



Title: Intrinsicly complicated. (From the Editors) (morality and political responsibility)  
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As we go to press, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is meeting in Baltimore. At the top of the bishops' agenda is ratification of a statement instructing Catholics on the relationship between morality and political responsibility.

The statement, issued every four years to coincide with presidential elections and designed to encourage political participation, has long been titled "Faithful Citizenship." In the new draft of the document now being debated by the bishops, the title has been changed to "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." The new title reflects a shift in emphasis in the bishops' approach to the debate about the fraught relationship between the church's moral teaching and the legal and political status of issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. While not abandoning the "consistent ethic of life" language that previously linked the bishops' rejection of legalized abortion with concerns about poverty, the death penalty, immigration, and the environment, the new statement nevertheless puts abortion conspicuously at the top of every list of pressing threats to human dignity.

This shift in emphasis is further characterized by repeated references to the "intrinsicly evil" nature of abortion, euthanasia, the destruction of human embryos, and human cloning. Some conservative Catholics add same-sex marriage to this list and call these issues "nonnegotiable," a stance that rests uneasily with the inevitably contested and provisional nature of political decision making in a pluralistic democracy. As the draft argues, any "legal system that violates the right to life on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed." Complicating this analysis, of course, is the fact that for those who would not outlaw abortion in all instances, it is not simply innocent life that is at stake, but the life and health of the mother as well. Whether antiabortion laws are enforceable, or whether they would be quickly reversed and produce an even more prochoice consensus, are also concerns.

It remains unclear exactly how fundamentally flawed the bishops judge the American legal system to be, since they are nevertheless committed to working within that system to achieve a just outcome.

the compelling logic of the prolife argument that a life deserving protection begins at conception is only part