Responding to a decade of research on and legislative responses to human embryonic stem cell research around the world, Archbishop William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), signed Dignitas Personae, an instruction addressing certain developments in bioethics, on September 8, 2008. This instruction updates Donum Vitae (DV), written by the CDF more than two decades earlier in response to developments in reproductive technologies. Since prior teaching about embryos and scientific research in DV and in the 1995 papal encyclical Evangelium Vitae (EV) provides sufficient moral guidance, the Vatican’s release of the instruction on December 12, 2008, a little over a month after the presidential election in the United States, was wise or fortuitous (DV, nos. 1–2; EV, no. 63). This delayed release saved the instruction from being received as a means of trying to influence voters to choose the extraordinary route of selective conscientious objection to voting, first articulated by the U.S. Catholic bishops in their 2007 statement “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.”

The 2008 Election

The day after Levada signed Dignitas Personae (DP), Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden suggested on the campaign trail that Republican presidential candidate John McCain was opposed to stem cell research. In response, McCain aired a stem cell research radio advertisement as part of his 2008 presidential campaign:

. . . John McCain will lead his congressional allies to improve America’s health. Stem cell research to unlock the mystery of cancer, diabetes, heart disease. Stem cell research to help free families from the fear and devastation of illness. Stem cell research to help doctors repair spinal cord damage, knee injuries, serious burns. Stem cell research to help stroke victims. And John McCain and his Congressional allies will invest millions more in new NIH medical research to prevent disease. Medical breakthroughs to help you get better faster. . . .

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As the political advertisement advocates stem cell research, it emphasizes the potential health benefits but fails to consider the moral significance of the source of the cells. Drawing attention to and reiterating the moral significance of their source, DP highlights the moral relevance of the degree to which obtaining stem cells harms a subject (no. 32). In light of this evaluation of the degree of harm caused, one could conclude that the use of stem cells from adults and umbilical cord blood obtained at birth is morally legitimate, while the use of embryonic stem cells is not because of the destruction of human life necessary to obtain embryonic stem cells (DP, nos. 18–19).

The voting records of both Barack Obama and McCain reveal legislative support for such embryonic stem cell research; they have voted to lift the federal funding restrictions on embryonic stem cell research that President George Bush implemented in 2001. Some voters might have concluded based on this record that they could not vote for either candidate. A Catholic could even find justification for this position in the most recent episcopal statement on faithful citizenship, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” which recognizes the possibility of selective conscientious objection to voting under particular circumstances. Yet, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” does not advocate either abstinence from voting or the reduction of political participation to a single-issue response. To better understand this, we will examine the centrality of the obligation of political participation articulated in the episcopal statements on faithful citizenship and the prior need for conscience formation emphasized in the most recent statement.

The Obligation of Political Participation

Lack of political participation, including a significant decline in voter turnout in the United States, was the sign of the times that motivated the first episcopal statement on political responsibility in 1976 (Administrative Board, 567). In anticipation of each presidential election since then, the bishops’ conference has underscored the obligation of political participation. That obligation remains a central theme of the most recent episcopal statement on faithful citizenship (USCCB, no. 9). Even as “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” acknowledges that one could in good conscience abstain from voting when all candidates support policies that legitimate an intrinsic evil, it identifies this course of action as “extraordinary” (no. 36). This new acknowledgment of selective conscientious objection to voting responds to a concern raised by some Catholics, particularly those informed by Catholic Answers’ “Voter’s Guide for Serious Catholics” (12). In the rare instances in which individuals discern that they cannot vote because of the candidates’ positions on embryonic stem cell research, they need to be attentive to the other forms of political participation in which they engage so as to contribute to the common good. Opposition to one evil is not sufficient since there are other evils that need to be avoided and many ways in which the good needs to be realized (USCCB, no. 24). The bishops call Catholics to engage the many moral issues facing the United States (USCCB, nos. 63–88).

Catholic teaching about justice and peace recognizes that violations of human life are a fundamental injustice that societies have an obligation to prevent. Human lives are at stake in the abortions performed, in the wars waged, in the criminal executions carried out, and the health care policies adopted. The Catholic faith teaches that life needs to be valued whether a person is innocent or guilty, and it needs to be protected not only through preventive actions but also through constructive actions. As people lose their homes, jobs, and life savings, Catholic
social teaching reminds citizens that these economic issues are also moral issues involving basic human needs. As energy prices increase, consumers are reminded that the earth’s resources are limited, and Catholic teaching about caring for creation seems particularly relevant. These issues, as well as many more, weigh on people’s consciences.

The Catholic moral tradition helps one understand how a Catholic could vote for one of the candidates, despite his position on embryonic stem cell research, rather than abdicate responsibility for choosing a leader to address the many challenges to the common good (USCCB, nos. 34–36). The Catholic moral tradition’s principle of material cooperation helps an individual evaluate one’s intentions, the degree to which one is contributing to evil, and the degree to which an action contributes to the good. In so doing, it challenges those who argue that the end justifies the means as well as those who are only concerned about subjective intentions. As one votes for a candidate whose policies do not reflect one’s values in particular ways, the vote serves as an invitation to other forms of political participation to share those values not reflected in one’s vote.

Conscience Formation Prior to Political Participation

The Catholic Church does not tell one whom to vote for and even recognizes that one’s conscience might prevent an individual from casting a vote, but the church reminds everyone of the obligation of political participation and the importance of conscience formation prior to this participation (USCCB, nos. 7, 9, 36). One who reads “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” might conclude that conscience is the voice of God (no. 17). That, however, is not the intent of the document, given the stated desire to affirm past teaching (USCCB, no. 3).

Gaudium et Spes does not describe conscience as the voice of God but rather as a dimension of the human person to which the voice of God speaks (no. 16). Conscience is a human capacity in need of formation, and the communities to which one belongs impact formation in both positive and negative ways. For those that allow the Catholic community to contribute to their formation, Scripture, liturgy, the lives of saints, and magisterial teaching all have a role to play in shaping perceptions. With these perceptions and values, one then needs to exercise the virtue of prudence, which allows one to reason well in the process of making practical judgments in light of values. Since conscience is not the voice of God and is capable of error, attentiveness to God in prayer needs to be an essential part of conscience formation.

Political Participation

When Catholics attribute a decision not to vote to candidates’ positions on embryonic stem cell research and their understanding of “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” they invite reflection on questions about abstinence from voting as a form of political participation. In particular, to what degree is it an easy way to make a decision in the midst of complex challenges to the common good? To what degree is it an extraordinary action resulting from an informed conscience? In the latter case, what forms of political participation complement selective conscientious objection to voting? These questions are worthy of discussion so that the origin and purpose of the statements on political responsibility are not lost. As the first statement on political responsibility reminds us, political participation (including voter participation) is necessary for the sake of the common good (Administrative Board, 567).
References


