

Letter to Catholics in England and Wales from their Bishops

“ ... Remembering the mercies of God... let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and mature.”
(cf Romans 12:1-2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

The Gospel is radical and challenging. It is the saving message of Jesus Christ. 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 in search of redemption; the child in a distant land claiming the right to a future; and the frail elderly person needing care and facing the frontier of death.

As Catholics, we are called to work for a world shaped by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel proclaims the mercy of God and invites us steadfastly to love God and our neighbour.

Our relationship with God leads to the desire to build a world in which respect, dignity, equality, justice, and peace are our primary concerns.

Pope Francis tells us that we are ‘missionary disciples’ who witness to the mercy of Christ through the faithfulness of our lives and the world we wish to build. In the light of the Gospel we can be messengers of hope as we challenge the political candidates about the policies they wish to implement and the reasons why.

At this General Election we are asked to think about the kind of society we want here at home and abroad. Whom you vote for is a matter for you alone. Our aim is to suggest how you might approach this important question in May 2015 and to suggest some key issues for your reflection as you make your own decision.

Voting in a general election should seldom, if ever, be based on a single issue. Elections involve a whole range of issues, some without doubt more central than others, particularly those concerned with the dignity and value of human life and human flourishing. In this letter, we highlight some important issues – but not the only ones. In each case we suggest a question which you may wish to bear in mind.

Respecting Life



Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Each person matters and the foundation of Catholic teaching is the respect for human life from conception to natural death. We support policies that protect the fundamental right to human life. The unborn child is vulnerable and defenceless and, tragically, in our society often the innocent victim of abortion. We oppose calls to introduce assisted suicide or euthanasia. We urge better support for carers and more high quality palliative care and a robust National Health Service on which we can all rely. The House of Lords has been considering a Bill to

legalise assisted suicide, and it is likely that there will be renewed efforts by some in the next Parliament to pass such legislation.

Where do the candidates in your constituency stand on assisted suicide, euthanasia, abortion and other life issues?

Supporting Marriage and Family Life



The Christian understanding of marriage, founded on a loving and faithful relationship between a man and a woman, is the basic building block of society. It provides stability for the nurturing and education of children. Today, families are more diverse and fragile than they were and there are many families of all kinds where love and commitment are found. Society needs good and strong families which are dedicated to the well-being of their children.

A commitment to support the family should be at the heart of social and political life.

Do your candidates have a commitment to support marriage and family life?

Domestic Poverty

There are many families in our communities who are financially vulnerable and struggle to make ends meet; housing and living costs are high.

Many people do not have a living wage to support them and their families. Too many have to turn to the state for additional income and to external voluntary support such as food banks.

Government policies should be assessed on the ways in which they impact those most in need, including those who are homeless or hungry, and how they support and strengthen the family and its capacity to flourish.



Where do your candidates stand on directly helping the poorest and most vulnerable people in the UK and also helping them to transform their lives?

Educating for the good of all

The provision of good education is fundamental to the future of society. We want outstanding schools where success is not just narrowly based on league tables but on how the full potential of every child is developed.

Catholic schools and colleges seek to develop to their full potential the God-given gifts of every child. This includes the spiritual dimension of life in which we live as friends of Jesus Christ. Catholic schools serve over 845,000 children in England and Wales and are generally more ethnically diverse than many other schools. They make a positive contribution to society as they help pupils to become good citizens with clear moral principles to guide their lives and thereby help build up the network of relationships in society.

Future government policy should ensure that the poorest have access to high quality education and that Catholic parents have true choice for educating their children in Catholic schools.

How will candidates in your constituency ensure the best outcomes for the poorest children?

Will they support parental choice for faith-based education?

Building Communities

As human beings we share a common humanity and are members of a single human family. We rightly have ties to our own families and communities, but are always called by the Gospel to a wider solidarity with others and to help build a society based on love and justice, where decisions are made at the most appropriate level - whether local, national or international.

Europe

The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity assist us in how to think about the future of Europe.

Where do your candidates stand in protecting these values in the debate about European institutions?

The Voluntary Sector

For some communities many factors make life more difficult, including rising inequality, increased loneliness for many older people, job insecurity and overstretched community services. Building communities is something that can only be done by active citizens. It cannot only be left just to politicians or government.

Where do your candidates stand on the role of the voluntary sector and how its work can be enhanced?

Living Wage and the Dignity of Human Work

The private sector also has a vital role. Business should see itself at the service of society, solving problems and meeting needs.

The market economy exists to serve humanity. People are not merely economic units to be exploited. The dignity of work should always be respected.

Do your candidates support a living wage and a thriving private sector committed to fair pay and the dignity of human work?

Asylum and Immigration

Violence and conflict have led to the massive displacement of people, many of whom seek asylum or refuge. There are also workers and students from overseas who contribute much to the common good of our country.

Indeed, most people who settle in this country find work in order to bring up their families and contribute to society's well-being. Immigration is a highly emotive issue and every country needs a policy to control immigration, as well as a positive commitment to policies that facilitate the integration of migrants into the mainstream of society. There is a great danger of blaming immigrants for the ills of society.

We support policies which fairly regulate immigration and uphold the human rights of all, recognising the rights, dignity and protection of refugees and migrants.

Where do your candidates stand on issues of asylum and immigration?

Religious Freedom

In recent years we have witnessed a dramatic increase both in violent extremism and in the persecution of people on the basis of their religious beliefs. Many have suffered appalling violence. The recognition and respect given to religious belief is now a crucial issue in many societies including our own.

Catholics seek to recognise the signs of God's goodness everywhere, promote mutual understanding, defend the fundamental rights and freedoms of all, including the right to practice

their religion, both in private and in public, and the duty to strive to contribute to the common good of all.

Where do your candidates stand on these issues of religious freedom, mutual respect and the role of faith in God in contemporary Britain, and in defending fundamental human rights and promoting religious freedom overseas?

Caring for the World

God has given us a good world in which to live and an abundance of gifts of which we are the stewards. Such gifts are distributed unevenly across the world. There is a great gulf between the rich and the poor.

We are not the owners of these goods but the custodians of them and they should be for the benefit of all people. As members of one human family, the richer nations such as ours have a duty to help the development of the poorer nations.

What are the views of your candidates about overseas aid and development?

We know that caring for the planet involves concern for the environment and protecting the livelihood of the poorest people in the world.

What are the views of your candidates on tackling climate change and supporting sustainable development?

Conclusion

As followers of Christ, we work with him to renew the face of the earth. This begins with our daily personal encounter with him through prayer and the sacraments. We are called to live out his teaching through active love of neighbour wherever that may be; in our homes, in our work places, in our parishes and in the wider communities of which we form a part. As his disciples, we search for mercy, compassion and justice in all we say and do, and challenge where these are absent in our world. Together with the state and politicians, we are responsible for the kind of society we build. That is why our actions are more important than our opinions.

Politics is a vital and necessary vocation. It carries important responsibilities not only for policy decisions but also for shaping the hopes and aspirations of people. Political leaders can choose to appeal to our sense of hope or of fear, to our desires to care for others or for ourselves, and to our sense of solidarity or to our selfishness.

We expect politicians to be committed to the common good. We also each have a responsibility to be involved in the democratic process. It is important that we vote. It is a duty which springs from the privilege of living in a democratic society.

In deciding how we vote the question for each one of us is then:

How, in the light of the Gospel, can my vote best serve the common good?

Prior to casting your vote, you may wish to use the following prayer:

“Lord, grant us wisdom that we may walk with integrity, guarding the path of justice and knowing the protection of your loving care for all”.

With our very best wishes,

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

President

Archbishop Peter Smith

Vice President