

**RESPONSE TO DAVID DECOSSE: “FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP’ AND  
THE THEOLOGY OF CONSCIENCE”**

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Thank you, David, for a very rich paper on conscience and politics that is both critical and constructive. Thank you, Paul, for the invitation to respond to David’s address. Too often today we hear views expressed on both conscience and politics that are simply critical. Given the theme of our convention this year, which struck me immediately as incredibly and importantly hopeful—thank you again, Paul, for choosing the beautiful theme of grace at work in the world—it is encouraging to receive a constructive proposal on how a theology of conscience may better serve the freedom of persons.

Let me begin my response to you by reviewing what I understand to be your argument. Your primary and fundamental contention is that the theology of conscience in the current iteration of the USCCB’s “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility” is inadequate. The theology of conscience in this document is, you believe, one that treats conscience as, basically, a “functional, ratifying capacity,” focused on “correspondence with the truth and obedience especially to certain universal, negative commandments” (p. 45). You recommend that this theology of conscience change, following Pope Francis, who has famously stated that “we must form consciences, not replace them” and James Keenan’s engagement of *Amoris Laetitia* such that conscience is “set free to be fully itself.” By this you mean “to associate conscience more clearly with its own capacity for moral truth,” and “to embed that capacity in the concrete world,” thereby, you say, freeing conscience to respond to grace at work in the world. You also think the bishops should shift from a focus on religious freedom understood as the freedom of the church in the public sphere to religious freedom grounded in human dignity, following John Courtney Murray, and serving the freedom of the American people in terms of their constitutional rights within a liberal democracy. Finally, you suggest that the theology of conscience should be connected to the *sensus fidelium* and to mission understood according to the baptismal imagery of priest, prophet, and ruler.

In short, you contend that the theology of conscience in *Faithful Citizenship* does not do justice to the freedom of individual conscience and to the call to serve the American people. The theology of conscience in the bishops’ document is too minimalistic in its interpretation of the function of conscience, and it is stuck in talk of intrinsic evil that constrains rather than aids freedom in decision-making.

I agree that transforming the operative theology of conscience so that it follows Pope Francis’ direction is deeply desirable, insofar as this means showing a preference for concrete persons over abstract moral principles. Moreover, though I am a Canadian, I can appreciate your hope that the USCCB will use the opportunity afforded them, to guide the faithful on political responsibility leading up to the 2020 election to exhort Catholic American citizens to boldness and to empower the laity to vote meaningfully. The stakes are high, and it is important that Catholic Americans understand that the primary fiduciary duty of a Catholic citizen is not only to refrain from doing anything that would violate the moral law, but to use one’s citizenship and understand one’s political responsibility in terms of the positive and powerful change one can make for one’s fellow Americans, for the polity and one’s society, with their voting.

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I did indeed share the experience of hearing a particular, if implicit, emphasis in the Bishops' document on the issue of abortion and intrinsic evil, and I agree that the manner in which the issue is treated would benefit from updating, precisely the kind of complexification in understanding the capacity of conscience that you suggest, with a greater emphasis on the historicity, contingency, and the embodied character of conscience and decision-making. The term 'intrinsic evil' undoubtedly tends to raise a red flag for many contemporary Catholic moral theologians, though not all.

And yet, on the whole, I don't think that *Faithful Citizenship* is as poor in its theology of conscience as you assert that it is. It speaks about discernment (sections 18, 19, and 20) and the importance of applying the virtue of prudence. It specifies consideration of candidates' integrity, philosophy, and performance when voting, beyond issues and party politics, in section 41. It discusses many if not all the issues that are part of a consistent life ethic, including migration, racism, violence, and care for our common home, empowering all Catholics to serve the freedom of their neighbors in terms of their basic human rights. In mentioning the social goods they are trying to uphold, the bishops note that these are not bringing a "Catholic interest" to the political sphere, but rather that of "the dignity of every human person made in the image of God." Indeed, the concept of human dignity permeates the document (sec. 8, 9, 10, 20, 29, 39, 44, 45, 49, 57, 66, 68, 91). There's a lot to like, here, frankly.

Moreover, I am concerned about the way that the Church and the individual Catholic conscience are configured in your paper. Behind your criticisms of the theology of conscience in *Faithful Citizenship* seem to lie certain oppositions: church teaching, moral principles, and truth on the one hand vs. personhood on the other; the basic good of religion, truth, corporate identity of the Church on the one hand and human dignity on the other (e.g., p. 45); the teaching hierarchy on one hand, the *sensus fidelium* on the other. Are the religious freedom of the Church and human dignity really so far apart? To put it another way, might the freedom of the Church, *libertas ecclesiae*, be precisely for the support and protection of human dignity? Is the relationship between the Church and individuals so clearly separable as well? What happens to ecclesiality when we approach moral teachings in this way?

To me there is an operative ecclesiology in your interpretation of *Faithful Citizenship* that understands the church primarily in terms of its structure, with an under-emphasis on the church as communion and, if this is the case, how does such an underlying ecclesiology affect the power of the claims you make against the theology of conscience of the *Faithful Citizenship* document? A communion ecclesiology or, at least, a less adversarial ecclesiological foundation, would help us to appreciate more the way in which conscience is indeed formed in and by the Church, even if that formation involves a significant degree of individual human agency.

Moreover, who is left out when we continue to configure the issues of moral theology in terms of freedom of conscience? Do we reduce the conversation to one between hierarchy and the lay faithful? Between moral theologians? It seems to me that a more concrete ecclesiology would take into account the many differentiated forms in which people express themselves as lay Catholics today, including those who are members of lay ecclesial movements, lapsed Catholics, and so forth.

Let me clarify that an ampler communion ecclesiology is not advocacy for retrenchment or blind obedience to authority, but is, rather, the suggestion of a process whereby we become more attentive to one another, more collegial, and hence, more

united. Respect for time and for the importance of dialogue are two additional hallmarks of Pope Francis' style.

I affirm the end goal you suggest, David, of change towards “an embodied, relational, and vulnerable theology of conscience” and “conscience as disposed toward grace at work in the world”—this is the heart of solidarity. And I wholeheartedly agree that we ought to follow Pope Francis' lead in honoring “concrete persons at the front door.” For me, though, your notion of the church is too much of an extrinsicist notion of ecclesiality: as if the church is an external layer of membership that rubs against my inner freedom instead of forming it. How can we talk about shifting the theology of conscience in the direction that you suggest, without pitting church leaders against individuals?

To the same point, the corporate dimension of the *sensus fidelium* is not clear to me in your presentation. I am challenged to perceive a sense of the bishops as being part of the whole people of God. *Lumen Gentium* 12 states:

The whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the holy one (see Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot be mistaken in belief. It shows this characteristic through the entire people's supernatural sense of the faith, when, “from the bishops to the last of the faithful,” it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals. By this sense of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the people of God, guided by the sacred magisterium which it faithfully obeys, receives not the word of human beings, but truly the word of God, “the faith once for all delivered to the saints”. The people unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply through right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life.

Although you quote James Keenan to support the proposal to integrate conscience and the *sensus fidelium* more fully: “*Sensus fidelium* is about the laity's beliefs as faith lived in conscience,” *Lumen Gentium* clarifies that *sensus fidelium* is not divorced from magisterial teaching.

I do want to acknowledge that our very different embodied relationships with our respective local teaching hierarchy may contribute to the hermeneutic gap that I feel exists between us on the matter of how we ought to relate to said hierarchy. I am a Canadian with an experience of working with the extremely open and collegial Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on ecumenical issues. Nonetheless, I would argue for the priority of building ecclesial relationships and friendship as these constructive criticisms of the theology of conscience are proposed about and, perhaps, to the national episcopate.

Finally, regarding the broadening of the notion of mission to include all aspects of the *triplex munus*, priestly and ruling as well prophetic call to all the baptized, while I think this suggestion is immensely hopeful and exciting at first blush, I also believe that there is an argument to be made for the prophetic to be emphasized—though not to the exclusion of the others—given our time. In the concrete, we do need to take into account the cultural shift of secularism. The current culture in North America does have tendencies toward individualism and libertarianism in its understanding of personhood and freedom, and the Church can help with these truncated notions. Affirming the value of leaning into the prophetic mode of Christian witness is not to express support for opting out of voting on the basis of cooperation with evil either.

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But there are ways in which freedom within the context of being the body of Christ and the freedoms that come from democratic citizenship are not simply reducible to one another. Certainly, I agree that helping people move toward healing and conversion from the sinful history of racism in America through accompaniment to grow in being more attuned to the struggle and suffering of one's neighbor and one's self where this social sin is concerned; rejecting tribalism; and building up the virtuous bases of institutions of the common good such as the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary are key ways in which the Church can work to serve the common good of the American people leading up to the 2020 election.

I appreciate and deeply affirm the need for all aspects of moral theology, including the theology of conscience, to shift in the direction of the concrete, as Pope Francis shows us so beautifully how to do. I think it is important to do so in a manner that avoids the polarities typical of moral theology, however, which tends, I think, to be particularly prone to maintaining the liberal/conservative distinctions, or 'Catholic tribalism' as you call it. Might we espouse as a baseline principle that we are one body, one communion, and the efficacy of our mission to the world stands or falls on our own health as a united community? To the extent that we are able to show that community is not the enemy of individual freedom we have, I believe, a way in which we might be most effectively prophetic, priestly, and compelling to a world that often views individuals and communities as a zero-sum game. If our theology of conscience reflected such an ecclesiology, where formation and responsibility, Catholic corporate identity and personal integrity were *de facto* not mutually exclusive, we could really be the instruments of grace at work in the world!