



July 6, 2026

Feast of Saint Maria Goretti, Virgin and Martyr

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As citizens entrusted with the responsibilities of democratic self-government, we are called to form our consciences according to the truth revealed by God and taught by His Church. Among the many issues that confront voters, none concerns a more fundamental human right than the protection of innocent human life. For this reason, I write to reflect upon the grave moral evil of abortion and the responsibilities that flow from our faith and from Scripture.

This fall, we Virginians face a grave moral choice. The Virginia General Assembly has approved an extreme abortion amendment (the “Virginia Right to Reproductive Freedom Amendment”) for the ballot on November 3, 2026, with early voting starting on September 18. This means we voters will decide whether to enshrine practically unregulated and unlimited abortion in our state constitution, at any time during pregnancy, even up until birth.

The Catholic Church has consistently taught that direct abortion – the intentional killing of an unborn child – is a grave moral evil. The Catechism states: “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception” (CCC 2270). This teaching is not rooted merely in religious sentiment or political preference. It arises from the natural moral law, accessible to human reason, and from divine revelation. The commandment “You shall not kill” (Ex 20:13) protects innocent human life and applies to the child in the womb no less than to any other member of the human family.

As voters, we must recognize that laws shape culture and influence the protection of human rights. A society that fails to defend its most vulnerable members undermines the foundation of justice itself. As Saint John Paul II wrote in *Christifideles Laici*: “The common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights – for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture – is false and illusory if *the right to life*, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination” (no. 38).

In Pope Leo XIV’s first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, he titles the second chapter *Foundations and Principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. These foundations, he says, include the dignity of the person, created in the image and likeness of God. He further states that “the fundamental dignity of each person, therefore, is neither acquired nor earned, nor does it need to be justified” (no. 53). A second foundation of the Social Doctrine of the Church is the inviolability of human rights, among which the first is “the right to life, from conception to its natural end” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 155).

This does not mean that Catholics are indifferent to poverty, immigration, healthcare, education, racial justice, or other important concerns. The Gospel calls us to care for the whole human person and the common good. Yet the right to life is foundational because no other rights can be exercised without it.

At the same time, we must approach this issue with both truth and charity. Many women and men carry deep wounds from past abortions. The Church proclaims not only the sanctity of life but also the boundless mercy of God. Jesus came not to “condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17). Through repentance, reconciliation, and the healing grace of Christ, forgiveness and restoration are always possible.

Therefore, I urge Catholic voters within the Diocese of Richmond to:

1. Form their consciences through prayer, Scripture, and the teachings of the Church.
2. Defend the dignity of every human life from conception to natural death.
3. Support laws and public policies that protect unborn children and assist mothers, fathers, and families in need.
4. Work to build a culture of life marked by compassion, solidarity, and practical support for those facing difficult pregnancies.
5. Pray for elected leaders, medical professionals, parents, and all whose decisions affect the lives of the unborn.

The **Virginia Right to Reproductive Freedom Amendment** is worded vaguely in order to disguise its true meaning. It purports to help women, but in reality, it does the opposite – it harms them. It threatens to eliminate the health regulations that protect women in our communities and puts vulnerable women at risk of being coerced into having abortions.

Passing this radical amendment could take away parents’ rights to be involved in their child’s healthcare. It could make abortion the only invasive medical procedure that a minor could undergo without their parent’s permission. It puts teenage girls in jeopardy, while empowering predators and human traffickers.

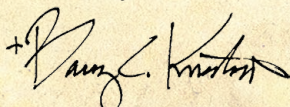
This extreme amendment would even allow a baby to die after an attempted abortion, denying a basic right to medical care to which all human beings are entitled. It could also let people who are not doctors perform abortions in the second and third trimesters, putting women at further risk. The amendment is not reproductive freedom. It is not compassion. Rather, it is a grave injustice that would cause great harm to the sisters, daughters, and friends in our communities. For more on the dangers of this deadly amendment, visit the Virginia Catholic Conference’s abortion amendment webpage (vacatholic.org/amendment).

Every life is sacred. The Church has always taught that abortion is an intrinsic evil. It takes one of God’s greatest gifts – a human life. No law can ever make right what is intrinsically wrong. Let us pray for the courage to confront this evil that threatens to destroy life, to be persistent yet compassionate in our advocacy, and to vote so that we stand up for the great good that God has given us. Let us commit ourselves to defending those who cannot speak for themselves and to witnessing to the Gospel of Life in both word and deed.

As faithful Catholics, and citizens, I ask that you vote NO on this extreme amendment. Let us renew our commitment to support women in crisis, to protect the innocent, and to defend the vulnerable. We must choose life – “Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him.” (Dt 30:19-20).

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, who carried the Savior in her womb and said “yes” to God’s gift of life, intercede for us and for all who seek to build a civilization of love.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Barry C. Knestout", with a small cross symbol to the left.

Most Reverend Barry C. Knestout
Bishop of Richmond