

# The Monitor

## *Momentum*

Diocese of Trenton

September 2008  
Reprinted from the  
September 18, 2008 issue  
of *The Monitor*



### Faithful Citizenship

For more information, visit  
[www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org)

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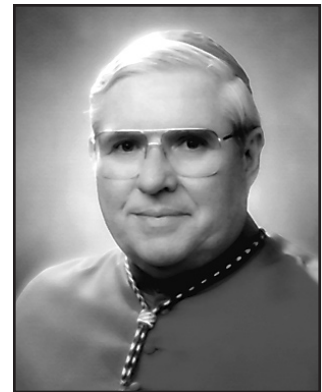
## Faithful citizenship begins with Church teaching

Common wisdom holds that there are two subjects one should never bring up in polite conversation ... religion and politics. I can tell you that when the subject is both religion and politics and how they relate to one another, there are few conversations, polite or otherwise, that go smoothly. Very often the attempt is befuddled by misunderstanding, strong opinions and even stronger emotions.

And yet, communicating about the connection between our faith and political responsibility is something that the Catholic Church is called to do in the context of her teaching on faithful citizenship, an ideal that is explained in the U.S. Bishops' November 2007 document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."

This document, which I am happy to have endorsed as a member of the Bishops' conference, is a comprehensive, nuanced and thoughtful presentation of the call to Catholics to properly form their consciences in light of Church teaching, supported by available information about the candidates and the issues, and served by the exercise of free will and human reasoning.

Because the document so deftly addresses the complexities connected to faith and political responsibility, it presents a unique challenge to those who seek to share its meaning with others. The more nuanced and comprehensive a document is, the more it requires our time and study in attempting to under-



### Our Shepherd Speaks

Bishop John M. Smith

stand it. It is not easily digested on a quick read, or well understood through a frame of reference that sees all things in absolute terms.

In writing "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship", the bishops have asked us to examine a broad range of considerations, to reflect and pray on our responsibility and to seek God's will. They ask us to make a real commitment to the process of forming our consciences and to practice faithful citizenship at all times and in all aspects of our lives, not just when we enter the polling booth, and not only in an election year. Indeed, even those who cannot vote, such as our youth, are asked to engage in faithful citizenship and

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## ‘Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship’

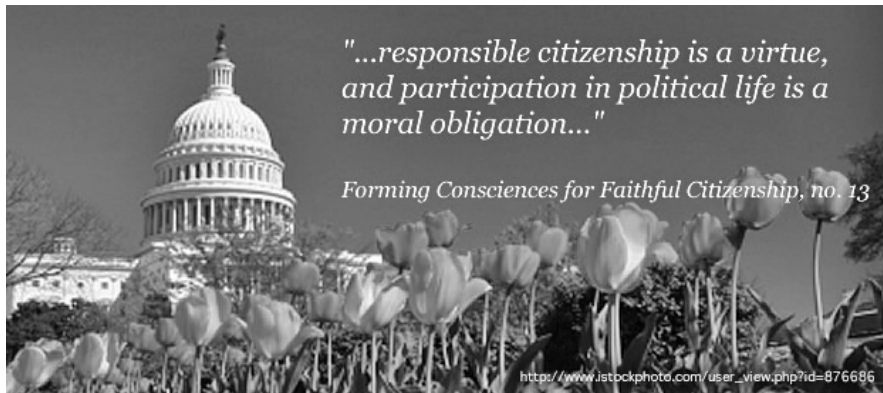
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bring an expression of their moral  
values to the political arena.

The Catechism teaches that free will is an important part of who we are. We experience it not only in our exercise of it, but in our very being. When God creates us in his image and likeness, he imparts free will to us. God wishes us to utilize this gift well. Like all gifts we may use them well or poorly. To use free will for its intended purpose is to follow God’s will each time the opportunity is presented to us.

Knowing God’s will and following it is the authentic Catholic understanding of conscience. We often hear the word conscience used, even in secular circles. That is precisely the reason it is so very important to define this concept carefully. Conscience is not the little voice or raw emotions we feel urging us to do one thing or another. Nor is it the good angel and the bad angel deliberating on each shoulder.

Our conscience is formed by being open to and understanding the teachings of the Church. When we ask honest questions and seek out authentic teaching from reliable sources we go a long way in forming our conscience. Forming one’s conscience is a serious duty of every Catholic throughout the entirety of his or her life.

The Bishops’ document on faithful citizenship specifically instructs us to form our consciences in light of Catholic teaching, which seeks to protect the dignity of human life



at all stages from conception to natural death. While that embodies a wide range of issues, there are none as important as the mandate to stand in defense of innocent human life by always opposing laws that sanction abortion, embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia. These have always been defined as “intrinsic evils” in Church teaching and can never be supported.

What the document also tells us is that our responsibility does not end there. We are required to lend a moral voice to all issues that impact on the dignity of human life. These include such concerns as poverty, hunger, war, racial injustice, torture, genocide, fair immigration laws, the sanctity of marriage, the call to global solidarity and the protection of the environment. In recognizing the pre-eminence of the basic right to life, we are asked to work within our political circles to bring about positive change in service to the common good.

As Bishop of the Diocese of Trenton I am obliged to do all that I can to clarify these matters of Church teaching. Beginning with this column, we will be dedicating the next six weeks to

informing the faithful about faithful citizenship and its application to political issues that are facing us in this presidential election and beyond. A series of essays, along with articles of interest about faithful citizenship, will be published in *The Monitor*, and made available online on the diocesan website ([www.dioceseoftrenton.org](http://www.dioceseoftrenton.org)).

I encourage all Catholics of the Diocese of Trenton, from our teens to our eldest members, to read the document, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” in its entirety; to speak to their pastors, parish ministers and fellow Catholics, and to enter into a period of prayer and reflection in advance of the coming election. I am confident that God will recognize and bless our earnest efforts to exercise our moral obligations as faithful citizens of this great country.

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