

Every Day CATHOLIC

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Our Brothers' Keepers— Faith, Politics and the Common Good

by Jim and Susan Vogt

Take this patriotism quiz: Who are your U.S. senators and representatives? Who are your state senators and representatives? When was the last time you communicated with one of the above? Do you gripe about paying taxes? How does all this relate to your faith?

When Cain asked God the crucial question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God responded by punishing Cain for killing Abel (Genesis 4:1-16). We are responsible for safeguarding each others’ lives, and good government is one of the primary ways we do this.

The U.S. bishops echo this in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*: “We are called to practice Christ’s commandment to ‘love one another’ (John 13:34). We are also called to promote the well-being of all, to share our blessings with those most in need, to defend marriage, and to protect the lives and dignity of all, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the voiceless” (#10).

The Catholic Church and other

religious and humanitarian institutions do great works of charity and support the common good. These efforts can be multiplied through the far-reaching scope of local and national governments. As we know from the parable of the Good Samaritan, we are called to be not only our brother’s keeper, but also our neighbor’s—and our neighbor is everyone.

But, you may say, “Government is often wasteful. Politicians can’t be trusted. I don’t always agree with the way the government spends my taxes.” There is some truth in all these statements, but a government derives its power from the people. If it is unresponsive to the will of the people, the people have the responsibility to reform the government—but don’t expect it to happen overnight or without mammoth doses of human energy, time and perseverance.

So what does it mean to be a faithful, patriotic citizen? Voting is good, but what difference can one vote make? Waving the flag tells others that we care about our country, but it doesn’t change unjust

laws. Serving in the military requires great personal and family sacrifice, but not everyone is called to serve in this way. Who is really patriotic? Is it the person who proudly says the Pledge of Allegiance, the one who works on a political campaign and participates in a public rally, or the one who challenges an unjust law? All of them, of course.

Patriotism includes all the ways that we love, support and call our country to be its best self. In fact, it doesn’t require that we always agree with our government. Speaking up or protesting in the public

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“Mercy is the golden chain by which society is bound together.”

—William Blake,
1757-1827



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The Candidate

by Frank Frost

The *Candidate* (1972) holds up amazingly well for today's viewing and still offers food for thought.

It's the story of a dedicated public-policy activist who is tapped to run for the U.S. Senate by a couple of professional political operatives. This consultant and media expert (Peter Boyle and Allen Garfield) are in it for the game. They like to win, of course, but even if they lose, they make a good living.

The candidate they choose, Bill McKay (Robert Redford), is deeply involved in fighting for civil rights, legal aid and the environment. He agrees to enter the race as a long shot, expecting to lose, but with a goal of using the campaign to get his message to the public. He signs on with the condition that he will be able to say what he wants and be a straight talker, true to himself and his ideals. Slowly, but surely, he starts to accept compromises, yet, even so, his struggle to be honest strikes a chord with the public.

The movie becomes a story of conscience put to the test. How far will McKay go to win? The distance he travels can be seen in the contrast between two scenes. In the opening, McKay is surrounded by a cadre of busy young activists whom he keeps on their toes with firm directives. He knows what it takes to get things done. On election night, when he wins, he's totally at a loss, asking his political consultant, "What do we do now?" When it comes to actually governing, his plans for improving society have slipped away.

McKay's dilemma, in a sense, is one shared by voters in a democracy. How involved are we in the game of winning elections versus pursuing goals that serve the common good?



Chris Korzen

by Joan McKamey

People caution against talking about religion or politics. For Chris Korzen, these topics belong in the *same* conversation. His passion about this connection led to a career that bridges both worlds. Growing up in Rhode Island, Chris says he "had a sense that being Catholic brought with it social responsibility, that we're supposed to care about the poor and be nice to one another." He tells *Every Day Catholic*, "It was when I went to college at Holy Cross (Massachusetts) that the two really began to be melded together. I came away from that experience with a much better sense of what it means to be Catholic."

His work, as executive director of Catholics United (catholics-united.org), builds on earlier experiences as a union organizer, working in the software field, making radio documentaries and earning a master's degree in theology. In 2004, while a graduate student, Chris helped develop a Web site "to help Catholics make an informed decision about who to vote for for president." This effort

was based on the U.S. bishops' document *Faithful Citizenship*. He says, "The project was so successful and so different from anything else that we saw during that election cycle that we felt a responsibility to continue the work."

Through Catholics United, Chris says, "We're reaching out to folks across the country whose vocation calls them to do social justice work but who maybe haven't known how to engage in that process as a Catholic because those structures don't always exist on the parish level. We want to provide a positive way that folks can be involved." He says that, with Catholic social teaching as their foundation and guide, Catholics United "looks at the whole Catholic tradition and what our Church teaches" and offers ways people can be involved in government in concrete ways.

When asked if they will be preparing an election guide for the 2008 election, Chris says, "Yes. We'll be weighing in especially on issues like poverty, war and the environment." Always working toward common-ground solutions for the common good, Catholics United hopes to move the country toward a deeper understanding of the abortion issue. Chris says they hope to "look at solutions that address the root causes of many abortions. These are primarily economic: lack of health care, education, job security and child care. We want to help eliminate the acrimony and partisanship around this important issue."

Chris admits that this work challenges him, saying, "Some folks don't like to cross that line between politics and Church. For folks involved in social change work and political work from a faith perspective, it's a constant struggle to make sure that one's not influencing the other in negative ways. It requires some real reflection and prayer to make sure that we're keeping the faith." Chris explores these issues with Alexia Kelley of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good in their book (released June 2008), *A Nation for All: How the Catholic Vision of the Common Good Can Save America from the Politics of Division* (Jossey-Bass).

MOVIE MOMENTS, CONT'D.

Next time you watch *The Candidate*, ASK YOURSELF:

- What compromises that put ambition before integrity does McKay make along the way?
- McKay's climactic question, "What do we do now?" shows he has lost his way. Does it also suggest that he still seeks more than politics as a game?
- How committed am I to democratic ideals of seeking the common good?



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Forming a Political Conscience

by Jeanne Hunt

Scenario

Olivia watches the evening news with her parents. Jim and Carolyn are shocked when she expresses support for a candidate who holds many views that oppose Church teaching. They simply presumed that, since Olivia attends a Catholic high school, she is being formed in Catholic morality.

Olivia's positions appear not so much results of accepting doctrine as of picking and choosing what fits her interpretation

of morality. Olivia's school and her culture encourage her to form her own opinions. Jim and Carolyn feel overwhelmed with Olivia's antagonistic attitude and wonder if it's too late to teach their daughter the reasons for Catholic moral teaching and its impact on political views.

A response

The best place to begin the development of our children's morality is at the supper table. There are stories about the Kennedy family's energetic supper-table conversations. Joe Kennedy was famous for introducing his children to controversial topics from newspaper articles and inviting them to respond. The lively discussions became a place to develop a strong political and moral conscience.

Such occasions can give parents a vehicle for presenting their own views. Too often our children aren't given the guidance they need to form their consciences. The family, the domestic Church, should always be the arena of forming children's political conscience. This begins with understanding what their parents believe and why.

Children soak up everything, especially

the things their parents say and do. Recently my two-year-old grandson observed his father drop a hammer and say, "Oh, man!" For a week, little Lewis said the same thing every time he dropped something.

Catholic parents must actively share their political and moral opinions with our children. If we don't, they will turn to the culture for instruction. Parental moral guidance should begin early and last through adulthood. This is not to say that we shouldn't encourage children to develop their own opinions. It's important to be respectful of a child's ideas even though we may judge them erroneous. A parent's role is to gently lead the child to another possibility.

Jim and Carolyn took Olivia's views seriously and realized that they had neglected their role in helping form her political conscience. They began family supper-table discussions about the candidates and issues. They took advantage of media messages that supported or conflicted with Catholic teaching. They began to pray for their vibrant, intelligent daughter that God's hand would guide her future voting.

PRAYER

Litany for Guidance

by Jeanne Hunt

(for praying alone or with others)

Preparation: Set a prayer table with strips of ribbon in the colors of the national flag, a black marker or pen, a candle and a national flag.

OPENING SONG

Sing a hymn such as "God Bless America."

OPENING PRAYER

"Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful with the wisdom to choose strong and courageous leaders. Give us the insight to understand the important issues and the ability to discern your will. Help us

to apply gospel values to the concerns of our time."

SCRIPTURE

Solomon's Prayer for Wisdom (Wisdom 9:1-18)

RITUAL

(adapt as needed for nations other than the U.S.)

Response: Come, O Wisdom, inspire your people.

"The colors of the flag are signs of the best in a nation's citizens. White signifies purity and innocence, red: hardiness and valor, and blue: vigilance, perseverance and justice.

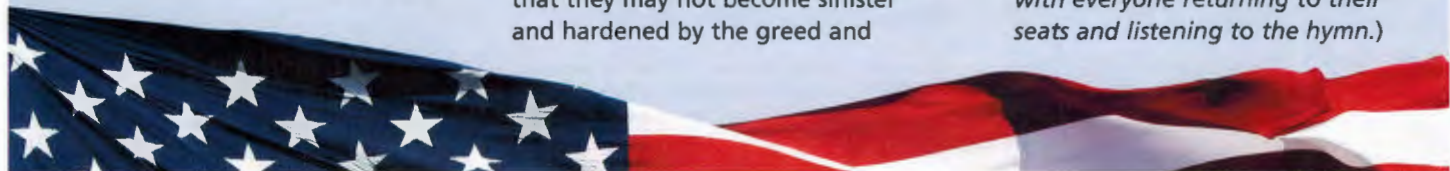
Give our leadership purity and innocence that they may not become sinister and hardened by the greed and

power that confront them, we pray to the Lord....

May hardiness and valor be our companions as we make right political choices, we pray to the Lord....

Endow those who participate in the political process with vigilance, perseverance and justice, we pray to the Lord...."

"Please come to the prayer table, take a ribbon and write on it the name of a candidate or cause that needs the blessing and guidance of God. Keep this prayer ribbon with you as a reminder to pray for our country through the election process." (Listen to a patriotic hymn during this time. The service ends with everyone returning to their seats and listening to the hymn.)



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square with humility and openness to hearing the other side are also ways of being a faithful citizen. As the U.S. bishops say, "To teach the ways of peace is not 'to weaken the nation's will' but to be concerned for the nation's soul" (*The Challenge Of Peace*, #304).

Surely those in the armed services are patriotic, but that isn't the only way to serve. Some of our citizens do so through the Peace Corps, Teach for America or other volunteer associations, and their service is no less honorable. They're working to build up our country



by being our brothers' keepers both here and abroad. Conscientious objectors to war serve the country through alternative service and challenge politicians to reevaluate violence as a solution to political disputes.

So what role do we Catholics have to play in politics? The Catholic Church doesn't tell us how to vote. The Church does, however, provide principles, called Catholic social teaching, which should guide our consciences when preparing to vote. They are:

- the right to life and dignity of the human person
- the call to family, community and participation
- the rights and responsibilities necessary to foster the common good
- an option for the poor and vulnerable
- the dignity of work and the rights of workers
- solidarity with the whole human family

that reaches beyond national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences

- caring for God's creation.

Now, back to the quiz. What can ordinary "Joe Citizen" do to become a more faithful citizen?

- **Vote, of course.** Pulling the lever in the voting booth is the easy part. Becoming a knowledgeable voter, however, demands time and study. Check candidates' positions against the principles of Catholic social teaching above. Don't just vote on one issue; weigh all the issues. Voting is a complex decision of conscience. Consult the U.S.

Catholic bishops' Web site, faithfulcitizenship.org, for more background.

- **Become an involved citizen.** Work for the candidates and issues you support. Anyone who has done door-to-door canvassing or been part of a phone bank knows what a trying job it is. We don't do it because it's fun. We do it because the system needs worker bees in order to work.

Don't stop after the campaign is over. Go to public

hearings, follow the news, communicate with public officials (that's why you need to know who they are), write letters to the editor, sign petitions.

- **Don't be afraid to run for office.** Not everyone has the skill or stamina to hold public office, but if good people don't take the risk, we'll get what's left.

- **Pay taxes, gratefully.** Few people like to pay taxes, but, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Taxes are the price we pay for a civilized society." Taxes pay for schools, fire departments, roads, parks, civil defense, protection of the environment, safety and support services for the poor—the common good. Contributing to the common good is one way we love our neighbors who don't live right next door.

Citizenship is not a pass/fail class. For Catholics, it takes vigilance grounded in Christian values to get credit.

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Jim and Susan Vogt have four adult children and live in Covington, Kentucky. Jim directs the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative. Susan speaks and writes on marriage, parenting and spirituality. Learn more at susanvogt.net.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Do you vote by political party, by issue or by some other determination? What factors do you consider in making your choices at the polls?

What does being a *faithful* and *patriotic* citizen look like in your life? How do you deal with the inevitable tension between these two values?

What will you do to better inform your conscience in preparation for upcoming elections? Be sure to include Catholic social teaching and Scripture in these efforts.

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