

Sacred Voters and Secular Elections: Beyond *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*

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Abstract

*As another major national election approaches, American Catholics need a better understanding of the political conscience. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC) attempts to provide guidance. However, the document has been roundly criticized by Catholics from various political persuasions. In attempting to understand political conscience today, it is helpful to return to the great thinkers of tradition, and in particular Thomas Aquinas. This paper aims at recovery of Thomas' understanding of conscience, rooted in the act of *synderesis* and oriented towards the common good, as a fitting and critical interlocutor for FCFC.*

Text

As the 2020 election cycle approaches, questions regarding Christians' role in the public square begin to resurface. Catholics who look for institutional guidance regarding their obligation to vote might be underwhelmed. In 2019, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) decided not to rewrite their document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC), originally published in 2007. This choice is unsatisfactory given the changes in the United States since 2007, especially the resurgence of far-right groups and the changing nature of political dialogue. Likewise, *FCFC* serves more as a voter guide than a document for forming consciences. The genuine diversity of Catholic political opinion and the

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rapidly changing political context suggests that a voting guide would be less helpful than a well-formed conscience for navigating each election faithfully. Instead, Catholics could also look to the tradition to find resources for how to understand conscience. Thomas Aquinas' virtue approach to individual actions could provide a way for Catholics to understand their role as voters in the American political system. To understand Thomas' approach to conscience it will be first necessary to examine his concept of *synderesis*, before turning to the virtue of prudence, and finally examining conscience itself. Thomas' approach offers a corrective understanding to *FCFC*'s approach to conscience.

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

First, it is necessary to examine the USCCB's understanding of political conscience in order to see the distinction between the USCCB and Thomas. The bishops start the document suggesting, "Responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation."¹ In this sentiment, the bishops present both virtue and moral obligation as frameworks for considering conscience. While they often attempt to present a virtue ethic, as a whole the bishops' document focuses on moral obligation in obedience to authority. In the section concerning conscience itself, the *FCFC* describes conscience as the "voice of God" that inclines a person towards good.² The phrase, "voice of God," connotes a message of certainty, rather than one of rational discernment. Further, throughout the document, a well-formed conscience is defined as completely in line with magisterial teaching; otherwise, the person could

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences For Citizenship* (Washington D.C., USCCB 2018), 13

² USCCB, 17

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be liable for sin.³ We can look at the example of how the bishops treat the virtue of prudence and the issue of abortion to demonstrate *FCFC*'s inadequacies.

When *FCFC* turns to the virtue of prudence, it continues the pattern of suggesting virtue while emphasizing certainty in moral norms. When the bishops treat the virtue of prudence itself, they name it as a compliment of conscience and the way of sorting alternative actions according to each context.⁴ However, the bishops' focus turns from the virtue to a much longer section concerning "intrinsic evil". In this section the *FCFC* emphasizes conservative culture war issues like abortion as the primary examples of intrinsic evil, explicitly denying that a person could vote for a party that contradicts the bishop's approach to these issues.⁵ The ubiquitous emphasis on moral obligation over rational discernment suggests that the virtue of prudence is restricted and an individual's conscience may not discern in favor of pro-choice candidates at all. The absolutizing of actions seem to run contrary to a virtue ethic focused on particular contexts.

Another defining point for understanding conscience in the *FCFC* is the certitude with which the *FCFC* speaks about contingent moral issues. In keeping with their focus on intrinsic evil, the bishop's expounding of certain specific issues speaks with absolute certainty. The topic of abortion, disproportionately emphasized throughout the document, is declared unopen for discussion and is considered the fundamental problem to be addressed in U.S. politics.⁶ The bishops even call for a possible constitutional amendment to end abortion.⁷ While the bishops' general instructions concerning a number of topics— care for the environment or the cessation of

³ USCCB, 18.

⁴ USCCB, 19.

⁵ USCCB, 34.

⁶ USCCB, 92.

⁷ USCCB, 65.

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war, for example— leave the committed Catholic open to thoughtful discernment, the topic of abortion is closed, leaving little or no room for discussion. Questions of prenatal care, paid family leave, universal childcare, adequate school systems, the financial cost of children, etc. come secondary to the bishops' specific suggestion for a ban on abortion. The document does not encourage authentic prudential discernment by individual Catholics about which issues take priority.

Thomas Aquinas on Consciences

Given the inadequacies in the document, Catholics searching for a deeper understanding of political conscience can turn to Thomas Aquinas. There are several steps to unpacking Thomas' understanding of conscience and how it relates to political life. Initially, the concept of *synderesis* needs to be understood because it serves as the first principle of moral decision making. Next, the virtue of prudence serves an important role for two reasons: 1) is its primary place in Thomas' system of virtue ethics, and 2) prudence is concerned with the proper choice between alternatives. Within prudence, Thomas describes both political and regnative prudence, which are particularly relevant to the present discussion. Finally, conscience will be drawn from the consideration for *synderesis* and prudence. In his formulation, Thomas provides an understanding of conscience and political engagement grounded in a dynamic virtue ethic focused on rational decision making.

I. Synderesis

Thomas uses the word *synderesis* to describe human beings' ability to know what is good. This concept is mentioned in relation to human knowledge, virtue, and natural law, so understanding *synderesis* provides a crucial insight into Thomas' concept of moral action.

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Thomas describes *synderesis* as a natural habit of the intellect.⁸ As a natural habit, *synderesis* is available to all people by their nature. *Synderesis* is natural to humanity but still requires habitual formation, so it is not always active in moral decision making.⁹

Thomas's most basic description of *synderesis* is "to incite to good, and to murmur at evil, inasmuch as through first principles we proceed to discover, and judge of what we have discovered".¹⁰ Thomas first describes it as a drive to do good, but this does not provide any more concrete norms because *synderesis* does not direct the means to the good. Tobias Hoffman notes that Thomas differs from his teacher, Albert the Great, who did provide more specific norms such as prohibitions against killing and extramarital sex.¹¹ Thomas's approach sees *synderesis* as a more general concept than Albert. However, this is not to undercut the usefulness of *synderesis*. Based on what a person can grasp through *synderesis*, one can argue for further positions within a natural law ethic. *Synderesis* serves as the first principles for ethical arguments.

Because *synderesis* acts as the first principles of action, it does not deal with concrete actions directly. As a distinction between *synderesis* and prudence, Thomas argues that *synderesis* directs the ends of moral decisions, whereas prudence directs the means.¹² In ethical reflection a person deduces concrete norms from the first principles by way of prudence. This distinction helps to clarify Thomas' suggestion that *synderesis* is infallible.¹³ The infallible

⁸ *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), I, q.79, a.12.

⁹ Tobias Hoffmann. "Conscience and *Synderesis*" in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012), 257.

¹⁰ *ST*, I, q.79, a.12.

¹¹ Hoffmann, 256.

¹² *ST*, II-II, q.47, a.6.

¹³ Hoffman, 256.

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quality of *synderesis*, not to be overstated, is humans' infallible ability to grasp at what is good, and does not extend to the human ability to grasp the proper means to reach the good end. To this point, Thomas suggests that principles deduced from the *synderesis* form the basis of natural law.

¹⁴ However, in matters of contingency, human reason, ruled by practical rather than speculative reason, is not always the same in each person.¹⁵ Therefore, the judgments reached in practical matters, while elucidated by *synderesis*, are not infallible.

II. The Virtue of Prudence

After considering *synderesis*, the next concept integral to understanding conscience is the virtue of prudence. A direct definition of the virtue is "right reason [for] things to be done".¹⁶ Whereas *synderesis* provided the principles to begin rational discernment, prudence directs reason to proper action. The importance of prudence for Thomas should not be understated; James Keenan argues that the whole moral life falls under the direction and guidance of prudence.¹⁷ Aquinas himself notes that all of the cardinal virtues are key for the moral life, but prudence alone is the principal virtue, directing the others.¹⁸ All the virtues are put into proper action at the direction of prudence.

As noted above, a key distinction between *synderesis* and prudence lies in that which each virtuous action is directed. *Synderesis* directs the ends of the moral action, but prudence directs the means. Within Thomas' ethics, "it matters not only what a [person] does but also how

¹⁴ *ST*, I-II, q.94, a.1, ad. 2.

¹⁵ *ST*, I-II, q.94, a.4.

¹⁶ *ST*, I-II, q.57, a.4.

¹⁷ James E. Keenan, "The Virtue of Prudence" in *Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press 2002) 259.

¹⁸ *ST*, I-II, q.61, a.2.

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[s]he does it”.¹⁹ A person might seek to live a temperate or just life, but it is only through prudential judgment that the person is able to discern what actions actually contribute to the virtues of temperance and justice. In this example, it is *synderesis* that directs the person to want goodness and prudence, and directs the person how to do so.

For Thomas, the virtues are connected. Therefore, though prudence directs the virtues, it also needs moral virtues to function properly. Thomas says that a required part of the virtue is a disposition open to it, which requires a rectitude of appetites.²⁰ In other words, for a person to use the virtue of prudence, it is necessary to practice the moral virtues as directed by prudence. This is a key reminder that all virtue is habit, and to build prudence, a person must practice all the virtues, or else fear, desire, or another appetite could inhibit prudence in a moment of decision.

It is through charity and reason that Thomas extends prudential judgment to the common good. Thomas first considers Aristotle’s contention that prudence is not concerned with the common good because humans are only directed towards the actions of oneself, and justice is directed towards the common good.²¹ However, Thomas sees this view as contrary to charity and right reason because charity calls a person to seek the good of the other, and right reason directs the person to see the common good taking priority over the individual.²² All prudence for Christians contains a social element that works for the common good. The virtue of prudence, when redirected by the infusion of charity, calls the person to act towards the common good in love. However, Thomas notes that prudential judgment itself, if in accord with right reason, demands that the person work for the common good.

¹⁹ *ST*, I-II, q.57. a.5.

²⁰ *ST*, I-II, q.57 a.4.

²¹ *ST*, II-II, q.47, a.10, obj. 1.

²² *ST*, II-II, q.47, a.10.

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To this point, Thomas develops what he calls political prudence, which is distinct from personal prudence because it is not directed to the life of virtue in pursuit of happiness. Thomas distinguishes between personal, familial, and political freedom by noting that there are different ends of each category.²³ The end of political prudence is the common good of the city, which promotes happiness and virtue. Still, political prudence is the exercise of right judgment between different choices.

This brings Thomas to the question of whether political prudence belongs to the ruler or to the ruled. He suggests that prudence is only for the ruler because they are the person who makes the decisions for the state. However, Thomas makes the unfortunate suggestion that the ruled do not exercise prudence for the common good, and further focuses on slave's inability to do so.²⁴ He does not deny that as humans they exercise prudence because they are rational.²⁵ The latter point should serve as a counterbalance that undercuts some of the problematic elements in Thomas' analysis. Political prudence, for Thomas, is distinct from other uses of the action because it directs not just the individual, but also the community. Thomas' dismissal of the "ruled" lacking such prudence, would likely be different if he were to examine political prudence in a democratic society. However, what can be gleaned from this perspective is that rulers, even without Christian charity, do have a responsibility to act for the common good.

²³ *ST*, II-II, q.47, a.11.

²⁴ *ST*, II-II, q.47, a.12, ad. 2.

²⁵ *ST*, II-II, q.47, a.12.

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III. Conscience

Having considered *synderesis* and prudence, conscience can now be seen as the active integration of the two. Thomas describes conscience as an act, rather than a power or a habit in itself. More specifically it is the act of applying moral knowledge to a situation.²⁶

First, moral knowledge needs to be defined. Moral knowledge is drawn from the person's use of *synderesis*, which forms the basis for a person's insight into the natural law. Further, Thomas would include scriptural and traditional authorities as sources that provide more specific norms, not found solely through the use of *synderesis*.²⁷ For Thomas, contemporary science serves at the foundation for both the scriptural and the rational bases of moral knowledge. Aristotelian science informed Thomas' understanding of how the world worked according to reason.²⁸ This can be clearly seen in his Aristotelian notion of the purposes of sex as found in his discussion of lust.²⁹ Through synthesis, Thomas understood moral knowledge through interpretation of scripture and authority but always in accord with right reason and science. Moral knowledge is then applied through conscience. For this application to be virtuous it must be prudent. As an action, it would be informed by habits and would inform the formation of habits. Thus, prudence guides the act of conscience. Further, the act of conscience sees the integration of *synderesis* and prudence in the choice of ends and means.

Second, Thomas describes conscience acting in three ways: witnessing, binding, accusing.³⁰ The first way is for conscience to witness to an action. In this case, conscience is at

²⁶ *ST*, I, q.79, a.12.

²⁷ Hoffmann, 257.

²⁸ Servais-Theodore Pinckaers, "The Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press 2002), 21.

²⁹ *ST*, II-II, q.154.

³⁰ *ST*, I, q.79, a.12.

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play when a person acts without realizing unconsciously.³¹ The witness of the conscience could inform the action without the person realizing, by habit. The witnessing of conscience leads a virtuous person to commit virtuous and just acts. The second way conscience operates is by binding or inciting a person to act or withhold action in any particular case. This action or inaction could be considered a premeditated use of conscience. Finally, conscience can operate to accuse or excuse a person.³² The final way conscience may act is by reviewing past actions and judging them as moral or immoral. Each of the past actions is a manifestation of conscience informed by *synderesis* and guided by the virtue of prudence.

Finally, Thomas explains a person's responsibility regarding their conscience, when their conscience might be in error. First, he dismisses the position that a person should not act in accordance with their conscience when they judge an evil or immoral action as good. For example if a person's conscience orders them to steal in order to feed their family, a person should do so, regardless of the larger ethics. Thomas argues that a person is *always* bound to follow their conscience.³³ However, Thomas does not think this will excuse a person who commits an action wrongly. Thomas asserts that a person is guilty if the person chooses to not form their reason towards the good, but not if they involuntarily commit evil in good conscience.³⁴ Thomas argues that a person's conscience is always binding, but that even if they are bound to follow it, it is not always good.

³¹ Hoffmann, 257.

³² *ST*, I, q.79, a.12.

³³ *ST*, I-II, q.19, a.5.

³⁴ *ST*, I-II, q.19, a.6.

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A Dialogue Between Thomas and *FCFC*

Thomas's understanding of conscience as applied moral knowledge to a particular situation can serve as a critique and correction to *FCFC*. Although the intent of the document is to form consciences, the document presents an understanding of conscience that is too authoritarian. Further, the document does not distinguish between speculative and practical reason, and so speaks with too much certainty about contingent moral issues.

I. FCFC's Authoritarian Understanding of Conscience

An authoritarian understanding of conscience stems out of *FCFC*'s presentation of conscience. The moral knowledge presented by the *FCFC* strings together standard the USCCB's central arguments concerning specific moral issues, which are drawn from papal encyclicals, homilies, and magisterial documents. Thomas took these authorities seriously, placing Augustine or the Church's councils as just under the authority of scripture.³⁵ However, the authorities did not serve as the sole basis for his ethical reflection, nor did they constitute the entirety of moral knowledge. As demonstrated above, *synderesis*, and natural law by extension, along with prudential judgment form the basis for the natural way humans seek moral knowledge.

Further, Thomas's use of science could serve as a model for developing moral knowledge today. Though Aristotelian science is far from standard accepted practice today, Thomas' use of Aristotle's conclusions demonstrates his willingness to consult contemporary science of his day. *FCFC* speaks of science only twice. First in a passing quotation from Pope Francis on the need

³⁵ Pinckaers, 19.

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to use science.³⁶ Second, the document only constructively speaks of the contribution of science to conscientious decision-making in terms of ecological politics.³⁷ Though it is not necessary for the bishops to write about the specifics of biology, psychology, or sociology, forming consciences (according to a Thomistic model) needs to take contemporary physical and social sciences seriously.

Returning to the critique of the authoritarian conscience, Thomas provides a framework for conscience that is much different than the bishops' own framework. In calling conscience a voice of God, and then asserting their own positions as absolutes in ethical reflection, the bishops rhetorically demand conformity to their positions. However, for Thomas, conscience is the use of moral knowledge, which includes scripture and tradition as well as natural law and contemporary science.

II. Particular Situations

The other side of Thomas's definition of conscience is the application to particular situations. *FCFC* is not consistent in its approach to dealing with particular moral issues. On one hand, the bishops take a step back and encourage dialogue about the best means to approach most issues. The bishops' short section on prudence, albeit generally undercut by the overall framework the document uses, allows for individual differences in the way Catholics approach moral issues.³⁸ An example could be the sparse treatment the bishops give to discrimination and racism, which as an issue of its own standing covers just six lines in the whole document.³⁹ In sharp contrast, the document speaks of culture war issues, especially abortion, in much more

³⁶ USCCB, 9.

³⁷ USCCB, 51.

³⁸ USCCB, 20.

³⁹ USCCB, 85.

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specific terms. Hence, the document insists on a constitutional amendment to stop abortion.⁴⁰

Though the bishops make a passing attempt to allow for divergence, in cases like abortion and family life, the tone appears to be certain and authoritative.

Thomas approached the specifics of moral issues with more humility. Thomas' understanding that the natural law was held in each person, but that when contingent matters were concerned there would be a greater degree of error.⁴¹ Thomas still addresses the particularities of moral issues, at times engaging in what today is considered an error. The bishops can and should speak to moral specifics, but they should consider how they approach addressing particular moral issues. When *FCFC* gives specific condemnation or support to an issue, such an emphasis places those issues above the other issues in the document. Further, humility regarding the specifics is helpful. Thomas' humility regarding the ability to know what is good in practice, in moving from abstract to reality, might be a helpful stance for the Catholic political imagination. A document focusing on forming consciences should not just give pronouncements and demand obedience, but rather should foster political, moral, and epistemological stances oriented towards justice.

Conclusion

The bishops attempted to create a pastoral document about Catholics' place in the U.S. political system, but the result was underwhelming given the way the tradition has attempted to understand conscience. The bishop's document understands conscience in an overly authoritarian and absolute way. For Thomas Aquinas, conscience was an act that flowed out of a person's use of *synderesis* and prudence. The former is the habit by which a person is able to grasp the

⁴⁰ USCCB, 65.

⁴¹ *ST*, I-II, q.94, a.4.

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concepts that guide moral arguments. It directs the ends of the moral life with what Thomas describes as infallibility, but when considering practical matters, it is prone to error. Prudence, on the other hand, directs the means by which a person reaches moral ends. It guides decision making by orienting those decisions towards the good. Finally, Thomas suggests that prudence is oriented towards the common good by both charity and right reason, so for Catholics, the common good deserves pride of place when considering elections. A pastoral plan that encourages active use of conscience in voting should follow Thomas' own emphasis on rational discernment rooted in the whole breadth of moral knowledge.

So how should Catholics use Thomas' approach to conscience while considering voting in upcoming elections? First, people should reflect on a breadth of moral knowledge. This would include religious authorities, but it would also include reflecting on biology, economics, and sociology. Then, an act of conscience applies that knowledge to a particular decision, which in this case is voting. A person is then bound to follow their conscience. Thomas's understanding is that it is always immoral for a person not to do so. In reference to contingent moral decisions, Thomas suggests that there is a serious chance of error, so Catholics should observe humility regarding their own positions, which could help contribute to meaningful dialogue across political differences. Finally, prudence should play an important part in a person's reflection. Thomas argues that the common good takes a prudential pride of place above individual interests, so Catholics following their conscience should vote for candidates and policies that contribute to the common good. Catholics should follow their conscience, formed by scripture, tradition, reason, and science, to vote for the common good.

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