

The General Election



A letter from the Bishops' Conference
to Catholics in England and Wales

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

The Gospel is radical and challenging. It is a message of salvation. It is a way of life. It teaches us to value each person: the vulnerable child inside the womb; the parent struggling with the pressures of family life; the person striving to combat poverty; the teacher inspiring students to seek the truth; the stranger fleeing violence and persecution in their homeland; the prisoner in his cell searching for redemption; the child in a distant land claiming the right to a future; and the frail person facing the frontier of death.

At a general election we are asked to think about the kind of world we want to live in. As Catholics, we are called to work for a world shaped by the gospel of Christ. How you vote is a matter for you alone. Our aim is to suggest some key issues for you to reflect on in the light of Catholic Social Teaching.

Catholic Social Teaching

This teaching is rooted in Scripture and draws from the wisdom of Christian thinkers and Church documents. At its heart is the Common Good. We have a responsibility to each other and a duty to promote and work for a society and a world in which all thrive.

The diversity of our society today can enrich us, but it takes the efforts of all to foster one that is cohesive and characterised by a commitment to equality and respect for the human rights of every person. Political parties, especially at the time of elections, must set an example and avoid appealing to prejudice. Catholics should never support parties with racist policies.

Our belief as Catholics is that faith and reason always go together. We believe that the truths of the Gospel have implications for how we are to live in society for the good of all, and that we have reasons and arguments to support what we say. Our faith has a public dimension; it cannot remain private if we are to live it as fully as Christ calls us to do. Catholic Social Teaching provides a way of thinking about the public side of our faith. It helps us all to reflect on the political world in the context of our relationship with God.

In our teaching document *Cherishing Life*, published in 2004, we stated, 'Voting in a general election should seldom, if ever, be based on a single issue, because elections are concerned with a whole range of issues, very many of which are concerned with life and human flourishing.' We have highlighted some particularly important issues – but not the only ones – that we should consider as we decide how to vote. In each case we have suggested a question you may wish to bear in mind.

Marriage and the Family

The traditional family structure, centred upon a loving and faithful relationship between a husband and a wife, remains the building block of our society. Families today are both more diverse and more fragile than a generation ago, leading to far-reaching consequences, especially for children and the elderly.

A political commitment to support and strengthen marriage and family life should be at the heart of all social policy. Legislation and policy needs to be assessed for its impact on families, for instance whether it strengthens their relationships or undermines their capacity to survive and grow. **Do your local candidates have a commitment to support marriage and family life as the basis for a healthy society?**

Respect for Life

Each human being is made in the image and likeness of God, the author of all life. The Catholic Church accordingly affirms the value and dignity of life from conception to natural death. These are views shared by many people of other faiths and those of no religious belief.

We support policies that will not only safeguard the fundamental right to life of each person, but will also ensure that the very vulnerable are treated with care and dignity. We oppose euthanasia and abortion, as well as the cloning of human embryonic lives for research. It is likely that in the next Parliament renewed efforts will be made to legalise euthanasia. **Where do the candidates in your constituency stand on euthanasia, abortion, and other life issues?**

Criminal Justice

There are currently record levels of men and women in prison in England and Wales. Many of our prisons are overcrowded and unable to deliver adequate programmes of education and rehabilitation that can help a prisoner to return to society with a new sense of hope and break the cycle of reoffending.

Government should develop policies that produce a more humane criminal justice system. Prisons should not be seen as a dustbin for the problems society fails to address elsewhere. In our recent report entitled *A Place of Redemption*, we called for a compassionate and fresh approach to crime and punishment. It is a fundamental Gospel principle that each person has the potential for change and transformation. Radical change is needed if reoffending rates are to be reduced.

At the same time public policy must support the victims of crime and provide adequate resources to make the streets of our villages, towns and cities safer. **What do your local candidates say about how crime should be prevented and how victims and offenders should be treated?**

Education

The provision of good education for all – whether at school or as adults – is fundamental to our society's future well-being. Education is not primarily about exam results and league tables. It is about the formation of the whole person. This means imparting a clear sense of moral rights and responsibilities

and fostering good ideas of citizenship. Most Catholic schools and colleges do this well – inspections show they are one of the success stories of our education system. Amongst the features that mark them out are their care for the disadvantaged and the ways in which they bring together students from different ethnic cultures and equip them to make a positive contribution to our diverse society.

Future government policy should continue to invest more in education for all, ensuring that parents have a real choice in the education of their children and that no-one is deterred from education by reason of affordability. **What approaches do your local candidates have to enhancing educational opportunities for all, permitting choice of a faith based education, and for funding faith schools?**

The Global Common Good

Pope John Paul II has reminded us that it is a scandal that so many millions of people around the world lack basic food, shelter, health care and education, while we in the richer countries consume so much of the earth's resources. The Gospel calls us to be responsible stewards of creation, to share the resources and wealth of our planet and to protect the environment in every way that we can.

There is a growing movement, involving people of all beliefs, for the debts of the poorest countries to be cancelled. With the UK hosting the gathering of G8 leaders and assuming

presidency of the EU member states this year, the cancellation of debt, more and better aid, and fairer trade should be at the top of the agenda for our government and all European states.

The global common good needs to be promoted through respect for the rule of law and by strengthening international organisations such as the UN. It requires policies that challenge the root causes of injustice, such as wars, generalised violence, persecution, human rights abuses, the arms trade, the crippling debt burden and unfair trade practices that distort the economies of poor countries. **How committed are your local candidates to protecting the environment, promoting peace and justice and pursuing fairer trade and other effective policies to help the world's poorest people?**

Refugees and Migrants

In the 21st century victims of persecution or economic dislocation are on the move around the world. In the Southern hemisphere most remain in poverty. Many are internally displaced, or live as refugees in neighbouring countries. Comparatively few flee to the rich North for protection or sustenance. We support policies that provide protection for refugees and migrants, recognising their human rights and dignity, and that seek to foster respect for racial, ethnic and religious differences.

Prosperous nations are obliged to share their prosperity with poorer nations to the extent they are able, and, in so far as they can, to welcome the stranger in search of protection or the

means of livelihood which they cannot find in their own country.

We support policies that uphold international law and standards governing the treatment of refugees and migrants and which seek to combat the criminal trafficking and sexual abuse of women and children. **What do your local candidates say about how asylum seekers and refugees should be treated in this country?**

Other issues and our website

These are just some of the issues and questions you may wish to consider as you decide how to vote. There are many others of great importance which we cannot cover in a short letter. On the Bishops' Conference website at www.catholicchurch.org.uk/election there is more detailed information and texts of previous publications as well as links to Catholic agencies, the Churches' recent report *Prosperity with a Purpose*, and to other ecumenical information on how to organise local meetings for parliamentary candidates.

With our prayers and good wishes,



Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, President
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales March 2005



Archbishop Patrick Kelly, Vice-President

Conclusion

Within the restlessness, fragmentation, moral confusion, and preoccupation with celebrity that are features of modern culture, the lives of many people are still guided by faith and hope in the mystery of God.

We expect politicians to be committed to the common good, but we too have a responsibility to be involved in the democratic process. As followers of Christ, we are called to personal conversion through prayer and the sacramental life of the Church. We are also called to work for social transformation through love, compassion, peace, and justice, in our homes, work places, parishes and the wider human family of God.

It is most important that we vote. It is a duty that springs from the privilege of living in a democratic society. In deciding how we will cast that vote, the question for each of us is: **'How, in the light of the Gospel, can my vote best serve the common good?'**

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