brings Jesus to you in a more immediate way than anything else you can do. You can have the power of Christ going with you when you vote. Isn't that an amazing privilege?

Well, now you're just about ready. You've studied Scripture, you're well informed about the teaching of the Church, you've been listening to the Lord in prayer, and you've cleared out your conscience with a good confession. You've done everything you can to form a conscience that will be ready to show you what the right decision is. You can take all that with you when you vote.

But at this point, many Catholics I know get paralyzed by that one little scruple we brought

up near the beginning of the book. They come to me and ask, “But is it right to mix religion and politics?”

10. Religion and Politics

“BUT IS IT right to mix religion and politics?”

I think that’s the wrong question. It suggests that we’re going to try to force other people to follow our religion. But Christianity can’t be forced.

So, no, we’re not going to try to force everybody to be a Catholic Christian. Instead, we need to live the lives Christ showed us how to live, and that will make people *want* to be Catholic Christians.

And I don’t think it would be a good idea to vote for only Catholic politicians, or even only Christian ones. I know some Jewish and Muslim people I would trust with my country’s life. And I’m sorry to say that I’ve known some Catholic politicians I wouldn’t trust at all. I’ve spent a lot of time in Chicago, after all.

But none of that means religion has nothing to do with politics. I believe in separation of church and state: I believe that the state shouldn't have any control over the Church, and the Church shouldn't control the state.

But that's very different from saying that the Church shouldn't have any influence. Religion is the most important thing in my life. I hope it's the most important thing in your life, too, or your priorities are seriously messed up. And as Christians we have an absolute duty to guide our government in Christian principles—because they're the *right* principles. As Pope Francis put it:

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.⁶

So the Church won't tell you which candidates to vote for. But the Church will remind you of

what Jesus taught. The Church will remind you how to form your conscience. The Church will remind you that God has given you a free will and an intellect—an intellect by which you can *know*, and a free will by which you can *choose*.

And this is exactly what the people who founded this country hoped for: people of faith making choices based on their faith.

When George Washington decided not to run for a third term as President, he sent a letter to the American people that was printed in all the newspapers up and down the country. We know it as Washington's Farewell Address, his last great gift to the country he loved. And here's what he had to say about religion and politics:

Of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and Citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the

pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked, Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect, that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

It is substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who, that is a sincere friend to it, can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?⁷

Now, Washington wasn't someone who believed in an established religion. He didn't think Americans had to be his kind of Christian, or even Christian at all, to be good citizens. In 1790 he wrote to a Jewish congregation in Rhode Island that exercising their religion was their *inherent natural right*, and every good citizen of every religion was equally an American.

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, "which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance" [here he quoted from the rabbi's letter to him], requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.... May the children of the

Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid [see Micah 4:4]. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.⁸

This makes it clear, in case it needed to be made clear: George Washington believed in freedom of religion. So we should take his words about religion all the more seriously.

They certainly meant a lot to the Americans who first read them. George Washington had been our greatest hero, leading the army in the Revolution, when all odds were against him. He had extraordinary leadership and vision. And I might add that, in his writings, he also shows a great deal of humility. He was elected twice by popular acclaim to be President of our country. And then he freely chose after two terms not to

run for election again, so that power could be passed on peacefully. In many ways this was something new in human history.

Washington gives us the way I'd really like to frame our conversation about voting your conscience, and how we connect our conscience to religion.

We're right to demand a government that doesn't encourage one religion over another—that doesn't favor Baptists over Catholics, or Jews over Hindus. Good citizens of all sorts should feel safe and welcome here. But we're also right to demand a government that *encourages* religion and doesn't fight against it.

And we have to demand a government that stands up for the rights of the helpless, because that's why government exists. Today the very most helpless of all are also the ones most in danger: unborn human children, tens of thousands of whom will be killed just this year to make life more convenient for us. As Christians, we can't keep silent about that tragedy. I've never forgotten the stirring words St. John Paul

the Great spoke to a huge crowd on the Mall in Washington:

And so, we will stand up every time that human life is threatened. When the sacredness of life before birth is attacked, we will stand up and proclaim that no one ever has the authority to destroy unborn life. When a child is described as a burden or is looked upon only as a means to satisfy an emotional need, we will stand up and insist that every child is a unique and unrepeatable gift of God, with the right to a loving and united family. When the institution of marriage is abandoned to human selfishness or reduced to a temporary, conditional arrangement that can easily be terminated, we will stand up and affirm the indissolubility of the marriage bond.⁹

And we have been standing up. Catholics have been the loudest voice in this country crying out against abortion. But just in case we were getting too complacent, Pope Francis reminds us

that there are other things we can't keep silent about:

Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.¹⁰

So does this mean abortion isn't as important as we thought it was? No, that's not what it

means at all. We're not choosing between protecting the unborn and helping the poor. Instead, we demand *both*. We need to let our politicians know that they have a duty to defend the helpless, whoever they may be. That's why we *have* government: to keep our world from spiraling down into chaos, where only the strongest and most ruthless get a chance to survive. It doesn't matter whether people are helpless because they aren't physically able to take care of themselves, or because they don't have the money and power that make life easy in a consumerist society.

So we can't use poverty as an excuse to dilute our "clear, firm and passionate" defense of the unborn. We have to be passionate about that defense, *and* we have to work for the economic justice Pope Francis was talking about.

That's our ideal. But, of course, we don't live in an ideal world. We live in the world of sin. We live in the world after the Fall.

It would be easy if, in every election, one candidate embraced all the Catholic values Pope Francis listed. Then there wouldn't be any prob-

lem. Defends the unborn? Check. Has a program for economic justice? Check. Long record of battling every form of rejection? Check. That's our candidate.

In the real world, that seldom happens. We usually have a menu of less-than-ideal choices, and we have to pick one of them. How can we do that and still uphold our Christian values?

This is where that virtue of *prudence* comes in to help us. You remember: prudence brings out the scale and weighs the issues. Abortion, for example, is a matter of more than 600,000 human lives every *year*. That weighs a lot in the scale.

The American bishops won't tell you which candidate to vote for any more than Pope Francis will. But they do have some pointed advice. They remind us of what Pope Francis has already told us:

Pope Francis has continued to draw attention to important issues such as migration, xenophobia, racism, abortion, global conflict, and care for creation. In the

United States and around the world, many challenges demand our attention.

But then they go on to point out what *prudence* has to tell us about the priorities:

The threat of abortion remains our pre-eminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed.

Does this mean we vote on only one issue? No:

At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty.¹¹

But we *do* give the issue of abortion a huge amount of weight in our scale, because it's a huge threat. In 2004, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) sent a letter to a U. S.

Cardinal about when Catholics should decide not to present themselves for Holy Communion.

Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or on the decision to wage war, he would not for that reason be considered unworthy to present himself to receive Holy Communion. While the Church exhorts civil authorities to seek peace, not war, and to exercise discretion and mercy in imposing punishment on criminals, it may still be permissible to take up arms to repel an aggressor or to have recourse to capital punishment. There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia.¹²

As a Catholic, Cardinal Ratzinger said, you need to examine your *conscience* before you

present yourself for Communion—and one of the things you have to examine is how you voted. But, again, there's no list of Church-supported candidates. There's a very important note at the end of that letter:

[N.B. A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia. When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favour of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons.]

(What are *proportionate reasons*? you might ask. Someone asked that question of the head of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities. He couldn't think of any.)

These are the things we have to keep in mind to form a conscience that's ready to make the hard decisions on the ballot.

Then we can go into the polling place, or fill in our mail-in ballot, and *vote our conscience*.

This is where it all comes together. This is where we have to put our prudence to work. This is where we have to remember those Ten Commandments that tell us what our priorities are. This is where we have to remember the Gospel message of love. This is where we have to hear what the Church has to teach us. Above all, this is where we have to be fortified with regular prayer and participation in the sacraments. Because for just this one moment, *we are in control*. Together, you and I and all the other voters in this country are absolute dictators. That's an awesome responsibility. And it seems as though the choice gets harder every year. But remember what our American bishops have told us:

Catholics often face difficult choices about how to vote. This is why it is so important to vote according to a well-formed

conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods....

As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. A candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support. Yet if a candidate's position on a single issue promotes an intrinsically evil act, such as legal abortion, redefining marriage in a way that denies its essential meaning, or racist behavior, a voter may legitimately disqualify a candidate from receiving support.¹³

I know that making important decisions isn't always easy. But as Catholics we have advantages that no one else has. We have an instruction manual for the moral life in Scripture. We have the *infallible* teaching of the Church to tell us what's morally true. We have a direct line to God in prayer. We have the power of the sacraments. And I know that, when we mark that ballot, we'll have the Blessed Mother and all the saints praying for us.

So vote your conscience—but first *form* your conscience. Form your conscience in the words and teachings of Jesus Christ and His Church, and you'll know what to do. Nothing will be impossible with God.

About the Author

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Rev. Francis J. Hoffman, JCD, “Fr. Rocky,” serves as Executive Director/CEO of Relevant Radio® in addition to serving on the Board of Directors for Relevant Radio.

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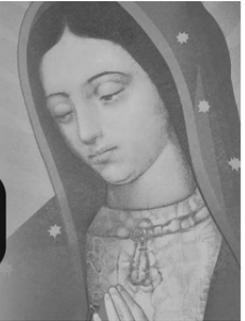
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Notes

- 1 Linda Bordoni, “Pope at Mass: ‘Make room in your lives for the Word of God,’” Vatican News, January 26, 2020.
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- 3 Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, 1.
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- 5 Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, 104.
- 6 Pope Francis, Morning Meditation, September 16, 2013.
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- 8 George Washington, Letter to Touro Synagogue, 1790.
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