



The Challenge of Faithful Citizenship

A CATHOLIC CALL TO POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

A Summary of the Statement by the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Elections are a time for debate and decisions. Our nation has been attacked and has gone to war. We have moved from sharing budget surpluses to allocating the burdens of deficits. Our world faces fundamental questions of life and death, war and peace, who moves ahead and who is left behind. Our community of faith is working to heal wounds and rebuild trust, but we cannot abandon the duty to act on our faith in political life.

Politics should be about an old idea with new power—the common good. The question should not be, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” It should be, “How can ‘we’—all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable—be better off in the years ahead?”

In this election year, we ask who has a place at the table of life in our nation and around the world. Where is the place at the table for children destroyed before they are born; for the hungry and those who lack health care; for families who need decent work, wages, education, and hope for the future? How can the poor and vulnerable have a real place at the table where policies and priorities are set? For Catholics, a special table—an altar—is where we find the direction to use our voices and votes to defend life, advance justice, pursue peace, and find a place at the table for all God’s children.

We need a new kind of politics—focused on moral principles, not on polls; on the needs of the vulnerable, not the contributions of the powerful; and on the pursuit of the common good, not the demands of special interests. Some Catholics may feel politically homeless, sensing that no political party and too few candidates share a consistent concern for human life and dignity. However, this is no time for retreat or discouragement. We need more, not less engagement in political life.

A Call to Faithful Citizenship

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation. Believers are called to become informed, active, and responsible participants in the political process. Even those who are not citizens are called to participate. Catholics who seek political office have a particular responsibility to bring together their faith, moral convictions, and public responsibilities. This is about more than one election. It requires ongoing participation in the political process.

The Constitution protects our right to speak without governmental favoritism or discrimination. Our nation is enriched, not threatened, when religious groups join public debate. A Catholic

moral framework is often not “politically correct;” it does not fit the rigid ideologies of “right” or “left,” or the platform of any party. Believers are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society, testing every candidate and party for how they affect human life and dignity, and how they pursue justice and peace.

The Role of the Church

The Church is called to share our social teaching, to highlight the moral dimensions of issues, to participate in debate on public policy, and to witness to the Gospel.

Our community of faith brings several assets to these challenges: *A consistent moral framework* anchored in the Scriptures and expressed in the teaching of the Church; *everyday experience* in educating the young, caring for the sick, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, welcoming refugees, and speaking for those who have no voice; and a *large and diverse community*—Republican, Democrat, and Independent—all called to provide a moral haven for our democracy and to be the “salt of the earth.”

We urge our fellow citizens to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or self-interest. As bishops, we do not wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing or opposing candidates. We hope that voters will examine candidates on the full range of issues and on their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance. A consistent ethic of life should be the moral framework to address issues in the political arena.

For Catholics, the defense of human life and dignity is not a narrow cause, but a way of life. A recent Vatican statement reminds us that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit voting for a political program or law that contradicts fundamental principles of our faith. It also reminds us that we should not isolate a particular element of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust our responsibility towards the common good.

Moral Priorities for Public Life

Many political issues have important moral dimensions that must be considered. Over the years, we have issued statements applying Catholic social teaching to the public concerns of our day. In Faithful Citizenship, we offer a brief summary of our positions on issues. “Protecting Human Life” begins with our opposition to abortion and euthanasia, which are pre-eminent

threats to human life and dignity, and extends to our opposition to cloning, assisted suicide, and the death penalty, and our efforts to promote peace. “Promoting Family Life” focuses on promotion of marriage, parental choice in education, responsible communications, and moral and economic supports for families. “Pursuing Social Justice” requires working for a more just economic life with decent jobs and just wages, providing adequate assistance to poor families, overcoming a culture of violence, combating discrimination, and defending the right to quality health care, housing, and food. “Practicing Global Solidarity” addresses overcoming hunger and global poverty, reducing debt and promoting development, responding to the needs of immigrants and refugees, pursuing peace, and working to reduce regional conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and other parts of the world.

This brief description only begins to explain how Catholic teaching has been applied to these issues. We hope Catholics and others will read our complete statement on *Faithful*

Citizenship, as well as other documents that address key issues for the campaign and for the years to come.

Conclusion

The dual calling of faith and citizenship is at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in the United States at this time. We urge Catholics to register, vote, and become more involved in public life, to protect human life and dignity and to advance the common good. Faithful citizenship challenges us to seek a place at the table of life for all God’s children in the elections of 2004 and beyond.

Please see www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship for the complete *Faithful Citizenship* statement and a wide range of resources for parishes, schools, dioceses, and other groups or call 800-235-8722 to order *Faithful Citizenship* materials.

Questions for the Campaign

The Catholic community is not an interest group. The Church does not offer contributions or endorsements. Instead, we raise a series of questions:

1. After September 11, how can we build not only a safer world, but a better world—more just, more secure, more peaceful, more respectful of human life and dignity?
2. How will we protect the weakest in our midst—innocent unborn children? How can our nation not turn to violence to solve some of its most difficult problems—abortion to deal with difficult pregnancies; the death penalty to combat crime; euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of age, illness, and disability; and war to address international disputes?
3. How will we address the tragic fact that more than 30,000 children die every day as a result of hunger, international debt and lack of development around the world?
4. How can our nation help parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values, a sense of hope, and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility? How can our society defend the central institution of marriage and better support families in their moral responsibilities?
5. How will we address the growing number of people without affordable and accessible health care? How can health care better protect human life and respect human dignity?
6. How will our society combat continuing prejudice, overcome hostility toward immigrants and refugees, and heal the wounds of racism, religious bigotry, and discrimination?
7. How will our nation pursue the values of justice and peace in a world where injustice is common, desperate poverty widespread, and peace is too often overwhelmed by violence?
8. What are the responsibilities and limitations of families, community organizations, markets, and government? How can these elements of society work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good and care for creation?
9. When should our nation use, or avoid the use of, military force—for what purpose, under what authority, and at what human cost?
10. How can we join with other nations to lead the world to greater respect for human life and dignity, religious freedom and democracy, economic justice and care for God’s creation?

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