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Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski participates in a roundtable at Georgetown University in W

Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski participates in a roundtable at Georgetown University in Washington Sept. 11, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy Georgetown University/Rafael Suanes)

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Participation in elections is a key component of faithful citizenship for U.S. Catholics, as is advocating for free and fair elections, Catholic leaders said Sept. 11.

At a press briefing that also included theologians and representatives of Catholic advocacy organizations and religious orders, Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami pointed to the U.S. bishops' document "[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#)" as a reference point for Catholic voters this November.

"We have to just keep on telling people in the pews to vote," Wenski said. "A significant percentage of American citizens who can vote don't vote, and we have to tell everybody that they have to be faithful citizens by exercising their right to vote."

Panelists spoke about pastoral challenges presented by some hardline immigration enforcement policies as among the concerns Catholics should consider.

Fr. Juan de la Cruz Turcios, a parochial vicar at St. Camillus Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, who immigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador, said that in his multicultural parish "there is a lot of fear." He described his own experience carrying his U.S. passport card at all times.

"Never before in my life — I've been living in the United States for almost 30 years — never before in my life have I had to carry my passport card just to go to the 7-Eleven around the corner," he said. "Yes, because I am a target too, even though I'm a priest."

Wenski said that advocating for humane immigration policies "is not a struggle that the church has gotten into just the day before yesterday."

"We've been involved in immigration from the beginning of the church in this country, because immigration is the story of the Catholic Church: the Italians, the Irish, the Poles that immigrated in the 18th and 19th centuries and early 20th centuries," he said. "This is our story, and the bishops have been pretty unified on the issue of immigration."

"We might have our disputes on liturgical or other issues," he said, "but the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, we vote almost 100% in favor of protection for immigrants and for a broader reform of our nation's failed and inadequate immigration policies. So we're doing what we've always done, but we are facing strong headwinds recently because of these inadequate and antiquated laws that have been given new teeth."

Among some of the immigration policy reforms the U.S. bishops have supported are earned pathways to citizenship or lawful permanent residence for eligible migrants; ensuring families of mixed immigration status are not separated; upholding due process in immigration enforcement actions; and ensuring sensitive locations such as houses of worship, schools, and hospitals are protected from enforcement actions.

Only U.S. citizens may vote in federal elections in the U.S. under federal law. But hardline immigration enforcement actions have left some immigrants, who are naturalized U.S. citizens and eligible to vote, concerned about accessing their polling

places if immigration enforcement efforts take place there and that they might be wrongly included in those actions.

Joseph Tomás McKellar, executive director of Catholics in Communion, said the group's work would include having "poll chaplains" available for eligible voters concerned about their ballot access.

"Every eligible voter should feel safe to vote, and every vote should get counted, regardless of who or what people vote for," McKellar said. "The question this morning isn't about the church turning more liberal or conservative. That's the wrong frame. It's about how the church is returning to its roots, who these Catholics are, and why being Catholic in America increasingly means building brick by brick a civilization of love."

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Richard Wood, a sociologist and president of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California, added, "I think it's the church's response to some of the real risks to free and fair elections happening."

"But it's motivated not by partisan concern, but by this deep Catholic teaching of the rights of full participation, that people have a right to full participation in society, to shape the decision-making, and our mechanism for doing that is elections," Wood said. "So how those elections happen really matters to the church. It's about human dignity, right? The dignity of voters who go to the polls. That dignity means their votes should really be protected."

Asked how to apply the principles of "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" to the circumstances of the 2026 midterm elections, Katie Holler, lead organizer for The Dorothea Project, said in that document, "the bishops put forth three beautiful priorities to guide us in forming our consciences."

"Those three priorities that they put forth for us as Catholics are: Who is my neighbor, what is the role of the church in public life, and faith before politics," Holler said. "And I think those are great starting places for us as Catholics."

She said that discernment should include asking "what does the church say about the human dignity of the person, about the importance of families and community

and solidarity, the preferential option for the poor, the vulnerable, and care for creation" and applying those principles as "the first way that we assess candidates."

[Kate Scanlon is a national reporter for OSV News covering Washington. Follow her on X @kgscanlon.]