Beyond offering guidelines for voting, *Faithful Citizenship* represents an attempt by the U.S. Catholic bishops to articulate a theological vision of political engagement. One may examine the theological vision of *Faithful Citizenship* according to three textual viewpoints: what it says (content); theological understandings (problematics); and possibilities for conceptual development (implications). Addressing the dynamics of political engagement in contemporary society is a complex task. While this analysis maintains that *Faithful Citizenship* constitutes a useful conceptual resource insofar as signaling basic theological terms of Catholic political engagement, there are areas of conceptual underdevelopment. Accordingly, the analysis suggests paths toward a deeper conceptual engagement with political philosophy, especially understandings of constitutional democracy.

**Keywords**: *Faithful Citizenship*, political engagement, Catholicism, theology, publicness

**Introduction**

Beyond offering guidelines for voting, *Faithful Citizenship* represents an attempt by the U.S. Catholic bishops to articulate a theological vision of political engagement. The political is more than simply a matter of electoral politics in that it encompasses human activity as an organic reality, and, as such, it thereby bears directly on Catholicism as a faith tradition. Catholicism as a faith tradition concerns itself with faith as integral to human existence and cannot escape being shaped...
by the polity in which it resides. Consequently, while the U.S. Catholic bishops may seek to articulate a theological vision of political engagement that is faithful to tradition, it is a task that also demands attentiveness to matters of constitutional and democratic polity constitutive of the U.S. context.

**Historical Background**

The history of Catholicism in the United States is one of overcoming minority status and rising to prominence. Spurred on by waves of immigration, and despite frequent anti-Catholic campaigns, Catholicism had become, by the mid-19th century, the largest denomination in the nation. Eventually, Catholicism began to impact the U.S. political system in a significant way, as Catholics formed a major part of the Democrat Party coalition throughout much of the 20th century, and they substantially contributed to the election of John F. Kennedy as the nation’s first Catholic president in 1960. In recent decades, however, more and more white Catholics have moved toward the Republican Party, while Hispanic Catholics continue to identify primarily as Democrats.

The voting guidelines under consideration here are a publication of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). As a national ecclesial body, the USCCB is a relatively recent phenomenon. For much of U.S. history, the activities of the Catholic bishops as a group were loosely organized. However, the rise of the federal government in the post-World War II era generated the need for a more permanent platform that could address an expanding array of policy issues, with the publication of *Political Responsibility: Reflections on an Election Year* in 1976 marking the beginning of efforts by the bishops to address political matters at the national level.

The bishops’ current teaching document on voting bears the title *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*. In the earliest years of publication, the process of preparing
the document involved less consultation than presently. In more recent years, a committee of bishops reviews any amendments to the document and then presents it to the entire conference of bishops for debate and a vote.

As public intellectuals, theologians have raised concerns about Faithful Citizenship in several areas. They have critiqued the document for overlooking questions of political polarization and party ideology. They have also critiqued the document for its lack of emphasis on the personal character of those running for office. Finally, the document has received criticism for focusing on issues of sexuality at the expense of other ethical concerns.

Faithful Citizenship has not been significantly modified since 2007, arguably reflecting the difficulties that bishops face as public figures. Of course, bishops are constrained by the Catholic tradition, with its inbuilt tendency for consistency over time. In addition, Catholic social teaching is both pro-life and pro-social justice, and this may create unique levels of cross-pressure for Catholic voters.

While it would be a mistake to insist that each and every teaching presented by the bishops must bind the consciences of believers, episcopal teaching matters greatly from a Catholic perspective. Indeed, Faithful Citizenship has implications beyond theology and the church. The document represents critical discourse that serves as a self-reflection of both modern political theory and theology regarding its normative sources.

**Faithful Citizenship: Content, Problematics, and Implications**

One can appreciate the importance of Faithful Citizenship by examining it as a theological text. There are three textual viewpoints to consider: what the document says (content); its theological understandings (concepts); and its possibilities for conceptual development (implications).

The first of the document’s major sections (“The U.S. Bishops’ Reflection on Catholic Teaching and Public Life”) is the fundamental one. This is where the bishops lay out the normative grounds for their vision of political engagement. From

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14 Ibidem, pp. 15-16.
17 For example, see Matthew Sitman, “Preeminent? The Bishops Miss the Mark on Faithful Citizenship”, Commonwealth Magazine, November 21, 2019. Available at: https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/preeminent (accessed March 1, 2023).
the viewpoint of content, one may sort the discussion analytically according to the levels of “individual,” “institution,” and “publicness.” Individual” concerns human nature itself and how individual persons practice their faith. “Institution” concerns the existence of the church within processes of social transformation, while “publicness” concerns the faith as a corporate reality impacting the polity as a whole.

Within each of the content levels, Faithful Citizenship articulates a vision of political engagement in reference to specific theological understandings. At the level of “individual,” the document draws on a concept of the common good. At the level of “institution,” the document draws on a concept of historical consciousness. And, at the level of “publicness,” the document draws on a concept of faith as public witness.

Finally, these theological understandings have implications regarding notions of political engagement present in the broader philosophical tradition. Political engagement is inseparable from the communicative aspect of human life and action. At its core, it entails an ongoing process of critical-rational argumentation in which both faith traditions and philosophy journey together towards a common future. Hence, one must look at ways in which the arguments made in Faithful Citizenship might be sharpened and clarified.

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22 See Ann Taves, From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies, Religion, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2020, p. 14. For Taves, religion pertains to the category of “worldview.” Given its naturalistic overtones, such a category is debatable from a theological viewpoint, yet it acknowledges that worldviews as such are tied to basic human practices and ways of life.


26 See Christiane Alpers, “Public Opposition to Ecclesial Involvement in Secular Politics: Schillebeeckx’s Grace-Optimism as a Response to Public Theology and Radical Orthodoxy,” in: Salvation in the World: The Crossroads of Public Theology, T&T Clark, New York, 2017, pp. 26-42. Alpers observe that resistance to Christian involvement in secular politics has been countered by “public theology” and “Radical Orthodoxy.” Building on Schillebeeckx, she makes an argument for a modified approach that differs from both . . . insofar as their approaches to politics commence with the detection of a problem [secular ontology] that needs to be solved.

27 Jurgen Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays (trans. Giarlan Cronin), Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 103. In his article “Prepolitical Foundations of the Constitutional State?,” Habermas specifies his understanding of modern constitutional polity as one of “Kantian republicanism.” Contrary to a contextualist view, Habermas proposes that all societies share in a basic “communicative constitution of sociocultural forms of life” that justifies a “nondefeasist concept of reason” along with a “nondecisionistic concept of legal validity.”


Faithful Citizenship’s Vision of Political Engagement

Level I: Individual

_Faithful Citizenship_ proclaims that politics involves justice for all according to the “common good.” This is in keeping with Catholicism’s understanding of natural law. However, this natural law orientation stands in contrast with an understanding of justice rooted in “the turn to the subject” stretching back to the Enlightenment. In the U.S. context, such an understanding is particularly manifested in the post-World War II era with its emphasis on human rights. In contrast to a natural law conception of justice that is oriented toward the “good,” justice is hereby understood in terms of the “right.” This distinction between the “good” and the “right” is central to much of contemporary political theory. Implicit in this understanding is that democratic society compels citizens to shape their identities as equal and autonomous agents within the constraints of political community as the normative arena of justice. Consequently, in its appeals to the “common good,” _Faithful Citizenship_ advances a contrasting view of the normative basis of the political that is likely to be challenged.

_Faithful Citizenship_ also depicts justice in relation to morality. It posits that the divine will and the human will are joined in acts of love that ensure justice in a basic interpersonal sense. However, within a political context, one must grapple with the fact of the law. Constitutional polity is characterized by a dynamic relationship between the _intra_-communal (love) and the _inter_-communal (law). Although both morality and the law are vital to the wellbeing of constitutional polity, the legal aspect is decisive. The law relates not only to questions of discursive justification but...
Having examined the common good and morality, *Faithful Citizenship* then proceeds to define human personhood. The document argues that each person has dignity in virtue of his or her existence. Such an understanding operates within a metaphysical framework. However, religious believers in the U.S. context inhabit a polity which does not reason metaphysically, per se. Constitutional polity tends to eschew essentialist categories in favor of indeterminate categories, and this poses a challenge to any reliance on metaphysics. U.S. constitutional polity has developed largely in conjunction with political liberalism that conceives of a self-governing people, thus disavowing the pursuit of any absolute “truth.”

*Faithful Citizenship* also overlooks theologians whose work specifically focuses on the U.S. context. John Courtney Murray is a case in point. Murray explores personhood in relation to the common use of reason in both individual and social areas of judgment. While his approach draws on a Catholic appreciation of the interdependence of faith and reason, it also highlights the problem of group bias. The problem manifests when human dignity is proclaimed in the name of all yet serves only the interests of dominant groups. *Faithful Citizenship* would thus benefit from a deeper appreciation of the anti-majoritarian aspects of constitutional polity. While some constitutional frameworks make explicit reference to human dignity in terms of “rights,” in the U.S. context, a grounding of human dignity in terms of constitutional “values” is more plausible.

**Level II: Institution**

In *Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops address their message to citizens who exercise their civic rights and duties, thus acknowledging that citizens generate social change. However, the church as an institution also exists within society and assumes a historical consciousness. In the aftermath of the Second World War, a renewed

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40 “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, p. 14. “At the center of these truths is a respect for the dignity of every person. This is the core of Catholic moral and social teaching. Because we are people of faith and reason, it is appropriate and necessary to bring this essential truth about human life and dignity to the public square.”
41 Pini Ifergan, Cutting to the Chase: Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg on Political Theology and Secularization, *New German Critique*, No. 111, 2010, pp. 149-171. Whereas Schmitt insists that all political concepts are but theological in nature, Blumenberg disputes this on both historical and philosophical grounds in his work, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.
47 “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, p. 6. “With renewed hope, we, the Catholic Bishops of the United States, are re-issuing *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, our teaching document on the political responsibility of Catholics, which provides guidance for all who seek to exercise their rights and duties as citizens.”
historical consciousness emerged in the church in conjunction with political efforts to rebuild post-war society, and it became even more pronounced in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.48

*Faithful Citizenship* focuses on the institutional presence of the church in the course of U.S. history. It states that “…the Church’s teaching is in accord with the foundational values that have shaped our nation’s history: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”"49 Although official endorsement of democracy by the church is relatively recent,50 this section of the document alludes to how the church in the local U.S. context has sought to appropriate a democratic ethos from early on in its history. However, in this regard, the document could employ more concrete examples.

The growth of Catholicism in the United States would not have been possible without an institutional embrace of assimilation and cultural adaptation.51 However, the document at times appears to suggest that the church’s interests are inevitably at odds with the interests of political society.52 Yet the institutional role of Catholicism in relation to U.S. constitutional polity is rich and complex, being shaped by a “practical, but principled, willingness to adjust.”53 This diffuses any facile notion that the U.S. is either an essentially Christian nation, or conversely, that religions face a necessary disadvantage within constitutional structures.

This is especially relevant in connection with contemporary debates on “religious freedom.” At stake in these debates is not merely the issue of the role of religion in relation to politics. Religious disestablishment in the U.S. context implies a political role for religion that is rather open-ended.54 Hence, debates about religious freedom would seem to hinge on the particular quality of the contributions that specific institutions make, or fail to make, to democratic well-being.55

**Level III: Publicness**

*Faithful Citizenship* speaks of political participation as a basic liberty.56 Nonetheless, the document projects ambivalence. In a section which appropriates Pope

49 “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, p. 15. “Our nation’s tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions and concerns into public life. Indeed, our Church’s teaching is in accord with the foundational values that have shaped our nation’s history: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
52 “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, p. 16. “As citizens we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group.”
55 Ibidem, p. 128.
56 “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, p. 15. “Moreover, the United States Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to participate and speak without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination.”
Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Spe Salvi*, the document describes politics as “a fight for justice” founded on a hope which “transcends every law of justice.” On the one hand, one might take this description as gesturing towards a biblical and prophetic vision of public witness. On the other hand, prophetic rhetoric has the capacity to connote “destruction for the re-creation of perfection.” The ambiguity in this section is therefore problematic, appearing to de-value the role of procedural authority in the maintenance of constitutional order.

*Faithful Citizenship* also states that believers bear the responsibility to “hear, receive, and act upon the Church’s teaching….” In the post-Vatican II era, a tension exists between respect for individual conscience and obedience to episcopal authority. Again, the document would benefit from the insights of John Courtney Murray. Murray insists that the church “meets” the democratic state “above all within those who [are] both believers and citizens.” As such, religious convictions are not alien to public forms of debate characteristic of an open society. Nonetheless, Catholics may experience cognitive dissonance in relationship to episcopal authority, and this has a potential to undermine the agency of believers as equal citizens of a democracy.

Finally, *Faithful Citizenship* defends Catholicism’s position on abortion. In the section “Doing Good and Avoiding Evil,” the document states that “a legal system that violates the basic right to life on the ground of choice is fundamentally flawed (my emphasis).” Notwithstanding the philosophical merits of the church’s position, the document’s particular framing of the abortion issue in these terms is problematic. One could understand the statement as implying that reasoned forms of argumentation in support the pro-choice position are out of the question and even inimical to the maintenance of constitutional order. However, one must consider how U.S. constitutional polity is constituted by a plurality of moralities, thus allowing for “…not only a diversity of comprehensive ethical and metaphysical views, but further, and relatedly, disagreement over major questions of constitutional (or “human rights”) interpretation and application.”

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57 Ibidem, pp. 10-11.
62 Peter McDonough, *The Catholic Labyrinth: Power, Apathy, and a Passion for Reform in the American Church*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 23. In addition to alienation among Catholics who have ceased to actively participate in church life, alienation also manifests among Catholics who remain active, and it would appear to cut across all ideological subgroupings within the church. As McDonough observes: “In the culture of Catholicism, then, attitudes toward political, social, and sexual issues can be visualized as composing a set of concentric circles….” As such, “[the issues] may be combined in various ways, and this makes for strange bedfellows.”
63 “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, p. 10.
A Path Forward for Catholicism in the U.S. Political Context

The foregoing examination uncovers both strengths and limitations with regard to Faithful Citizenship’s vision of Catholic political engagement in the U.S. The document makes use of several key theological understandings, including the common good, historical consciousness, and prophetic witness. Nonetheless, Faithful Citizenship would benefit from drawing more deeply on the work of U.S. Catholic theologians like Murray, as well as on contemporary political theory in general. As the nature of constitutional and democratic polity continues to evolve, political engagement on the part of faith traditions represents a long-term challenge and opportunity. Towards this end, the document, with its conceptual engagement of the political at the levels of individual, institution, and publicness, serves as a salient recourse in charting a path forward.
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ГЛАСАЧКЕ ИНСТРУКЦИЈЕ АМЕРИЧКИХ БИСКУПА: ВЕРНО ГРАЂАНСТВО КАО ИЗВОР ПОЛИТИЧКОГ АНГАЖОВАЊА

Сажетак

Поред тога што нуди инструкције о гласању, Вернограђанство представља покушај америчких бискупа да артикулишу теолошку визију политичког деловања. Теолошка визија овог документа може се анализирати кроз три тачке: шта каже (садржај), теолошко разумевање (проблематика), и могућност за концептуално развијање (импликације). Међутим, бавити се динамиком политичког ангажовања у савremenom свету је веома сложен задатак. Иако овај рад тврди да Вернограђанство чини корistan извор за католичко политичко деловање, ипак постоje места која нису довољно развијена. Стога, овај рад сугерише путеве који би довели до дубљег концептуалног ангажовања са политичком философијом, поготово са разумевањем уставне демократије.

Кључне речи: Верно грађанство, политичко ангажовање, католицизам, теологија, јавност