

Why Should You Vote?

PART I

The Republican National Convention ended in New York recently. There were no surprises. They, according to their critics, touted all of the positions for which they are popular and avoided all the positions for which they are unpopular. They nominated George Bush and Dick Cheney to be their standard bearers and proceeded, according to their critics, to overstate their achievements and to exaggerate the weakness of their opponents.

The Democratic National Convention ended in Boston just days earlier. There were no surprises. They, according to their critics, touted all of the positions for which they are popular and avoided all the positions for which they are unpopular. They nominated John Kerry and John Edwards to be their standard bearers and proceeded, according to their critics, to overstate their promise and to exaggerate the weakness of their opponents.

Now both parties will spend hundreds of millions of dollars in the next 40 days in an effort to win the White House. Few so called experts are confident about predicting who will win. Almost all are willing to predict that the majority of American citizens eligible to vote will stay at home, seemingly indifferent to their unique role in a participatory democracy. Some studies indicate that in 2000 only 40 percent of potential voters actually voted!

What would a latter day St. Peter Claver, the patron saint of our Diocese, whose feast day is September 9th, make of this? In the 74 years of his lifetime (1580-1654), he witnessed one of the most abominable evils in human history, the African Slave trade. By the best estimates, more innocent people died in this buying and selling of human beings than the 6,000,000 who perished during the Nazi holocaust! It was an evil that could easily have been stopped if governments had wanted to do so, if the people had wanted their governments to do so.

We all know that some Catholics played a role in ending African slavery in this country. We also know that some Catholics supported slavery. Others were indifferent. Somehow they were unable to shine the light of the gospel upon our national sin and our national shame.

Today the Catholic Bishops of the United States believe that Catholic people can make a difference in our society. For this reason, every four years in anticipation of the quadrennial process of our presidential election, we Bishops publish a pastoral reflection called *Faithful Citizenship*. I suspect that many who are reading my column have never heard of this document. I believe that you should know about it. You should know what it says. Reading and discussing *Faithful Citizenship* would be faithful to the selfless spirit of Fr. Peter Claver S.J. who urged us to put deeds before words. Informed and conscientious voting is one of our most important deeds as American citizens.

Elections are a time for debate and decisions about the leaders, policies, and values that will guide our nation. Since the last highly controversial presidential election, our nation has been attacked by terrorists. We have gone to war not once but twice. We have moved from asking how to share budget surpluses to how to allocate the burdens of deficits. As we approach the elections of 2004, we face difficult challenges for our nation and our world.

Our nation has been wounded. September 11, 2001 and what followed have taught us that military strength, economic power, or technological advances alone cannot truly guarantee security, prosperity, or progress. The most important challenges we face are not simply political, economic, or technological, but ethical, moral, and spiritual.

In *Faithful Citizenship* we who exercise servant-leadership in the Church as Bishops urge all Catholic people to register, become informed about the complex challenges facing our country, vote, and become more involved in public life, in order to advance the common good.

In the 2004 elections, as always, we bishops are called by the gospel to be political but not partisan. The Church cannot be a chaplain for any one party or cheerleader for any specific candidate. We dare not and should not tell our people for whom to vote. This is a solemn decision of informed personal conscience that can only be made after studying all of the important issues before us and quietly reflecting upon the ability, character, and integrity of each candidate apart from the glare of partisan publicity.

Below you will find the beginning of the text of your Bishops' pastoral reflection, *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*. The remaining parts will be published in the weeks ahead. I hope it will help answer the question, Why should you vote? I hope that it will also assist you in making your personal decision concerning for whom you should vote.

FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: A CALL TO POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

(The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

INTRODUCTION

These times and this election will test us as American Catholics. A renewed commitment to faithful citizenship can help heal the wounds of our nation, world, and Church. What we have endured has changed many things, but it has not changed the fundamental mission and message of Catholics in public life. In times of terror and war, of global insecurity and economic uncertainty, of disrespect for human life and human dignity, we need to return to basic moral principles. Politics cannot be merely about ideological conflict, the search for partisan advantage, or political contributions. It should be about fundamental moral choices. How do we protect human life and dignity? How do we fairly share the blessings and burdens of the challenges we face? What kind of nation do we want to be? What kind of world do we want to shape?

Politics in this election year and beyond should be about an old idea with new power—the common good. The central 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? How can we protect and promote human life and dignity? How can we pursue greater justice and peace?”

In the face of all these challenges, we offer once again a

simple image—a table. Who has a place at the table of life? Where is the place at the table for a million of our nation's children who are destroyed every year before they are born? How can we secure a place at the table for the hungry and those who lack health care in our own land and around the world? Where is the place at the table for those in our world who lack the freedom to practice their faith or stand up for what they believe? How do we ensure that families in our inner cities and rural communities, in *barrios* in Latin America and villages in Africa and Asia have a place at the table—enough to eat, decent work and wages, education for their children, adequate health care and housing, and most of all, hope for the future?

We remember especially the people who are now missing at the table of life—those lost in the terror of September 11, in the service of our nation, and in the bloody conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa.

A table is also a place where important decisions are made in our communities, nation, and world. How can the poorest people on Earth and those who are vulnerable in our land, including immigrants and those who suffer discrimination, have a real place at the tables where policies and priorities are set?

For Catholics, a special table—the altar of sacrifice, where we celebrate the Eucharist—is where we find the direction and strength to take what we believe into the public square, using our voices and votes to defend life, advance justice, pursue peace, and find a place at the table for all God's children.

TASKS AND QUESTIONS FOR BELIEVERS

Our nation has been blessed with freedom, democracy, abundant resources, and generous and religious people. However, our prosperity does not reach far enough. Our culture sometimes does not lift us up but brings us down in moral terms. Our world is wounded by terror, torn apart by conflict, and haunted by hunger.

As we approach the elections of 2004, we renew our call for a new kind of politics—focused on moral principles not on the latest polls, on the needs of the poor and vulnerable not the contributions of the rich and powerful, and on the pursuit of the common good not the demands of special interests.

Faithful citizenship calls Catholics to see civic and political responsibilities through the eyes of faith and to bring our moral convictions to public life. People of good will and sound faith can disagree about specific applications of Catholic principles. However, Catholics in public life have a particular responsibility to bring together consistently their faith, moral principles, and public responsibilities.

At this time, 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 not a time for retreat or discouragement. We need more, not less engagement in political life. We urge Catholics to become more involved by running for office; by working within political parties; by contributing money or time to campaigns; and by joining diocesan legislative networks, community organizations, and other efforts to apply Catholic principles in the public square.

The Catholic community is a diverse community of faith, not an interest group. Our Church does not offer contributions or endorsements. Instead, we raise a series of questions, seeking to help lift up the moral and human dimensions of the choices facing voters and candidates:

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 will our nation resist what Pope John Paul II calls a “culture of death”? How can we keep our nation from turning 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, as well as the fact that the younger you are, the more likely you are to be poor here in the richest nation on Earth?
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 roles and responsibilities, offering them real choices and financial resources to obtain quality education and decent housing?
5. How will we address the growing number of families and individuals 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 other forms of 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, care for creation, and overcome injustice?
9. When should our nation use, or avoid the use of, mil-



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itary 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?

We hope these questions and the 2004 campaigns can lead to less cynicism and more participation, less partisanship, and more civil dialogue on fundamental issues.

A CALL TO FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP

One of our greatest blessings in the United States is our right and responsibility to participate in civic life. Everyone can and should participate. Even those who cannot vote have the right to have their voices heard on issues that affect their communities.

The Constitution protects the right of individuals and of religious bodies to speak out without governmental interference, favoritism, or discrimination. Major public issues have moral dimensions. Religious values have significant public consequences. Our nation is enriched and our tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups contribute their values to public debates.

As bishops, we have a responsibility as Americans and as religious teachers to speak out on the moral dimensions of public life. The Catholic community enters public life not to impose sectarian doctrine but to act on our moral convictions, to share our experience in serving the poor and vulnerable, and to participate in the dialogue over our nation's future.

A Catholic moral framework does not easily fit the ideologies of “right” or “left,” nor the platforms of any party. Our values are often not “politically correct.” Believers are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test public life by the values of Scripture and the principles of Catholic social teaching. Our responsibility is to measure all candidates, policies, parties, and platforms by how they protect or undermine the life, dignity, and rights of the human person whether they protect the poor and vulnerable and advance the common good.

Jesus called us to “love one another.” Our Lord's example and words demand care for the “least of these” from each of us. Yet they also require action on a broader scale. Faithful citizenship is about more than elections. It requires ongoing participation in the continuing political and legislative process.

A recent Vatican statement on Catholic participation in political life highlights the need for involvement:

Today's democratic societies . . . call for new and fuller forms of participation in public life by Christian and non-Christian citizens alike. Indeed, all can contribute, by voting in elections for lawmakers and government officials, and in other ways as well, to the development of political solutions and legislative choices which, in their opinion, will benefit the common good. In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation. All believers are called to faithful citizenship, to become informed, active, and responsible participants in the political process. As we have said, “We encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate [more fully] in building the culture of life. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts. Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power.” Even those who are not citizens are called to participate in the debates which shape our common life.

Catholic Assets in the Public Square

Our community of faith brings three major assets to these challenges.

A Consistent Moral Framework

The *Word of God and the teachings of the Church* give us a particular way of viewing the world. Scripture calls us to “choose life,” to serve “the least of these,” to “hunger and thirst” for justice and to be “peacemakers.”

Catholic teaching offers consistent moral principles to assess issues, political platforms, and campaigns for their impact on human life and dignity. As Catholics, we are not free to abandon unborn children because they are seen as unwanted or inconvenient; to turn our backs on immigrants because they lack the proper documents; to create and then destroy human lives in a quest for medical advances or profit; to turn away from poor women and children because they lack economic or political power; or to ignore sick people because they have no insurance. Nor can we neglect international responsibilities in the aftermath of war because resources are scarce. Catholic teaching requires us to speak up for the voiceless and to act in accord with universal moral values.

Everyday Experience

Our community also brings to public life *broad experience in serving those in need*. Every day, the Catholic community educates the young, cares for the sick, shelters the homeless, feeds the hungry, assists needy families, welcomes refugees, and serves the elderly. In defense of life, we reach out to children and to the sick, elderly, and disabled who need help. We support women in difficult pregnancies, and we assist those wounded by the trauma of abortion and domestic violence. On many issues, we speak for those who have no voice. These are not abstract issues for us; they have names and faces. We have practical expertise and daily experience to contribute to the public debate.

A Community of People

The *Catholic community* is large and diverse. We are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. We are members of every race, come from every ethnic background, and live in urban, rural, and suburban communities in all fifty states. We are CEOs and migrant farm workers, senators and persons on public assistance, business owners and union members. But all Catholics are called to a common commitment to protect human life and stand with those who are poor and vulnerable. We are all called to provide a moral haven for our democracy, to be the salt of the earth.

To obtain copies of *Faithful Citizenship*, call 1-800-235-8722 or go to www.usccb.org.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: “There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his

side. And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.’ Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side

to ours.’ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.’ But Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.’ He said, ‘Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ Then Abraham said, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’” *Luke 16:19-31*

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Twenty-Sixth
Sunday
in
Ordinary Time