

# focus

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MICHIGAN  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

## THE ISSUES, THE CANDIDATES, AND YOUR VOTE 2020

This year, Michigan voters have the privilege and freedom to participate in the greatest exercise of democracy by voting for candidates who have come forward to serve their communities. Tuesday, November 3, 2020 is Election Day, where the following offices—from the local township hall to the president of the country—will be decided:

- **Federal:** President of the United States of America, one of two Michigan U.S. Senate seats, and all fourteen U.S. Representatives in Michigan's Congressional Delegation.
- **State:** Two justices for the Michigan Supreme Court, two members of the State Board of Education, and all 110 State Representatives.
- **Local:** Probate judges, county commissioners, and various other local, township, and municipal officials. In many areas, Michiganders will also weigh in on critical ballot issues that impact services and policies within their local communities.

By Election Day, most Americans will likely have become exhausted by candidates, commentators, and political operatives who promote partisanship, division, fear, and name-calling. While running a campaign should be an opportunity for candidates to share their talents and abilities, past elections have led many to disengage from the political process, even though elected officials will have a significant impact on local neighborhoods, schools, and services.

In the days and weeks leading up to the election, Michigan Catholics have the responsibility to consider how they can best serve their communities through election choices and contribute to a climate of civility in the face of divisiveness and disagreement. In fact, Catholics can play a large role in returning civility and respect to the political process.

During the election, and perhaps just as importantly in their daily lives, Catholics are reminded to allow their faith to guide their politics. The principles of faith that govern one's daily life should also guide political viewpoints, and when necessary, "transform the political party...to which [he or she] belongs."<sup>1</sup> Rather than considering what a certain party would do, Catholics have the opportunity to ask:

- What does God want me to do?
- How will my voting choice help to promote the common good and protect human dignity?
- How can I speak up about the issues that matter in a respectful way?

This **focus** publication will examine the role of conscience formation and civility in the 2020 Election and provide questions and thoughts for consideration before Michiganders cast their ballot. It also offers insights from the lives of several Catholic saints, whose examples in public life teach the importance of courage, faith, and a love for others. ●

# ISSUES TO CONSIDER BEFORE VOTING

Catholics are called to consider a wide range of issues important to the common good before voting, weighing each according to its moral importance. During this process, it is beneficial to research the ballot ahead of time, gathering the facts for every question or candidate. The paragraphs below offer information about Catholic teaching, questions to assist voters in evaluating candidate positions or political party platforms, and a list of relevant saints from whom believers can learn before casting their ballot.<sup>2</sup> Consider using these tools for prayer and reflection during the conscience formation process.



**St. Gianna Beretta Molla**—an Italian physician—is the patron saint of unborn children. During her fourth pregnancy, St. Gianna chose not to undergo a procedure for her health that would have resulted in the death of her unborn child. She delivered a healthy baby but died from postoperative complications. Her bold decision to put another life before her own is an example of extraordinary and courageous action to protect human dignity. **Other examples:** St. Elizabeth, St. Gerard Majella, St. John Paul II, St. Joseph, and St. Katharine Drexel.

## Human Life and Dignity

From the moment an individual is conceived until his or her natural death, that person possesses dignity as a human being made in the image and likeness of God. Together with the frail and elderly, the handicapped and marginalized, the dignity of all human life must be protected, beginning with the unborn child in the womb. Rampant gun violence, maltreatment of the sick and disabled, and the loss of over 60 million children due to legalized abortion illustrate the need for a more just and violence-free society.

- Will the candidate support policies that provide women in difficult pregnancies with pre- and post-natal care, transportation and employment assistance, and other necessary care to help her through and after the pregnancy?
- Will the candidate oppose direct threats to human life, such as abortion, racism, assisted suicide, euthanasia, the death penalty, embryonic stem cell research, and violence?

## Religious Liberty

The constitutional freedoms that permit Americans to practice their faith freely and prohibit the government from intruding in religious life are among the foremost principles of the American experiment. This election season reminds us that these sacred principles are no longer paramount to some in the political and civil arena. Elected officials are thus urged to re-invigorate religious liberty for all, thereby promoting peace, understanding, and service to others in the public square.

- Does the candidate support the right of religious individuals and institutions, such as hospitals, charity agencies, and schools, to operate according to their deeply held beliefs?
- Does the candidate oppose restrictions on refugee acceptance and resettlement on the basis of religion?



**St. Thomas More** is the patron saint of lawyers, statesmen, and politicians. St. Thomas More served in a variety of public roles, including as Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII. He refused to acknowledge the king's divorce or recognize the king as the head of the Church, which led to

St. Thomas's execution. St. Thomas More is an example of holding strong to one's convictions in the face of extreme government pressure. **Other examples:** St. Andrew Dung-Lac, St. Edith Stein, St. John Fisher, St. José Luis Sánchez del Río, and St. Paul Miki.

## Preferential Option for the Poor

The Gospels share how Jesus saw dignity and value in every living person, especially those on the margins and those discarded or overlooked by the authorities. His example of charity and love for others inspire within the human heart a desire to serve the less fortunate. Catholics should consider how candidates will support policies that improve economic conditions and protect the vulnerable.

- Does the candidate promote policies that protect Michigan's most vulnerable citizens and foster the creation of jobs, with acceptable working conditions and just wages?
- Has the candidate discussed day-to-day realities with the poor and how he or she could assist, for example by supporting affordable housing and transportation policies for low- and moderate-income families and individuals?

**St. Vincent de Paul** is the patron saint of charities. He founded several hospitals and collected funds for war victims. His life inspired Blessed Frédéric Ozanam to create The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in 1833, which offers person-to-person services for those in need. Catholics are called to help one another through acts of charity and justice in the public realm. **Other examples:** St. Cajetan, St. Clare of Assisi, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Óscar Romero, and Blessed Solanus Casey.



## Education

Parents have the *fundamental right* to choose a school most suitable for their children.<sup>3</sup> The state has a responsibility to allow public and nonpublic options for all. Where existing structures continually fail low-income families, new models and choices become necessary.

- Does the candidate support the expansion of school choice options such as tuition tax credits, opportunity scholarships, or similar programs?
- How does the candidate propose to improve the quality of public education, especially for low-income students?



**St. Elizabeth Ann Seton** is the patron saint of Catholic education and the founder of the first Catholic schools in the country. Following the death of her husband when she was thirty, St. Elizabeth supported five children, converted to Catholicism, and became a founding member of the Sisters of Charity. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's example reminds Catholics to remain hopeful through difficulties. **Other examples:** St. Catherine of Siena, St. John Baptiste de la Salle, St. John Bosco, St. Marguerite Bourgeoys, and St. Thomas Aquinas.

## Children and Families

Strong communities are formed when stable and loving families are supported and encouraged. The Catholic Church teaches that marriage—the love of a man and a woman in a life-long commitment—is a vocation and blessing that ideally produces children for future generations. Public officials can support marriages and families through their positions and policies.

- Where does the candidate stand on policies that protect the stability of marriage and the institution of the family?
- Does the candidate believe in protecting marriage as an institution that brings together one man and one woman in faithful union?

**Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin** are the first spouses to be canonized as a couple in the modern Church. Throughout their marriage, the pair demonstrated a deep commitment to their faith and fostered a loving family life. They had nine children, including St. Therese of Lisieux. Louis and Zélie offer inspiration for



families about finding faith and strength through challenges. **Other examples:** St. Josephine Bakhita, St. Nicholas, St. Priscilla, St. Rita of Cascia, and St. Valentine.

## Health Care

Along with food, water, and shelter, access to health care is a basic human right. The Church considers healing a central ministry and has long fought for quality, affordable, and life-affirming care, especially for the poor.

- Does the candidate support increased access to affordable health care for low- and moderate-income individuals and families?
- Does the candidate respect human life, human dignity, and religious freedom in the health care system?



**St. Teresa of Calcutta** is well-known for dedicating her life to caring for the poorest of the poor. In 1950, St. Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity and created a home for the destitute and the dying. An unyielding advocate for all human life, St. Teresa's life affirmed the worth of every person through her care and public service. **Other examples:** St. Damien of Molokai, St. Luke, St. Marianne Cope, St. Padre Pio, and St. Peregrine.

## Restorative Justice

In recent years, the criminal justice system has learned it is more effective to be smart on crime rather than simply relying on harsh punishments. A Catholic approach to criminal justice begins with calling for all to be free from crime and violence, while at the same time recognizing an offender's dignity and pursuing solutions that encourage rehabilitation rather than retribution.

- Does the candidate support sentencing guidelines and parole practices that reflect an individual's potential threat to society, rather than mandatory minimum sentencing?
- Does the candidate support rehabilitation and re-entry programs for those who were incarcerated, to help them become productive members of society upon release?

**St. Maximilian Kolbe** is the patron of the imprisoned. The friar operated a religious publishing press, opened monasteries, and during World War II, started a temporary hospital. St. Maximilian Kolbe was taken to Auschwitz and volunteered to die in the place of another man. His sacrifice urges Catholics to ask: what more can one give of his or her own life to support those in need, including victims of crimes and prisoners whose dignity is often ignored? **Other examples:** St. Daniel of Padua, St. Dismas, St. John Cafasso, St. Maria Goretti, and St. Germaine Cousin.



## Immigrants and Refugees

Migrant worker visas and refugee resettlement policies have come to the forefront of the nation's immigration dialogue. Catholics are sensitive to the reasons why families flee their home country, such as war, unjust governments, and authoritarian regimes that suppress religious freedom, often times with violence. A lack of food, water, health care, or other necessities also play a role.

- Does the candidate support an immigration reform proposal that offers a path to citizenship, treats workers fairly, and prevents the separation of families?
- Does the candidate support immigration reform that maintains border integrity, respects U.S. laws, and addresses factors that compel people to leave their own countries?



**St. Frances Xavier Cabrini** is the patron saint of immigrants. She founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, as well as almost seventy institutions after coming to America, including orphanages, hospitals, and schools. In 1909, she became a naturalized citizen of the United States. Her life reminds Catholics of the value of "welcoming the stranger" and engaging with people of cultures different from their own. **Other examples:** St. Alban, Blessed John Baptist Scalabrini, St. Julian, St. Lorenzo Ruiz, and St. Toribio Romo.

## Care for Creation

Michigan's fresh water, beaches, and iconic scenery provide a haven for rest and reflect God's beauty. At the same time, due to poor policy decisions, polluted drinking water and an expanded presence of contaminants in soil have disproportionately impacted farmers, minorities, and low-income areas of the state. As a reflection of God's love and his mandate to serve the poor, caring for God's creation has long been of concern for the Catholic Church.

- How will the candidate address environmental issues, particularly their impact on the poor?
- Does the candidate support policies that will protect the state's natural resources?

**St. Kateri Tekakwitha**, the first Native American saint, is the patron saint of the environment and ecology. She grew closer to God through her encounters with nature, including praying for an hour each day in the woods. St. Kateri respected the connectedness of the environment and of human beings, a lesson that is critical for people of faith and for communities today. **Other examples:** St. Bonaventure, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Hildegard of Bingen, St. Isidore the Farmer, and St. Martin de Porres. ●



# DEVELOPING A WELL-FORMED CONSCIENCE

**Following in the footsteps of Jesus, it is the lifelong responsibility for Catholics “to do good and oppose evil,”** including in election choices.<sup>4</sup> To distinguish between right and wrong, people of faith turn to their conscience: a tool that relies on the “judgement of reason” and Scripture to offer guidance for decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Each Catholic is called to develop a “well-formed” conscience, internalizing their faith and the Word of God so they can apply it to real-life situations daily.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of the upcoming election and the conscience formation process, the Catholic Church reminds people of faith that they are not alone. While the Church does not endorse candidates or instruct parishioners how to vote, it has particular responsibilities: sharing the moral truth about issues and encouraging believers to develop prudence. Prudence is a virtue that, if cultivated, assists individuals in “[discerning] our true good in every circumstance and [choosing] the right means of achieving it.”<sup>7</sup> Developing a well-formed conscience is not a one-time exercise. After casting their ballot, Catholics may continue their efforts by infusing their politics with faith and Scripture, by supporting the common good, and by personally living out the teachings of the faith within their families, workplaces, and communities.

## Conscience Formation Tips<sup>8</sup>

- Study Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, and the lives of the saints.
- Pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit—counsel, fear of the Lord, fortitude, knowledge, piety, understanding, and wisdom—to help guide the decision-making process.
- Regularly partake in an examination of conscience to hear God's voice.
- Seek advice about conscience formation from trusted leaders when needed.
- Examine the facts and background information about a given choice.

*Prudence asks Catholics to consider their alternatives in a given choice, as well as what action is most fitting in the context of the situation. St. Thomas Aquinas called it “right reason” or “wisdom concerning human affairs” in his work Summa Theologiae.*

# CIVILIZE IT



DIGNITY BEYOND THE DEBATE

## Civilize It: Take the Pledge

While thinking about the saints and praying for their intercession, Catholics can further reflect upon ways to live out the values of their faith this election season. Rather than participating in dialogue that does not respect the human person, people of goodwill can instead commit to healthy conversation. By participating in the nonpartisan *Civilize It* campaign created by the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and adopted by the U.S. bishops, Catholics can promote civility, love their neighbor, and build community. The effort does not direct people to be silent about issues that matter; rather, it reminds Catholics how to converse with others when discussing politics and the election. Take the pledge for civility, clarity, and compassion online at [CivilizeItMichigan.com](http://CivilizeItMichigan.com).<sup>9</sup>

## I pledge:

**Civility.** To recognize the human dignity of those with whom I disagree, treat others with respect, and rise above attacks when directed at me.

**Clarity.** To root my political viewpoints in the Gospel and a well formed conscience, which involves prayer, conversation, study, and listening. I will stand up for my convictions and speak out when I witness language that disparages others' dignity, while also listening and seeking to understand others' experiences.

**Compassion.** To encounter others with a tone and posture which affirms that I honor the dignity of others and invites others to do the same. I will presume others' best intentions and listen to their stories with empathy. I will strive to understand before seeking to be understood. ●

**1, 4, 6.** Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, USCCB, 2019: [bit.ly/2CY57yl](http://bit.ly/2CY57yl). **2.** Background about the saints came from Catholic News Agency, Catholic Online, and Franciscan Media. Further information can be found at [micatholic.org/2020Election](http://micatholic.org/2020Election). **3.** Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), Second Edition, no. 2229: [bit.ly/2PGKxVW](http://bit.ly/2PGKxVW). **5.** CCC, Second Edition, no. 1778: [bit.ly/2PGKxVW](http://bit.ly/2PGKxVW). **7.** CCC, Second Edition, no. 1806: [bit.ly/2PGKxVW](http://bit.ly/2PGKxVW). **8.** "What Does it Mean to Form My Conscience?", USCCB, 2019: [bit.ly/2PEQqCT](http://bit.ly/2PEQqCT). **9.** A Spanish version is available at [CivilizaLaConversacion.com](http://CivilizaLaConversacion.com). **Photo credits:** St. Gianna Beretta Molla photo by José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro / CC BY-SA 3.0 ([bit.ly/2CNNjWB](http://bit.ly/2CNNjWB)). Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin photo by Catholic Church England and Wales / CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 ([bit.ly/31sK7cc](http://bit.ly/31sK7cc)). St. Kateri Tekakwitha photo by Dieterkaupp / CC BY-SA 4.0 ([bit.ly/3aLekpY](http://bit.ly/3aLekpY)).

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