

# ADULT EDUCATION AND SMALL FAITH COMMUNITY SHARING ON FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP

The following sessions can be used for a wide range of adult education programs. Many parishes have ongoing small groups that meet regularly to pray together, read Scripture, share faith and discuss what is happening in their lives and in the world around them. These groups may meet weekly, bi-monthly or according to some other regular pattern. The material that follows may be used by such groups at their regular gatherings or as part of a special series of meetings. The material can also be used in parishes that wish to create new groups that will meet for a shorter duration, e.g., as Lenten gatherings or during the summertime.

The four sample sessions correspond to the *Sample Lesson Plans for Elementary Age Students* and the *Sample Lesson Plans for Junior High and High School Youth*. One option is to make the sessions intergenerational, in which families and individuals of all ages gather for prayer and then break out into age appropriate groups. Or, these sessions can be done independently.

Below you will find a standard structure for the sessions followed by material for five specific themes. Those who use this material should feel free to adapt it to fit the specific situation of each individual group. A time frame of about 60 minutes is proposed, but the format is sufficiently flexible to allow less or more time.

## General Session Format

Session A: The Call to Participate in Public Life

Session B: Forming Consciences

Session C: Avoiding Evil and Doing Good

Session D: Catholic Social Teaching in the Public Square

## General Session Format

### Gathering

The leader should see that details of hospitality are taken care of so that everyone feels welcome, knows one another and is comfortable being together. In ongoing groups this pattern will already be well established. New groups will need to be more deliberate in establishing this climate right from the beginning. An icebreaker in which all are invited to share why they are interested in being part of the group can help everyone become acquainted quickly.

## Opening Prayer

*Depending on the leader's preference, a spontaneous prayer may be used to open the session, or a prepared text might be used. If the group is comfortable singing together, an appropriate song should be chosen. The following prayer can serve to begin each session:*

**Let us pray:** *(pause long enough to allow everyone to enter into a quiet state of awareness.)*

**Loving God, we thank you for this opportunity to gather together in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to put aside whatever might keep us from being fully present in this moment. Help us to be mindful that you are with us as the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, the One who draws us together in love and peace. Open our hearts and our minds as we share our faith and seek your guidance. Give us courage to probe deeply how you call us to live as your disciples in a complex and confusing world. Show us how to faithfully participate in public life in a nation that proclaims "In God we trust." We ask this, through Christ our Lord. (Amen)**

## Guidelines for Civil Dialogue (5 minutes)

*leader should go over the Ground Rules for Civil Dialogue that are included on the Civil Dialogue handout, which can be found [here](#). The first time the group meets, he or she may also wish to read Cardinal Wuerl's reflection together, and/or share the following words from Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship (nos. 60-62):*

We are committed to clarity about our moral teaching and to civility. In public life, it is important to practice the virtues of charity and justice that are at the core of our Tradition. We should work with others in a variety of ways to advance our moral principles.

In light of these principles and the blessings we share as part of a free and democratic nation, we bishops vigorously repeat our call for a renewed kind of politics:

- Focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls
- Focused more on the needs of the weak than on benefits for the strong
- Focused more on the pursuit of the common good than on the demands of narrow interests

This kind of political participation reflects the social teaching of our Church and the best traditions of our nation.

## **Scripture Reading & Faith Sharing (25 minutes)**

*The leader should introduce the focus of the gathering, explaining that the passage chosen from Scripture is meant to complement the theme of the session. The leader or another designated person then proclaims the reading.*

### **A reading from...**

*After the reading is finished, a brief period of silence follows. Then the leader says,*

**What word or phrase from the reading strikes you, or is echoing in your heart at this time? Just repeat the word or phrase aloud.**

*When all have had a chance to respond, the leader invites everyone to listen one more time to the text. It is good to have a different person proclaim the reading this second time.*

### **A reading from...**

*The leader then invites all to share what they are hearing in the text. The suggested discussion questions that accompany each Scriptural passage may be used to prompt discussion.*

## **Faithful Citizenship Reading & Discussion (25 minutes)**

*The leader makes a transition to the next segment of the meeting by reminding the group of the theme chosen for the session and inviting all to listen to the reading selected in conjunction with that theme. One of the participants in the group should have been asked ahead of time to read the passage, and the leader invites that person to read at this time.*

### **A reading from...**

*After the reading, the leader invites reactions from the group and facilitates the ensuing discussion. Optional suggested questions that accompany the reading may be used to prompt discussion. Without dominating, the leader should encourage participants to make connections between the Scripture reading/faith sharing and the discussion of faithful participation in public life.*

## **Closing Prayer (5 minutes)**

*The leader closes the session by inviting all to prayer. One way to do this is to ask participants to name aloud the needs that were stirred in their hearts by the sharing. After each petition is spoken, an agreed-upon common response (e.g., "Lord, hear our prayer") is said. The petitions may be concluded with all holding hands and reciting together the Our Father. If the group is comfortable singing, a suitable song may be chosen. Refreshments and social time should follow.*

# **SESSION A**

## **Theme: The Call to Participate in Public Life**

### **Scripture Reading & Discussion Questions**

#### **A Reading from Mark 12:28-34:**

One of the scribes, when he came forward and heard them disputing and saw how well he had answered them, asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?"

Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, 'He is One and there is no other than he.'

And 'to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself' is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

And when Jesus saw that (he) answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Jesus says that both loving God and loving neighbor bring a person closer to the kingdom of God. Sometimes we have a tendency to compartmentalize our faith life from our activity in the world. How is faith related to action in the world? How is love for God related to love for neighbor? How does a deep faith life help us to love others? How does being compassionate toward others affect us spiritually?
2. The reading instructs that you should love your neighbor as yourself. What would it look like to really love another person as you love yourself? Is your current perspective of service or charity one in which you see the poor and vulnerable just as you see yourself?
3. How do the two commandments relate to the idea of participating in public life?

4. How can the two commandments be seen as a foundation for all the other commandments? If our society were to embrace "love for neighbor" as a central idea governing our laws and policies, how might society be different?
5. What changes can you make in your own life to love God and neighbor better?

## **Faithful Citizenship Reading & Discussion Questions**

### **Readings from *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States***

God is love, and he desires that we help to build a "civilization of love"-one in which all human beings have the freedom and opportunity to experience the love of God and live out that love by making a free gift of themselves to one another. Pope Francis encourages us in *Evangelii Gaudium* to meditate on the inseparable bond between our acceptance of the message of salvation and genuine fraternal love . . . . God's word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us: "As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). The way we treat others has a transcendent dimension: "The measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mt 7:2). It corresponds to the mercy which God has shown us: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you . . . . For the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Lk 6:36-38). What these passages make clear is the absolute priority of "going forth from ourselves toward our brothers and sisters" as one of the two great commandments which ground every moral norm and as the clearest sign for discerning spiritual growth in response to God's completely free gift. (no. 179)

Love compels us "to 'go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation' (Mk 16:15)" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 181). "Here," Pope Francis continues, "'the creation' refers to every aspect of human life; consequently, 'the mission of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ has a universal destination. Its mandate of charity encompasses all dimensions of existence, all individuals, all areas of community life, and all peoples. Nothing human can be alien to it'" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 181). This "mandate" includes our engagement in political life (no. 1).

In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. "People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 220). The obligation to participate in political life is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, "It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life" (nos. 1913-1915) (no. 13).

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. The bishops note that engagement in public life is our response to God, who is love. How is God's love connected to our political participation? What connections do you see between the reading from Mark and the bishops' and Pope Francis' words?
2. What are ways that disciples of Christ can participate in the political process? How have you personally participated?
3. What obstacles do you personally feel stand in the way of you taking an active role in political life?
4. The bishops note that we all have a role to play in promoting the common good. In their statement, *Everyday Christianity*, the bishops noted: "We are corporate executives and migrant farm workers, senators and welfare recipients, university presidents and day care workers, tradesmen and farmers, office and factory workers, union leaders and small business owners. Our entire community of faith must help Catholics to be instruments of God's grace and creative power in business and politics, factories and offices, in homes and schools and in all the events of daily life. Social justice and the common good are built up or torn down day by day in the countless decisions and choices we make."

In what area is your work, and how can you promote the common good through that work?

5. In what ways can you help build a society in which the dignity of all human life is respected?

# **SESSION B**

## **Theme: Forming Consciences**

### **Scripture Reading & Discussion Questions**

#### **A Reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans. . . (Romans 2:13-16)**

For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who observe the law will be justified.

For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law.

They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What does Paul mean when he writes that although the Gentiles may not be familiar with Judaic law, "the demands of the law are written in their hearts"?
2. Name a time in which you had a difficult time deciding what was right in a situation. What helped you make your decision?
3. Why does Paul make a distinction between hearing the law and observing the law? How does this relate to you personally?
4. How does a person form the ability to choose between right and wrong? How does a person become equipped to make a responsible and faithful choice?

### **Faithful Citizenship Reading & Discussion Questions**

#### **Readings from *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*:**

The Church equips her members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church. Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere "feeling" about what we should or should not do. Rather,

conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith. . . (no. 17).

The formation of conscience includes several elements. First, there is a desire to embrace goodness and truth. For Catholics this begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It is also important to examine the facts and background information about various choices. Finally, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. Catholics must also understand that if they fail to form their consciences in the light of the truths of the faith and the moral teachings of the Church they can make erroneous judgments (no. 18).

The Church fosters well-formed consciences not only by teaching moral truth but also by encouraging its members to develop the virtue of prudence, which St. Ambrose described as "the charioteer of the virtues." Prudence enables us "to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1806). Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively. Exercising this virtue often requires the courage to act in defense of moral principles when making decisions about how to build a society of justice and peace (no. 19).

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you think of when you hear the word "conscience"? How does this compare to what the bishops describe as the elements of forming one's conscience?
2. How might applying the process described by the bishops help you or others to prayerfully explore a particular issue or teaching?
3. What is the role of prudence in decision making? How does one develop prudence? Describe an example of the virtue of prudence in your own life or decision-making.
4. What implications do the bishops' teachings on conscience and prudence have for you as an advocate and a voter?

# **SESSION C**

## **Theme: Avoiding Evil and Doing Good**

### **Scripture Reading & Discussion Questions**

#### **A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew. . . (Matthew 19:16-21)**

Now someone approached him and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?"

He answered him, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."

He asked him, "Which ones?" And Jesus replied, " 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother'; and 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The young man said to him, "All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?"

Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to (the) poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. How do each of the commandments that Jesus lifted up relate to the life and dignity of the human person? How does the last instruction he gives relate to this theme?
2. How are the commandments that Jesus mentions related to one another? How are avoiding evil and doing good linked? How are they different?
3. How might these commandments relate to modern-day issues? What does it mean to "come follow" Christ in public life?

### **Faithful Citizenship Reading & Discussion Questions**

#### **Readings from *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States***

Aided by the virtue of prudence in the exercise of well-formed consciences, Catholics are called to make practical judgments regarding good and evil choices in the political arena (no. 21).

There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called "intrinsically evil" actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia. In our nation, "abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others" (Living the Gospel of Life, no. 5). It is a mistake with grave moral consequences to treat the destruction of innocent human life merely as a matter of individual choice. A legal system that violates the basic right to life on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed (no. 22).

Similarly, human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, and other acts that directly violate the sanctity and dignity of human life are also intrinsically evil. These must always be opposed. Other direct assaults on innocent human life and violations of human dignity, such as genocide, torture, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, can never be justified. Nor can violations of human dignity, such as acts of racism, treating workers as mere means to an end, deliberately subjecting workers to subhuman living conditions, treating the poor as disposable, or redefining marriage to deny its essential meaning, ever be justified (no. 23).

Opposition to intrinsically evil acts, which undercut the dignity of the human person, should also open our eyes to the good we must do, that is, to our positive duty to contribute to the common good and to act in solidarity with those in need. As St. John Paul II said, "The fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment" (Veritatis Splendor, no. 52). Both opposing evil and doing good are essential obligations (no. 24).

The right to life implies and is linked to other human rights—to the basic goods that every human person needs to live and thrive. All the life issues are connected, for erosion of respect for the life of any individual or group in society necessarily diminishes respect for all life. The moral imperative to respond to the needs of our neighbors—basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work—is universally binding on our consciences and may be legitimately fulfilled by a variety of means. Catholics must seek the best ways to respond to these needs. As St. John XXIII taught, "[Each of us] has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and, finally, the necessary social services" (Pacem in Terris, no. 11) (no. 25).

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What do the bishops mean when they say, "Both opposing evil and doing good are essential obligations" (no. 24)? Why are both (not just one or the other) important for Catholics?
2. What are examples of intrinsic evils and why must they always be opposed? What are examples of supporting the common good and acting in solidarity with those in need?
3. How is the bishops' teaching on avoiding evil and doing good related to the reading from Matthew 19? How does this teaching from the bishops call Catholics to more authentically put their faith into action?
4. How can you personally respond to the call for each of us to oppose evil and support good?

# **SESSION D**

## **Theme: Catholic Social Teaching and the Public Square**

*Note to leader: Unlike the previous 3 sessions, for Session D, participants should be instructed, well in advance of the session, to read numbers 40 through 90 of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship. The statement is available online here, and in print, at the USCCB online store.*

## **Scripture Reading & Discussion Questions**

### **A reading from Matthew 25:31-46:**

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous 16 will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Have there been any particular experiences in your life when you unexpectedly recognized the face of Christ in another person? Describe.
2. In the context of our contemporary situation, who is hungry, thirsty, naked, ill, a stranger, or imprisoned today?
3. How would you evaluate your own faith community's response to those you just identified?
4. What audience do you think Jesus had in mind when he told this parable? Who is most in need of hearing this parable today?

### **Faithful Citizenship Reading and Discussion Questions:**

*In advance of the session, participants should have read numbers 40 through 90 of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship. Have copies of the statement available for those who need it, and give participants a few minutes to review what they read before using the discussion questions below.*

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops highlight four overall principles (the dignity of the human person, subsidiarity, common good, and solidarity), and seven specific themes, highlighted in bold within the text. How can these principles and themes help guide our participation in the public square?
2. Have there been any particular experiences in your life that have helped you to understand and experience one of these principles or themes in action?
3. Were you surprised, challenged, or encouraged by any of the ways that the bishops apply Catholic social teaching to issues that face our local and global communities? How?
4. How might the Holy Spirit be calling you to participate, on an ongoing basis (not just at election time), to address one of the many ways that human life or dignity or the common good are threatened?