

CLEAR CONSCIENCE

A CATHOLIC GUIDE TO VOTING

WITH A FOREWORD BY KEVIN CIEPLY
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AN ASCENSION GUIDE



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Ascension
PO Box 1990
West Chester, PA 19380
1-800-376-0520
ascensionpress.com

Cover design: Rosemary Strohm

Printed in the United States of America

20 21 22 23 24 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-950784-43-1

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Foreword

I'm not sure I even knew what the word *jurisprudence* meant as I sat in my first class with Professor Charlie Rice at Notre Dame. If I did, I know I didn't understand it.

Today, I look back on that class and still draw much inner strength from it. At a critical time in my life, it set my moral compass. I still see Professor Rice in my mind's eye: chiseled facial features, Marine hair-cut, standing strong and exhibiting an unusual degree of inner confidence and peace. Professor Charlie Rice was larger than life.

The most important lesson I learned from him was the first precept of natural law: "Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided."

This book seeks to help each of us seek good and avoid evil.

It is timely. The world seems to be coming apart at the seams—COVID-19, racial unrest, economic uncertainty, all under a growing loss of faith. Domestically, we are blessed to live in the greatest and most free nation on earth. And yet everything is politicized, and hurtful exchanges of words pit friends, colleagues, and brothers and sisters against one another.

Perhaps, there has never been a more critical time in our lives to exercise our political freedom to vote; but perhaps there has also never been a more confusing period.

The stakes are high—the future of our children and our children’s children.

So how do we vote? Is there a way to rationally measure the issues and candidates to ensure that we really are seeking good and avoiding evil?

Clear Conscience: A Catholic Guide to Voting helps us answer those important questions and guides us as we approach local, state, and national elections. It begins with a primer on the meaning of politics and the law. It draws on Scripture, natural law, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and papal teachings, such as the words of St. John Paul II. It not only provides a foundation for us to stand on as we cast our ballots—that is, a foundation that brings our faith, our patriotism, our morals, and our sense of fairness and justice together; it also builds on that foundation to provide specific guidance on contemporary issues, bridging our will to do good with the best policies to accomplish it.

This book helps us navigate the most contentious, confusing, and perilous issues of the day, such as the erosion of patriotism and the nuclear family. It analyzes and provides concrete guidance to issues such as immigration, poverty, guns, and the environment. And of course, it provides the principles that undergird our Catholic Faith’s non-negotiable position on life issues.

What this book does not do is tell you who to vote for or against, and what issues and policies you should or should not support. Indeed, my favorite chapter is Chapter Eight, “Prudential Judgment.” It starts off with the imperative that Catholics can never promote anything that violates the inherent dignity of the human person—and then quickly moves to the theme of the chapter—that the Church “leaves the majority of policy questions up to our sound judgment.”

If, as I suspect, you thirst for authenticity and congruency and sacredness in your life, how you vote plays a significant

role in fulfilling that quest. As faithful Catholics, we have a duty to exercise our right to vote in ways that harmonize faith and reason. We have a responsibility to our families and the future of our country to seek good and avoid evil. This book will help you tremendously in that endeavor.

Kevin Cieply
President and Dean
Ave Maria School of Law

Introduction

This book does not tell you who to vote for or what position to take on each complex political issue that candidates and pundits debate every election season.

And as it happens, neither does the Catholic Church.

As you will discover in the following chapters, the Church is not a political party, and its teachings are not a political platform. The Church has authority in political matters, but only when politics invades its turf.

That turf is in the realm of the eternal. The unchanging truths about the dignity of mankind and the meaning of human life.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR POLITICS

Outside of those teachings, the Catholic Church leaves us free to discern what is best in our political environment and even to arrive at diverse political conclusions on all but just a few immutable “life” issues.

This is why no Catholic priest or bishop can order us to do or not to do anything based on our convictions about certain political issues, such as how best to address climate change. This is also why Catholics do not need permission from our spiritual leaders before we take action to defend our religious liberty when we feel it is under threat. The Church’s leaders can offer opinions on such specific political questions, of course,

but their authority on such issues lies in the validity of their reasoned arguments, just like any other Catholic. Otherwise, no community initiative on many important issues could be undertaken without Catholics first obtaining permission from their pastor or bishop of each diocese.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), however, is clear in this regard:

It is not the role of the Pastors of the Church to intervene directly in the political structuring and organization of social life. This task is part of the vocation of *the lay faithful, acting on their own initiative with their fellow citizens*. Social action can assume various concrete forms. It should always have the common good in view and be in conformity with the message of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church. It is the role of the laity “to animate temporal realities with Christian commitment, by which they show that they are witnesses and agents of peace and justice.” (CCC 2442, emphasis added)

As any priest will tell you, the Church *needs* Catholics “in the pews” to act independently in the realm of politics.

In practical terms, given the hierarchical nature of the Church, much of the necessary agility to act with urgency when needed would be lost if Catholics needed to obtain clerical permission before acting as they prudentially discern they should in the political sphere.

As the *Catechism* states,

Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth. ... Their activity in ecclesial communities is

so necessary that, for the most part, *the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it.*
(CCC 900, emphasis added)

ACTING WITH A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

The responsibility of Catholics, then, regarding political life is certainly great. By the same token, though, taking a direct hand in the “political structuring and organization of social life” means that we had better know what we are doing.

After all, the policies we promote and the candidates for whom we vote can have enormous effects in the lives of many. Going about politics haphazardly would amount to being careless with our neighbors’ lives. We need to approach politics and voting with a *clear conscience*. The only way to do this is by obtaining a *clear understanding* of the unwavering truths the Christian faith teaches about human beings and society.

In **Chapter One**, we will discuss the Church’s embrace of the best of Greco-Roman political thought. We will see that human reason is a legitimate and God-given means of discovering what is best for us and our neighbors—and that politics is not some frivolous human invention; rather, it is as natural to us as the loving bond between members of a family. Finally, we will present the true purpose of politics—which is to make us “happy.” (Amazing, but true.)

In **Chapter Two**, we will discover how the Church inherited and perfected the political principles of the Old Testament. God’s revelation to his Chosen People gives us everything human reason has to offer and more. We will see how sin poses a primordial threat to our fulfillment and happiness, which is why God gave us eternal laws to free us.

Chapter Three presents the “political miracle” of Jesus. The Church he founded adopted and “Christianized” the best of ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman culture and shared it with

the entire world. The result? The invention of the notion of inherent human rights, a world in which governments are held accountable for how they treat God's children.

Chapter Four introduces the concept of natural law, which is the law that God wrote into the fabric of all of created reality. We cannot violate the natural law without serious consequences, any more than we can violate the law of gravity by "flying" out of a second-story window without suffering serious injuries. In this chapter, we will also discuss "positivism," the theory that political leaders can ignore natural law whenever they see fit. Positivism, in one form or another, is responsible for some of the worst atrocities in human history—atrocities that highlight the importance of Catholics like you speaking up boldly on behalf of the natural law.

In **Chapter Five**, we see why the Church has always embraced patriotism as a Christian virtue. Patriotism, though, can be twisted into a chauvinistic and unthinking national pride or a cringing obedience to the whims of demagogic leaders. True patriotism is based in nature. Just as we are called to honor our parents and our families, we owe our nation a special honor—because it is *our* nation.

In **Chapter Six**, we discuss the pitfalls of political power. When human beings have a great deal of power, they have a tendency to abuse it and end up hurting others. Historically, even leaders of the Church were overcome by this temptation when they found themselves with temporal and military power over lands and regions. We know that *might* does not make *right*. In fact, it is more likely to make us wrong.

Chapter Seven presents a thorough analysis of what a government owes its citizens, and what we as citizens owe our government. We have a place in our political environment, and if we abandon our role, we can expect the government to begin to fail or, just as bad, try to take over the role we

abdicated. Big government is not equipped to do well what we, our families, and our community are meant to do.

On a similar note, **Chapter Eight** helps us see the moral questions that we, as Christian citizens, must figure out for ourselves. The Church leaves many political issues in the realm of “prudential judgment”—that is, the realm of personal conscience. This means that we must be all the more serious about thinking clearly and conscientiously about our media consumption, our public witness, and our vote.

Starting with **Chapter Nine**, we will begin a Catholic “guided tour” of specific political issues, the first being war. Then, in **Chapters Ten through Sixteen**, we will proceed through a discussion of guns, poverty, immigration, racial injustice, the environment, human life, and human sexuality—and the implications each of these topics has on our political involvement.

Finally, in the **Epilogue**, we will discuss the immeasurable importance of religious liberty. In fact, without religious liberty, nothing in this book amounts to anything.

WHY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

As Americans and Catholics, we are blessed with a great political heritage.

We take for granted that all human beings have dignity and worth. We believe that torture, enslavement, and oppression are unacceptable. We accept that even the lowliest among us have rights—and that it is immoral to violate those rights. We even believe that violations of such rights should be illegal.

We may think these ideas are obvious or even cliché. Actually, they are *brilliant*. Throughout world history—and even in some places today—relatively few nations have known and embraced these principles and put them into practice.

Sadly, when it comes to world politics, abuse and corruption are more the norm than the exception—a fact that should make us see our own political order as all the more precious. What is more, our political heritage has been hard won. It has been carefully distilled by ingenious, courageous, and holy people over the course of millennia.

Think of our political heritage as a family heirloom, lovingly maintained by countless generations of our forebears. They polished it, kept it safe, and defended it from burglars. Many sacrificed their lives for it to ensure that we would possess it. It is now up to us to take ownership of this legacy—and hand it down intact to future generations.

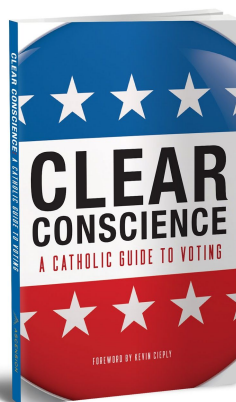
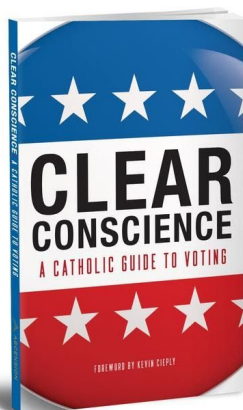
A first step is simply to learn and understand the political legacy we enjoy today.

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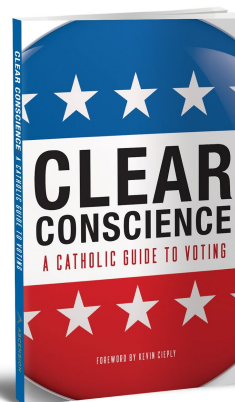
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