



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH INVOLVEMENT IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

INTRODUCTION

Since 1969, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) has offered a specifically Catholic contribution to state and federal public policy debates taking place in Wisconsin. Through the WCC, the Catholic bishops of Wisconsin address the moral implications of the issues that face citizens and those particular citizens who serve as our elected representatives.

A particular focus of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference has been to encourage and to inform more fully the involvement of Catholics in public affairs, both as individual citizens and as members of parishes and dioceses.

As citizens, Catholics involved in politics are a diverse body: Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and otherwise aligned. This diversity is acknowledged in Catholic teaching. As the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes (The Church in the Modern World)* notes, “the people who come together in the political community are many and diverse, and they have every right to prefer divergent solutions” (#74) in pursuit of the common good.

Nationally, the bishops of the United States have urged “all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate in building the culture of life.” (*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, 1998, #34.)

Catholics, whether they do so as private citizens or while serving the church in an official capacity, bring their faith into the public square when they address public policy issues. Through their efforts, the Church brings a collective wisdom gleaned from the multitude of charitable, medical, and educational services offered by Catholic parishes, diocesan agencies, schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. The Church also offers a consistent moral framework for building a society that “protects human life, promotes family life, pursues social justice, and practices solidarity.” (*Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium*, 1999, p. 12.)

Speaking before the elections held in the year 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) noted that the “Church’s participation in public affairs does not undermine but enriches the political process and affirms genuine pluralism.” (*Faithful Citizenship*, p. 12.)

These guidelines are adopted to encourage the appropriate and vital participation of people of faith in the public life of our state and our nation as we strive for the common good. They are

also adopted in response to numerous requests from parishes, Catholic organizations, and individuals for help in clarifying the proper role of the Church in our society.

Underlying these guidelines is the Catholic view that “every believer is called to faithful citizenship, to become an informed, active, and responsible participant in the political process.” (*Faithful Citizenship*, p. 9.)

MISSION OF THE CHURCH IS RELIGIOUS NOT POLITICAL

For reasons that are both theological and legal, the Church’s involvement in public life does not extend to endorsing candidates for election to public office nor calling for their defeat.

Theological Considerations

The theological reasons for not supporting or opposing candidates are by far the most important. In the words of Vatican II, the purpose Christ set forth for the Church is a religious one and He gave the Church “no proper mission in the political, economic or social order.” (*Gaudium et spes*, #42.) That is why the “Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.” (*Gaudium et spes*, #76.)

But Vatican II further taught that out of the Church’s religious mission, comes “a function, a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law.” (*Gaudium et spes*, #42.) In short, through her teaching and reflection on the state of the world, the Church seeks to inspire people everywhere to be involved in the affairs of the community. Yet, while the Church seeks to inspire, “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful.” (*Deus caritas est* (*God is Love*), #29.)

To state it another way, the Church as teacher assumes the role of *critiquing* the society and the culture. Catholics as citizens have the vocation of *transforming* the culture.

Legal Considerations

On the legal side, Church agencies and institutions must conform to the civil laws and regulations that govern tax-exempt organizations.

The legal parameters for what is permitted and not permitted of churches and individuals who are acting in an official church capacity are determined by the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. This code applies not only to churches but to all other tax-exempt organizations.

Stated most simply, tax-exempt organizations may engage in issue-related advocacy but may not be involved in partisan political activities or elections of non-partisan officials. Thus, actions that have the effect of supporting or opposing candidates for elected office are treated differently than are activities directed toward the enactment or defeat of legislation, or issues decided by referenda.

It is significant that these laws make the same distinction as does Catholic teaching regarding the role of churches and lay people. Advocacy and education, that is efforts to critique the society, are treated differently than the activity of transforming society by electing the leaders of our government.

Accordingly, the discussion of election-related activities that are permitted and those that are not permitted should be read in terms of what Catholics may do in their capacity as individual citizens or groups of like-minded voters. Catholics who are publicly identified with one or more ministries of the Church have the same First Amendment right as any other citizens to freely endorse or oppose political candidates or parties. However, they must make it eminently clear that they are doing so *as individuals* and not in a way that is interpreted as speaking for the Church. When expressing such opinions, the use of official titles and stationery must be avoided.

Recommended Church Activity: Issue Based Education and Advocacy

The following political activities, appropriate for church involvement, are encouraged:

1. Publishing and distributing issue materials without reference to specific candidates or political parties.
2. Voter registration campaigns and “get-out-the-vote” campaigns.
3. Encouraging Catholics, as citizens, to become involved in political activities.
4. Organizing committees for political education/involvement.
5. Developing a legislative network to review legislative activity and monitor the positions of elected officials. It is advisable that organizations engaging in this activity establish a practice of publishing the ongoing record of public officials and legislative bodies at reasonable intervals, rather than doing so exclusively during an election campaign.
6. Making church facilities available for multi-issue candidate forums, whether hosted by parishes, diocesan groups, or other neutral organizations.
7. Encouraging attendance at public forums.
8. Forming parish committees to help those with disabilities and/or elders to vote (for example, providing rides to the polls or information on absentee voting).
9. Assisting non-English speaking persons to register to vote and to learn about issues and/or providing registration and other materials in their native language.
10. Organizing letter-writing campaigns on legislative issues.
11. Developing special outreach programs to help the disadvantaged in the electoral process.

Prohibited Church Activity

Diocesan officials and agencies, clergy, religious, parish councils, parish organizations, and other Church affiliates, when acting in an official capacity, must avoid the following:

1. Endorsing or opposing political candidates or parties, or actively engaging in political campaigns for or against any candidate or party (for example, through homily, newsletter, web sites, and so on).
2. Permitting the preparation, collation, or distribution on church premises of any flyers or other printed materials that favor or oppose a candidate or a party.
3. Using diocesan or parish bulletins or web sites to support, promote, endorse, or oppose any particular political party or candidate.
4. Evaluating candidates in writing or in speech. Types of objectionable evaluations include the following:
 - a. Labeling a candidate as “pro-life” or “anti-school choice” removes objectivity by not allowing readers/listeners to evaluate a candidate’s position for themselves.
 - b. Using plus (+) or minus (-) signs to rate candidates implies an endorsement or opposition.
 - c. Rating candidates on a scale of “one to ten,” for example; or otherwise saying, “X is good, Y is better.”
 - d. Issuing “marked” sample ballots that tell people how to vote.
5. Giving church money or any monies arising from church-related sources to candidates for elective office or holders of political office.
6. Using church facilities in any manner that would connote endorsement of a political candidate.

Publication and/or Distribution of Candidates’ Positions

Parishes and other diocesan agencies or organizations must take great care when publishing or distributing materials that attempt to report candidates’ positions on specific issues or their voting records.

1. All surveys or questionnaires of candidates’ positions for state or federal elections must be prepared or approved by the USCCB or WCC if they are distributed on church property (including parking lots).

The following must be true of any survey or questionnaire approved by the WCC:

- a. It must be objectively worded and objectively compiled. (The survey/questionnaire must not make value judgments about the issue or the

response but should confine itself to describing the issue or vote in question and the candidate's position.)

- b. Its results must be accurately reported and free of bias.
 - c. It must cover a broad range of issues of interest or concern to the Church.
 - d. It cannot be distributed in the 10 days preceding a primary or general election because this may prevent candidates or parties from responding to inaccuracies or misrepresentations of their positions.
 - e. It cannot be prepared by an organization that supports or opposes a particular candidate or party.
2. Diocesan or parish bulletins, brochures or other publications containing reports of candidates' positions on issues should point out that the diocese or parish does not endorse candidates and that the material is distributed for the purposes of informing and educating voters.
 3. Those seeking approval of materials prepared by an organization or individual other than the USCCB, WCC or local diocese should submit materials to the WCC at least two weeks prior to the intended date of distribution.

Publication and/or Distribution of Voter Education Materials

Parishes and other diocesan agencies or organizations must also be careful regarding use of voter education materials prepared or distributed in the context of an election campaign even if they do not mention candidates by name.

Whenever possible, materials prepared by the USCCB, the WCC, or the local diocese should be used for voter education efforts. However, since no publication or series will address every issue of interest to Catholic citizens, the use of other materials may be appropriate. Such materials may be used subject to the following guidelines:

1. Prior to being distributed on church property (including parking lots) or used in some other official capacity, all materials designed to educate voters regarding state or national elections must either be 1) prepared by the USCCB, WCC, or by the local diocese, or 2) approved by the WCC.
2. Materials to educate voters about issues related to municipal or county elections or referenda must be prepared or approved by the local diocese.
3. The materials may not advocate a position that is opposed to one taken by the Holy See, USCCB, WCC, or the diocese.
4. Materials prepared by an organization or individual other than the Holy See, USCCB, WCC, or local diocese should be submitted to the WCC for approval at least two weeks prior to the intended date of distribution.

Diocesan Newspapers, Web Pages and Other Official Communications

In the context of balancing the rights and responsibilities under the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment "freedom of the press" guarantee, diocesan newspapers, web pages, and other official communications tools should note that many of the guidelines are applicable to their activities. Particularly of concern are the guidelines that pertain to publishing and distributing "issue" materials; promoting voter registration and "get-out-the-vote" campaigns; encouraging Catholics as citizens to become involved in political activities; and promoting attendance at public forums. The guidelines that ban endorsing or opposing political candidates or parties are also applicable.

The guidelines pertaining to publishing and/or distributing candidates' positions are applicable to diocesan newspapers, web pages, and other official communications tools whether the polls and summaries of voting records are prepared by the newspapers' own staff or by outside sources.

Nothing in the guidelines is meant to discourage diocesan news personnel from reporting on candidates' election campaigns and publicly stated positions or political views. Also, editorials and syndicated columnists may express subjective opinions or positions on political issues, as long as they do not endorse a particular candidate or political party. In fact, publication of information regarding the candidates and the issues is encouraged to assist subscribers in making informed, responsible choices.

Diocesan newspapers are also encouraged to accept advertising from political candidates, since to do otherwise would seem to label politics as immoral or anti-social. In addition, denial of advertising would deprive candidates of an important method of communicating with Catholic citizens.

The diocesan newspapers, in order to assure that political ads are not an occasion of scandal and do not offend Christian principles of justice and honesty, should adopt publishing policies and rules, communicate them to the public at the outset of each election season, and apply them equitably to all candidates and political parties.

Such policies should clearly state that the newspaper:

1. Accepts advertising from all candidates, political parties, and voter education groups, if offered, without regard to the advertisers' positions on particular issues.
2. Retains the right to veto or require editing of advertising copy so that it conforms to the publishing and editorial standards of the publication. The purpose of editing is not to censor or intervene in a political campaign, but to make sure that the material is not offensive to the readers in the judgment of the editors.
3. Will not solicit advertising selectively from candidates and/or parties.
4. Does not allow the newspaper ads to include endorsements by Church officials that include their official titles or reproductions of letters from Church officials or agencies that include the official letterhead.

5. Does not accept newspaper ads that include references to a candidate's race or ethnic origin. Statements regarding a candidate's position on issues must be based on clearly established voting patterns and/or publicly stated positions. Isolated comments, which may have been taken out of context or misquoted, and references to legislative votes, which are not indicative (or are contrary) to a candidate's general voting pattern on a particular issue, are not acceptable.
6. Will ascertain, as carefully as possible, all advertising copy for accuracy and truthfulness.
7. Requires payment for all political advertising in advance of publication. Advertising rates are the same for all candidates, political parties, and voter education groups.
8. Publishes in every issue of the newspaper that carries political advertising a statement informing readers that the acceptance of political advertising does not indicate endorsement by the newspaper or the diocese.

CLOSING

The Church needs to raise its voice clearly about justice, because the choices that face our nation are oftentimes choices that directly affect human dignity.

Again, in the words of the bishops:

Because of the interdependence among all the members of the human family around the globe, we have a moral responsibility to commit ourselves to the common good at all levels: in local communities, in our nation, in the community of nations. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. As Pope John Paul II has said, "We are all really responsible for all." (*Faithful Citizenship*, p. 14.)

Revised Winter 2006 / Updated August 2010

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

131 W. Wilson St, #1105

Madison, WI 53703

Tel 608/257-0004 Fax 257-0376

E-MAIL: office@wisconsincatholic.org WEBSITE: <http://www.wisconsincatholic.org>