

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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CATHOLICS SHOULD BE EXAMPLE IN 2010 CAMPAIGN

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

June 1 is the day on which candidates for the fall elections may begin to circulate nomination papers to secure a place on the primary election ballot. As such it marks the official beginning of the campaign season.

As this season begins, it is important to remember how we as Catholics can engage in faithful citizenship. The WCC's *Guidelines for Church Involvement in Electoral Politics*, first approved by the bishops in the early 1980s and periodically updated, share "dos and don'ts" for involvement by church organizations in election campaigns.

The *Guidelines* take great care to conform to the legal requirements for election-related activity that govern all tax-exempt organizations. Even more important, these *Guidelines* reflect the distinction in Catholic social teaching between the proper role of Catholics acting "as Church" and Catholics acting as faithful citizens in the arena of secular politics.

The *Guidelines* make clear that the theological reasons for not supporting or opposing candidates are far more important than the legal ones. Citing the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes*, the *Guidelines* affirm that the Church's mission is a religious one and this mission does not extend "to the political, economic or social order."

Rather, 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, recognizing that the responsibility for the civil government of society rests with lay women and men.

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.

The Church offers this critique in the form of bishops' "calls to political responsibility," written every four years. Issue-specific materials from the national and state Catholic conferences are also part of this critique. Together, these resources offer guidance to citizens as they take their values, insights, and experiences into the public debates of the campaign.

But while the Church encourages us to be involved citizens, we must remember that our personal words and deeds in the political arena are not those of the Church. The WCC *Guidelines* offer clear assistance for making the distinction between Church authority and individual opinion.

We Catholics can add much to the campaign by what we say. We can also enrich the process by how we say it. In a political culture that is often tainted with coarse rhetoric and shrill content, we can model civil discourse that offers light, not heat, to our fellow citizens.

Our social teaching is grounded in a commitment to the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person. We live up to that commitment when we respect our opponents and affirm their dignity in the words we choose to disagree with them.

Let's hope we Catholics can do this over the next five months. If we succeed, we will have gone a long way toward fulfilling our mission to transform the political culture for which we - and all our fellow citizens - are responsible.

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