

# Pastors, Parishes and Political Responsibility

## *Guidelines for permissible political activities by Catholic organizations*

The role and responsibilities of Catholics in public life have been the subject of much discussion throughout our nation in recent months. Catholics, virtually alone among religious denominations, are often made to feel that we should not allow our deeply held beliefs to help shape our positions on political issues. The notion that Catholics should separate their religious and moral beliefs from their actions as policy makers or voters is incorrect on its face. All people are obligated to vote according to their informed conscience, and religious beliefs play a critical role in the formation of the conscience.

In the United States of America, all citizens are blessed to have the opportunity to vote for our political leaders. This is not a responsibility to be taken lightly, and the New York State Catholic Conference renews its call to Catholic citizens to inform themselves on the critical issues of the day and to exercise their right to vote. These issues include, but are not limited to, respect for the sanctity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death, issues of war and peace, the education and formation of children, the needs of the poor, oppressed and vulnerable, and access to health care for all people, particularly the elderly and infirm.

In the document *[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#)*, the bishops of the United States remind us of the role of the church in the public square. “The United States Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to participate and speak out without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination. ...Our nation’s tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions into public life. The Catholic community brings to the political dialogue a consistent moral framework and broad experience serving those in need.”

But the document goes further than asserting the rights of Catholics to participate in the political process. It notes that such participation is obligatory. “In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. ...Catholic lay women and men need to act on the Church’s moral principles and become more involved: running for office, working within political parties, and communicating concerns to elected officials.”

Turning again to *Faithful Citizenship*, we are reminded of the importance of a well-formed conscience: “The Church equips her members to address political questions by helping them develop well-formed consciences.” It is the exercise of conscience, aided by prudential judgment, that assists Catholics in determining effective ways to promote the common good. The Bishops state, “Catholic voters should use Catholic teaching to examine candidates’ positions on issues and should consider candidates’ integrity, philosophy, and performance. It is important for all citizens ‘to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self-interest.’ (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 33).”



Keeping in mind their duty as Bishops to educate the faithful, the Bishops of New York State have joined with their brother bishops throughout the country in urging Catholics to become informed about issues, communicate their positions to elected officials, register to vote, and vote according to conscience. To this end, the New York Bishops have created the Catholic Advocacy Network ([www.nyscatholic.org](http://www.nyscatholic.org)), which serves as an educational arm of the New York State Catholic Conference. The Bishops have encouraged all Catholic New Yorkers to join the network to remain up to date on important issues involving fundamental issues of justice and respect for the sacredness and dignity of all human life.

The Bishops and the Catholic Conference respect the laws of our land with regard to restrictions on political activity by not-for-profit organizations. We therefore reprint the following guidelines to Catholic pastors and citizens regarding permissible political activity. These guidelines were approved by the Bishops prior to the 2000 presidential election and remain in effect. Individual bishops may have issued additional guidelines beyond what is listed below. The statewide guidelines do not supersede such local guidelines. We urge pastors to consult with their chancellors for additional guidance.

### **Guidelines for Political Activity**

While the Catholic Church often speaks to issues that are both moral and political, it directs its attention to the issues, not to political parties or candidates.

All activities of the Church, (and its parishes, schools and affiliated organizations) in the political arena must conform to the requirements of section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. This prohibits tax-exempt organizations from participating or intervening in political campaigns on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.

As a result, Church organizations, as well as individuals as representatives of Church organizations, are prohibited from engaging in partisan political activities, including raising money for candidates or political parties, making or distributing statements favoring or opposing candidates or parties, running for elected office, or otherwise participating in political campaigns.

Church employees and officials, however, including clergy and religious, acting in their individual capacity as private citizens, may participate freely in the political process, provided they are not acting as representatives of Church organizations or utilizing Church facilities or assets. There may be times when it is difficult to distinguish between activities undertaken as a private citizen and activities undertaken as a Church representative, and prudence should be exercised in this regard.

While we are aware that other tax-exempt organizations may not always abide by the law, we, as Church, are committed to obeying the law.



Church organizations should be particularly cautious when asked to distribute voter education materials prepared by outside organizations. Such organizations may not be subject to the section 501(c)(3) requirements and may intend to favor or oppose particular candidates. We recommend that all voter education materials be reviewed and approved by the diocesan attorney or the State Catholic Conference prior to authorization for distribution.

### **Permissible Church Activities**

- Endorsing/opposing legislation, including ballot referenda
- Homilies/bulletin inserts on moral issues, and on the moral responsibilities of voters
- Providing educational materials on public policy issues, but not candidates, to parishioners
- Arranging for groups to meet with their elected officials to advocate for or against legislation
- Encouraging letter-writing, phone calls and other contacts with candidates and elected officials about issues
- Inviting all candidates for public office to a Church-sponsored public forum, debate, or candidates' night
- Conducting a nonpartisan voter registration drive on Church property
- Distributing unbiased candidate questionnaires or voting records on a wide variety of issues

### **Prohibited Church Activities**

- Endorsing/opposing candidates for political office
- Homilies/bulletin inserts regarding specific candidates
- Distributing or permitting distribution of partisan campaign literature under Church auspices or on Church property
- Arranging for groups to work for a candidate for public office
- Funding or financial support of any candidate, political action committee, or political party



- Inviting only selected candidates to address your Church-sponsored group, or permitting/hosting political meetings on Church property
- Conducting voter registration that is slanted toward one party
- Rating candidates numerically, or “favorably” or “unfavorably”
- Sharing parish resources, including mailing lists, with political campaigns or parties

The above guidelines serve as a summary of the principle rules regarding political activity for tax exempt organizations. A more complete explanation of the regulations governing 501(c)(3) organizations is available from the New York State Catholic Conference.

Neither these guidelines nor any other church document should be used to endorse candidates or otherwise instruct people how to vote on candidates, nor to inhibit Catholics, acting as private citizens, from partisan political activity. Any questions which may arise should be referred to the Chancery Office of your (Arch)Diocese or the New York State Catholic Conference.

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