Bishops on Citizenship

The draft document emphasizes formation of conscience.

Aided by the moral teaching of the church, U.S. Catholics should carefully form their consciences in order to participate in public life, according to a draft document on faith and citizenship prepared by the Administrative Committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and made available to America. If approved, Forging Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility will be the latest in a series of documents published during presidential election cycles that provide a summary of relevant church teachings on social justice and political activity.

The document argues that all Catholics have a moral obligation to participate in political life. In forming their consciences for faithful citizenship, the statement reads, Catholics should cultivate “the desire to embrace goodness and live in truth,” study Scripture and church teaching, examine the facts and contexts of various public policy choices and then prayerfully reflect in order to “discern the will of God.” The draft also stresses the importance of exercising prudence in making judgments, so that citizens will be able to “determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively.”

The authors write that while voters are free to choose among various means of responding “to compelling social problems,” they are always bound by a moral obligation to work for the common good—“to build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means.” Citizens are also bound to oppose “intrinsically evil actions,” actions that are so “deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons.” Among these, says the draft, are abortion, euthanasia, human cloning and the destruction of human embryos for research.

According to the bishops, “those who knowingly, willingly, and directly support public policies or legislation that undermine fundamental moral principles cooperate with evil.” The draft admits, however, that it may be possible for a Catholic voter, in good conscience, “to vote for a candidate who supports a policy involving an intrinsic evil, such as abortion.” According to the bishops, “in some cases, if a Catholic who fully accepts fundamental principles such as the right to life were to vote for a candidate despite the candidate’s opposing position but because of other proportionate reasons, this vote would be considered ‘remote material cooperation’ and can be permitted only if there are indeed proportionate reasons.”

In making a prudential judgment about public policy choices or “proportionate reasons,” “two temptations in public life” must be avoided, according to the document. Catholics should reject any view that lacks “ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity” and should also avoid any “misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity.” In other words, while the prohibition on the direct and intentional taking of an innocent human life, as in abortion, may occupy a privileged position in moral decision-making and the church’s social teaching, this privilege may not be invoked as a justification for ignoring the church’s teachings on other matters, like war, torture, the death penalty and economic justice.

The document also summarizes the various positions of the U.S.C.C.B. on specific policy questions, including its opposition to same-sex marriage, stressing that the family, “based on marriage between a man and a woman,” is the “first and fundamental unit of society.” The draft calls on Catholics “to oppose unjust war and torture” and “recognizes the moral right of military personnel to conscientious objection.” Regarding the country’s current wars, the bishops “call on our country to work with the international community to seek a ‘responsible transition’ in Iraq and to address the human consequences of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

The U.S.C.C.B. Administrative Committee customarily prepares and publishes the bishops’ quadrennial document on faith and citizenship. This year, however, the proposed document will be reviewed and voted on by all the bishops of the United States at their meetings this month. According to Bishop William Skylstad, president of the U.S.C.C.B., the “bishops believe that because there is growing interest in what the church says about the relationship between faith and politics, it is important to give as many bishops as possible a chance to participate in drafting the revised and updated statement.”

From America's archives, the editors on Faithful Citizenship (10/27/03), at www.americamagazine.org.

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During the 2004 election campaigns, the U.S. bishops' statement on political responsibility, Faithful Citizenship, came in for considerable criticism among a vocal segment of conservative Catholics. They believed that the document diluted the pro-life message of the church by not emphasizing its preeminent importance. They contended that the document essentially provided a rationale for Catholics to vote for "pro-choice" politicians who supported other policies endorsed by Catholic social teaching, such as social justice and peace. Others in the Catholic community believed that church teaching requires voters to consider the full range of issues in evaluating candidates and policies and that the U.S. bishops' quadrennial statements on political responsibility properly reflected that view.

Because of this history, the wording of this year's version of the political responsibility statement (see summary of draft on preceding page) will be carefully scrutinized and debated for the first time by the full body of bishops rather than the U.S.C.C.B. Administrative Committee alone. If the document is to be an effective tool for voter education, it needs to strike a delicate balance between the two sides in the debate. If this is not achieved, the bishops' statement is likely to become a matter of renewed controversy within the Catholic community while failing to provide a positive contribution to the 2008 political discourse.

This statement, as well those of individual bishops during the 2008 campaigns, could also significantly affect the bishops' collective ability to influence the public debate and governmental decision-making after the elections. The situation, therefore, calls for bishops to avoid even the appearance of serving the partisan interests of either political party. The church has not only a right but a serious obligation to speak out on the moral dimensions of public policy issues. In doing so, the church has customarily avoided being used for partisan purposes by either political party. It would be wise to continue this nonpartisan tradition.

During the highly competitive races of 2000 and 2004, political campaigns developed new techniques for identifying and reaching out to groups of so-called swing voters, who are seen as possible votes for either party. One such group of particular interest to the Bush campaign comprised voters who identified themselves as active members of churches—especially, because of their large numbers, churchgoing Catholics. Many of these voters were seen as sympathetic to the Republican message on abortion and same-sex marriage.

In 2004, for example, Republican efforts to win the Catholic vote became particularly intense after the Democratic Party chose a Catholic as its nominee for president. The Republican Party launched a major effort to turn segments of the Catholic electorate against the Democratic candidate because of his positions on abortion, embryonic stem cell research and gay marriage. The Republicans allied themselves with conservative Catholic groups who helped spread the message to parishes around the country. In addition, these lay groups attempted to bring intense pressure on the bishops to speak out forcefully on these and other moral issues.

Some Catholic bishops had already threatened to deny Communion to either Catholic candidates or incumbent office holders who supported positions that contradicted church teaching on abortion and same sex marriage. In 2004, with the nomination of a Catholic for president whose voting record was seen as contradicting these teachings, this became a topic of national discussion. For the first time in decades, there was a serious public debate among the American Catholic bishops about how to address the political responsibilities of Catholic politicians and Catholic voters. Such discussions had been taking place among the bishops for years but they had always managed to keep their disagreements away from the glare of the media spotlight.

It is clear that these disputes within the church have not been resolved, as both Pope Benedict XVI and prominent American prelates continue to speak out on the same hot-button issues of abortion, embryonic stem cell research and gay marriage. Given the fact that the leading contenders for the Democratic nomination have taken pro-choice positions on abortion and are strongly supportive of civil unions for gay couples, and that a number of the candidates are Catholic, the public debate on faith and politics will most likely become increasingly intense and acrimonious. The situation will be further complicated next year if the Republican Party nominates a Catholic candidate with similar positions.

The 2008 political winds are blowing in a Democratic direction, although for the past two presidential elections the American electorate was closely divided along partisan lines. If the voting trends of 2000 and 2004 continue, we can expect that the 2008 campaign will be another intense ideological struggle between the two parties for political dominance. And the church will once again find itself near the center of the debate.

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