

ELECTION YEAR MESSAGE

An Election Year Message from Wisconsin's Roman Catholic Bishops

Introduction

Beginning in 1976 and every four years since, bishops in the United States have urged Catholics across our land to be active participants in the political process. The 1996 statement on Political Responsibility: Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least Among Us, and Pursuing the Common Good, reaffirms key elements of Catholic social teaching and urges citizens to consider these in light of the issues facing voters this year.

The United States Catholic Conference's Statement on Political Responsibility identifies six basic principles that lie at the heart of Catholic social teaching. Catholics and all citizens are encouraged to assess the issues discussed in this election year, and the policy proposals made by candidates in light of whether they support or weaken these principles.

1. **The Life and Dignity of the Human Person.** Each public policy must be evaluated in light of its impact on human life and dignity.
2. **Human Rights and Responsibilities.** Human dignity and the ability to fulfill our responsibilities require that human rights be respected.
3. **A Call to Family and Community.** The human person is not only sacred, but social. We exercise our rights and fulfill our responsibilities in community, the most basic of which is the family.
4. **The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers.** Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a vocation, a participation in creation. Basic rights of workers must be protected.
5. **The Option for the Poor.** Poor and vulnerable persons have a special place in church teaching. We need to put the needs of people who are poor first.
6. **Solidarity.** We are one human family despite differences of race, creed, or nationality. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions.

We invite Catholics and all citizens across Wisconsin to reflect on these principles as they assess their rights and responsibilities as citizens both before and after the 1996 elections.

We also call attention to three broad concerns which we believe will provide the context for debates between candidates and citizens in this particular election. These are: 1) the role of government in modern society; 2) the proper relationship between the federal government and state and local government; and, 3) the tone of political debate and discourse.

Role of Government

The State as the Guarantor of the Common Good

Perhaps the most talked about issue of this election year is that of the proper role of government in our lives. Many of the key topics before the voters are being framed in a way that draws us back to this overriding question. Such debate is healthy and should occur at regular intervals.

It is not appropriate for the Church to express a preference for a specific institutional government arrangement.¹ It is appropriate, however, for the Church to call attention to certain principles and factors that citizens should consider as they determine the proper scope of government authority and the government's relationship to other institutions and the individual.

Catholic social teaching has always regarded government as a desirable thing, necessary to insure justice and peace in the community. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church makes clear, "every human community needs an authority to govern it."² This truth has been reaffirmed at regular intervals by Popes over the last one hundred years and by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council.

The interests of the community are defined by the "common good" which is understood as the "sum total of social conditions which allow people as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment..."³

The common good has three essential elements:

1. respect for the person;
2. the social well being and development of the group; and,
3. the peace and stability of a just order.⁴

The Catechism also explains that the political community is the place where the common good is best served and that the state has the role of defending and promoting the common good of society and citizens and of the intermediate bodies that serve both.⁵

Further, the state has the responsibility to strive to eliminate imbalances that may exist in society⁶ and justice demands that civil government give more attention to the less fortunate.⁷ It is a fundamental duty of civil authority to coordinate social relationships to assure the proper exercise of rights.⁸ Government need not provide every service, resolve every dispute, nor regulate every activity. But government is one of the means by which the community assures that the essential needs of the common good are met.

In this respect Catholic social teaching is in harmony with the spirit of the nation's founders. The values discussed above are found in the Declaration of Independence, which holds that governments are instituted to secure God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These elements of Catholic social teaching are also present in the preamble to the Constitution, which asserts that among the primary purposes of the American government are those of establishing justice, providing for the common defense and promoting the general welfare.

We note that those chapters in our nation's past that are viewed favorably are those in which government acted to help those who were denied access to the American dream. Efforts to end

slavery, grant suffrage to women, improve rights and conditions of labor, and secure racial equality were all achieved because citizens used government to achieve these ends.

We also note that many issues of great concern to Catholics today require asking government to protect the weak, as in the case of efforts on behalf of unborn children or families on welfare, to empower families, as is the case with parental choice of schools, or to safeguard the values of the community as is the case in efforts to limit or ban pornography.

Limits on the State's Role

Yet, just as Catholic social teaching is open to the idea of an activist government, so has it argued for proper limits to the scope of the state's authority to assure a respectful relationship with other institutions in society. Thus, while Catholic social teaching is comfortable with the idea of a state that secures liberty and justice, it has also been firm in demanding that the government not usurp the proper freedoms of the people or unnecessarily interfere with the legitimate functions of private institutions.

This is especially true in the case of religion. Catholic social teaching is emphatic on the point that religious institutions and religiously inspired advocacy have a rightful place in debates over public policy.

Thus, a public debate over the state's proper role ought to include a search for a more apt metaphor than that of a "wall of separation" to describe the relationship between religion and society. Such a metaphor does not describe relations between neighbors, it does not imply cooperation, it does not foster community. It does not reflect the views and intention of our nation's Founders.

A Special Challenge to Catholics

In the past the case for an activist government and a welfare state have coincided with the self-interests of Catholics in the United States. Our ancestors were often newly arrived immigrants, lacking in education and political influence. As newcomers who were "different," Catholics were generally more vulnerable to ill fortune and injustice that are present in any society.

The interests of our Catholic ancestors were served by demands for political, social, and economic reform. In various ways, Catholic institutions and lay men and women advocated for policies that employed government to help these Catholics and others like them.

In 1920, a number of bishops, acting through the National Catholic Welfare Conference, issued a call for the reconstruction of the social order, a call that anticipated many reforms of the 1930's. Msgr. John Ryan, who articulated the case for a just wage and other economic and political reforms, was a fixture in public policy debates for over thirty years between 1910 and 1945. Lay Catholics took a prominent role in forming and leading the labor movement that argued for greater involvement by government in economic and social affairs. Each of these was an example of witness to the social teaching of the Church. Each materially helped countless Catholic families and their neighbors.

Today, the situation is much different. Many Catholics have "arrived" at the center of American life. The obstacles which excluded them have been removed in most instances. Today, the support and safety net of the welfare state so helpful to our parents and grandparents may seem more like a burden or barrier. Programs that help the poor and marginalized of this era are harder to connect to the self-interest of many Catholics today. At the same time, many other Catholics, especially those who are of Hispanic origin, face barriers similar to those faced by Catholics in years past. For them, the support of an activist government is much more essential.

This diversity in our own church offers clear and convincing evidence that the needs of the 21st century differ from those of the 20th. Old solutions must give way to new approaches. Yet the challenge of providing justice for the needy remains.

As Catholics consider the best way to effect change, we must not forget that our Catholic tradition is grounded in the Scriptures which exhort us to "Speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves - open our mouth, decree what is just and defend the needy and the poor."⁹ The platforms and proposals offered by candidates this year should be evaluated in light of their capacity to assist the needy today, be they Catholic or non-Catholic, as they assisted our ancestors.

Which Level of Government

The Principle of Subsidiary

Once the community has determined which problems or functions are the responsibility of government, another decision remains. Citizens must also determine which level of government is the most appropriate for the task at hand. This issue has been debated almost continuously since the United States became a nation. It is a major issue again this year.

Sometimes citizens must decide whether the federal or state government is the best vehicle to promote justice in a given policy area. On other occasions, voters are asked to decide whether it is preferable for state, county or municipal government to be accountable for a task or program.

As this debate is waged, some refer to Catholic social teaching and the "principle of subsidiarity" to support their view. The principle of subsidiarity is associated with the concept of "localism." Many point to the teaching of Pope Pius XI in 1931 that a "higher association" should not assume what a more local organization can accomplish.¹⁰

As bishops, we offer no specific response to any of these particular disputes. Rather, we urge voters to reflect on how subsidiarity should be applied to the facts of each debate. As they do so, it is important that the principle of subsidiarity be discussed with due consideration of developments in Catholic social teaching over the years.

Pius XI noted that history has shown that many things once done by small associations must in time be done by large associations.¹¹ More recently, Pope John Paul II observed that modern problems require new solutions and cited a need for a greater degree of international arrangements in social, economic, and cultural areas.¹² The Pope also noted that the state should

generally intervene indirectly to create favorable conditions for economic activity whereas it should be more directly involved in defending the weakest in the society.¹³

In determining whether a local level of government should assume responsibility for a specific task or policy, the citizen must assess more than whether the government involved is the most local available. One must also examine the true nature of the problem at hand and whether the local authority has the capacity or will to deal with it.

Government involvement may vary. Parental choice of schools is an example of state action that empowers families. Another appropriate response is for different levels of government to cooperate in the solution of a problem. The Interstate Highway system, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and environmental programs are examples of state and federal collaboration. In Wisconsin, our school aid formula, shared revenues, and University Extension are examples of collaboration by state and local governments.

Other times, a local government may possess the awareness of the problems and adequate resources, but lack the moral will to apply them. This is often the case when the civil and social rights of minorities are endangered or ignored. It can also occur, however, where powerful interests overwhelm the rest of the community. In such cases, states or even federal governments must assume the role of securing justice. This certainly occurred in the case of racial segregation and in efforts to improve the lot of migrant workers.

Hence, it is incumbent upon Catholics and others to assess each situation and public policy in light of these factors before deciding whether the private sector, or local, state, or federal government is the most appropriate place to deal with the problem.

Civility As Essential for Community

St. Augustine once described a community as people who hold a common love. Community in this sense is not possible if citizens do not love one another. Too often, the tone of our comments can convey a lack of love and concern for others that is destructive of the social fabric.

Whether we enter public debates from the right or the left, as conservatives or liberals, or as Republicans or Democrats, we are all Wisconsinites, we are all Americans and above all, we are all daughters and sons of God. We are and will remain neighbors who depend upon each other after the elections are past.

Because human beings are interdependent, the institutions they create and to which they belong also rely on each other. Just as healthy families are the foundation for healthy neighborhoods and communities, so do troubled states portend problems for families and individuals. Accordingly, no government is strong without vigilant, devoted citizens more committed to the well being of all than to their own self interest.

This interdependence means that we cannot malign or call into question the basic competence or integrity of our government without undermining the moral authority of other institutions as well. Citizens cannot discredit or disown a government led by elected officials and then expect

their neighbors to heed or defer to unelected, and hence less accountable leaders of business, education, the media, or the churches. Distrust is just as contagious as confidence.

As we affirmed in 1989 in our statement *The Consistent Life Ethic: A Demand of Discipleship* the most powerful weapons we as disciples bring to any debate are the force of our arguments and our personal example in expressing them. Therefore we owe it to each other to insist that our contribution to debates address the merits of the issues.

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland, OSB, Milwaukee

Bishop Robert J. Banks, Green Bay

Bishop Raymond L. Burke, La Crosse

Bishop William H. Bullock, Madison

Bishop Raphael M. Fliss, Superior

Footnotes

1. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, #47.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1998.
3. *Gaudium et Spes*, #26.
4. *Catechism*, #1906-09.
5. *Ibid*, #1910.
6. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, #54.
7. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, #56.
8. *Ibid.*, #62.
9. Proverbs 31 :8-9
10. Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, #79.
11. *Ibid*, #79.
12. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #43.
13. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, #15.
14. John Paul II, *Departure Statement*, Baltimore, MD. Oct. 8, 1995.

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