

A CATHOLIC BILL OF RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

To be human is to have rights. These include life and freedom, together with rights necessary to sustain them: shelter and nourishment, health and work, education and leisure. None of these rights is absolute. One may not exercise them so that other people are exploited.

Citizens of the United States are particularly conscious of their rights, written into our constitution: speech and peaceful assembly, dissent and due process, the choice to believe or not, freedom of the press and protection from cruel and unusual punishment, voting and the presumption of innocence.

When one decides to become a Catholic, one brings all these human rights into the Church. The Church has a solemn obligation to protect these and not to violate them. When one is a Catholic in the United States, the Church is obliged to safeguard those rights which define what it is to be a citizen—unless they are incompatible with Catholicism. One must not be told that one becomes a Catholic at the cost of being less an American. We cannot declare that fundamental rights have no place in the Church of Christ.

We often hear that the “Church is not a democracy.” This is not true: ecumenical councils, papal elections and the election of religious superiors occur regularly. The first Ecumenical Council in 325 declared that no priest was validly ordained unless the community made the selection. Popes and bishops were chosen by the people at large. Fundamentally, Catholic doctrine maintains that the Spirit is given to all and that baptism makes every Catholic equal.

Distinctions between clergy and laity are functional and arbitrary. Their value is always subordinate to the baptismal equality which gives all Catholics the priesthood, the right to the Eucharist, and full status in the community. Christ did not preach a Gospel of privilege and priorities, of entitlements, and of lesser or greater discipleships. Christ did not proclaim that the Reign of God was made up of those whose right to speech or due process or presumption of innocence would now be curtailed.

The Reign of God has its charter in the beatitudes, its constitution in the Gospels, and its mission in the Great Commandments.

In light of these principles and precepts, we, mindful of our baptism, eager to be fully citizens of the United States and thoroughly Catholic, articulate this **Catholic Bill of Rights and Responsibilities.**

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(Formally approved by a standing ovation at the American Catholic Council 6-12-11)

1. **Primacy of Conscience.** Every Catholic has the right and responsibility to develop an informed conscience and to act in accord with it.
 2. **Community.** Every Catholic has the right and responsibility to participate in a Eucharistic community and the right to responsible pastoral care.
 3. **Universal Ministry.** Every Catholic has the right and responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and to respond to the community's call to ministerial leadership.
 4. **Freedom of Expression.** Every Catholic has the right to freedom of expression and the freedom to dissent.
 5. **Sacraments.** Every Catholic has the right and responsibility to participate in the fullness of the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.
 6. **Reputation.** Every Catholic has the right to a good name and to due process.
 7. **Governance.** Every Catholic and every Catholic community has the right to a meaningful participation in decision making, including the selection of leaders.
 8. **Participation.** Every Catholic has the right and responsibility to share in the interpretation of the Gospel and Church tradition.
 9. **Councils.** Every Catholic has the right to convene and speak in assemblies where diverse voices can be heard.
 10. **Social Justice.** Every Catholic has the right and the responsibility to promote social justice in the world at large as well as within the structures of the Church.
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