



THE ISSUES, THE CANDIDATES AND YOUR VOTE 2006

We have seen that the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason.

*—Pope Benedict XVI
Deus Caritas Est, 2005*

Since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council the Church has taught that the Catholic layperson, as well as clergy and religious, has a civil obligation to participate in the democratic process. In his encyclical letter referenced above, Pope Benedict XVI expresses the notion that the Church herself, while playing an important role, is not solely responsible for the development of a just society. This task must occur within the public realm—in legislatures and statehouses. Thus, if people of good will hunger for a society based upon moral and traditional values, values that respect the dignity of human life with a special preference for the poor and vulnerable, there is no better time to act than the biennial election season.

Catholic responsibility for the development of civil society indeed is no small task. Those seeking the wisdom and guidance of the Church's participation in the democratic arena are encouraged to be, according to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document Faithful Citizenship, "political but not partisan, principled but not ideological, clear but also civil, and engaged but not used." The document also reminds the faithful that Christians are to "choose life," to serve "the least of these," to "hunger and thirst" for justice, and to be peacemakers.

In Michigan, the November 2006 general election may produce a seismic shift in public policy as nearly every office is up for election, including a United States Senate seat, congressional seats, the Governor's office, Secretary of State, Attorney General, state Senate and the House of Representatives. The fall election may also include the largest number of ballot questions the state has witnessed in some 20 years; ballot questions that will prove to have an impact upon education, the environment, economic justice and civil rights.

Certainly, the catalog of political issues for which the Church advocates is substantial, not only in number, but also in terms of how each public policy elevates the moral fiber of the human community. This FOCUS essay is intended to assist the Catholic faithful in developing a voting conscience, based on the principles of Catholic social teaching, that seeks the development of a culture of life while working for the day when justice and peace shall ultimately prevail.

HUMAN LIFE

The Church is called upon to manifest anew to everyone, with clear and stronger conviction, her will to promote human life by every means and to defend it against all attacks, in whatever condition or state of development it is found.¹

The Catholic Church teaches that all human beings are deserving of respect and must be protected from the moment of conception until natural death. This teaching is unambiguous. To support policies allowing for the promotion of God's greatest gift would display proper conscience formation, a clear understanding of Catholic social teaching, and the will to help guide our human community toward a consistent culture of life. In this aspect, a candidate claiming he or she is personally opposed to abortion, yet supports the procedure as public policy, represents an indifference to the protection of human life. Abortion, the purposeful killing of a child before birth, is never morally acceptable.

State sanctioned killing, otherwise known as the death penalty, cannot be justified by the Catholic conscience. Catholic social teaching implores the faithful to protect even those who take the lives of others. Erroneous evidence, forced confessions, the public cost of constant appeal and the likelihood for human error, all represent good public policy reasons why the death penalty must be opposed. Opposition to capital punishment is also tied to the Church's doctrine of mercy, as was the position of John Paul II. This outlook has been consistently upheld by the bishops of Michigan, who declared in their March 1999 Statement on the Death Penalty: "We believe that a principled and consistent rejection of death-dealing as a policy instrument is required to uphold the dignity of human persons and the value of human life."

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Assisted suicide and embryonic stem cell research are two additional life issues that must be consistently rejected by a well-formed Catholic conscience. Assisted suicide is understood as an action or omission which of itself or by intention causes death in order for suffering to be eliminated. Moreover, "the pleas of gravely ill people who sometimes ask for death are not to be understood as implying a true desire for euthanasia; in fact, it is almost always a case of an anguished plea for help and love. What a sick person needs, beside medical care is love, the human and supernatural warmth with which the sick person can and ought to be surrounded by all those close to him or her, parents and children, doctors and nurses."² It is necessary to reaffirm that nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being.

Embryonic stem cell research has ascended to the forefront of challenges to the dignity of human life, and is an issue that evokes strong emotions with the capability of dividing even close family members. While the Catholic Church supports and advocates for the advancement of adult stem cell research, which is consistently producing treatments for many different diseases, embryonic stem cell research, along with the human cloning technique Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer, purposefully destroys innocent human life. In the words of John Paul II: "There are no lives that are not worth living; there is no suffering, no matter how grave, that can justify killing a life; there are no reasons, no matter how noble, that make plausible the creation of human beings, destined to be used and destroyed."³

- **Where does the candidate stand on abortion?**
- **Where does the candidate stand on the death penalty?**
- **Where does the candidate stand on assisted suicide?**
- **Where does the candidate stand on destructive embryonic stem cell research?**

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The freedom of the Church is the fundamental principle in what concerns the relations between the Church and governments and the whole civil order.⁴

Freedom of religion, including conscience, is a primary and inalienable right of the human person, as it is guaranteed in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, as well as in Article 4, Section 4 of the Michigan Constitution. Insofar as it touches the innermost sphere of the spirit, one can even say that freedom of religion upholds the justification, deeply rooted in each individual, of all other liberties. Legislation that protects this freedom, limits government intrusion into religious matters, and allows for reasonable collaboration between public and religious entities must be respected by those running for public office.

As the nation evolves in a pluralistic manner, society has an obligation to find ways to honor and respect each neighbor's concerns, needs and beliefs. The tradition of meeting such needs, through a combination of public and private institutions, is a source of strength and diversity that should be supported rather than weakened. Indeed, our nation has a deep history of respect for the autonomous operation of faith-based agencies. Catholic Charities USA traces its beginnings to 1727 when the Ursuline Sisters arrived in New Orleans to minister to that community. Some 280 years later, Catholic Charities has continued

to carry forth its mission to assist the poor and vulnerable, which was evident most recently following the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina.

The freedom to serve in such a manner was an issue of grave concern to the Ursuline Sisters, who in 1804 expressed concern to President Thomas Jefferson that their services may not be permitted in the new nation. Responding to the Sisters' concern, President Jefferson stated in that same year: "The principles of the Constitution and government of the United States are a sure guarantee to you...that your institution will be permitted to govern itself according to its own voluntary rules without interference from the civil authority. Whatever diversity or shade may appear in the religious opinions of our fellow citizens, the charitable objects of your institution cannot be indifferent to any... Be assured it will meet all the protection which my office can give it."

Freedom of religion and the freedom to serve is an inalienable right of the American people and must be defended wherever necessary. The Catholic Church provides necessary services to the homeless, sick, poor and elderly in an effort to advance the common good.

- **Where does the candidate stand on protecting the rights of religious groups to act in accord with the teaching of their faith?**
- **Where does the candidate stand on the right of individuals and organizations to express their right of conscience in the provision of services?**

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND FISCAL ISSUES

Economic life is not meant solely to multiply goods produced and increase profit or power; it is ordered first of all to the service of persons, of the whole man, and of the entire human community.⁵

A clear indication of the moral strength of a society is the assistance it provides its most needy citizens. Certainly, there is a direct correlation between

moral government and the moral behavior and attitude of its citizens; therefore, a moral budget created by the state should foster broad implications upon the health

and welfare of its citizens. Matters of importance such as economic justice, social responsibility, human dignity and concern for the common good must all be considered when policymakers come to the table.

Of particular concern to the Catholic faithful must be the various state and federal programs that are most responsible for ensuring the health and safety of Michigan's children, poor, elderly, sick, and homeless. This concern is especially relevant when often times legislators of various fiscal beliefs contend that such programs should be drastically cut from government. Therefore, it is critical to advocate support for programs that directly benefit our society's most vulnerable population. For the state to practice the

virtue of solidarity allows our society to learn that "love thy neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

As Michigan continues to rank among the worst in the nation in unemployment and job creation, the state's policy makers have an obligation to ensure that, in these difficult times, those who are most vulnerable do not bear the brunt of the state's economic troubles. While discussions in Lansing may focus on who should pay how much in taxes, or which business tax should be created or eliminated, it is important to give consideration to candidates who will place economic justice policies ahead of personal ambition or party loyalty.

- **Does the candidate support preserving and promoting programs that protect the poor and most vulnerable members of our society?**

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The family based on marriage must be carefully protected and promoted as an essential factor in social existence, stability and peace, in a broad future vision of the society's common interest.⁶

Michigan has a rich history of providing faith-based services as they relate to children and families. Adoption and foster care, for example, enjoy a strong association with the Church in Michigan, which has contributed greatly toward the promotion of the family and indeed the common good. The Catholic Church offers these services across the entire state and has done so in the spirit of compassion, love and integrity. Based on Catholic teaching that every human life has value, any child who is abandoned, abused, scared or homeless will find within a Catholic agency staff members dedicated to that child's protection. This faith-based environment can only thrive, however, as long as the state allows each agency to operate independently of the State of Michigan.

The importance of quality services such as those offered by the Catholic Church cannot be overstated. Currently,

the State of Michigan is struggling to fully staff its departments and programs that operate in the foster care environment. The ratio of caseworkers to foster families, while improving, is at a dangerously low level. As the State is the largest public provider of adoption and foster care services, the Church continues to work on behalf of children and families by operating as the largest private provider of such services. Should the scenario arise where faith-based adoption or foster care agencies were no longer able to operate within their mission statement, the effect upon state services would be disastrous. Thus, the Church works in collaboration with the State to provide services that uphold and defend the dignity and respect that every child and family deserves.

As the State continues its partnership with faith-based social service agencies, it remains critical for the two entities to maintain a defined distance. In this aspect,

and in due consideration of religious liberty, the State has an obligation to continue funding private agencies at appropriate levels rather than incrementally performing the job itself. While children represent a vulnerable

population of our human community, and as policies are enacted that effect their health, safety and welfare, the state must continue funding faith-based social service agencies at necessary levels.

- **Does the candidate support the traditional definition of the family?**
- **Does the candidate favor private agencies providing certain services, such as adoption, that would otherwise be provided by the government?**

EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE

...parents have a right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental...Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.⁷

One fundamental right of human decency and dignity is the right to an education. The Catholic Church has long held that parents are the primary educators of their children and should have a greater role in what, how and where their children are educated. In some cases private and/or religious schools are the best option for children. In others, public charter schools are more effective. For many, the traditional public school system provides the best educational opportunity. For this reason, educational reform must continue to include a greater role for parents and families. Competition created by viable school choice policies will serve to better public schools and force all schools to focus on their most important mission, educating children.

True education reform removes barriers that prevent the state from living up to its moral obligation to ensure all children receive a quality education, and all families have the ability to make the choice they feel provides the best

opportunity for their children. Expanding educational choice then is not an option. It is a tenet of social justice.

Equitable, accessible and ethical health care is an essential safeguard of human life. Health care is a human right, and genuine health care reform, recognizing the dignity of persons and the unique needs of the poor, is a matter of fundamental justice.

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Quality health care is another fundamental right that must be promoted and supported by the cooperative efforts of the public and private sectors for the dignity of the individual and society as a whole. There continues to be a genuine need to reform our health care delivery system. The problems of the uninsured and the underinsured continue to escalate. The Catholic Church has spoken vigorously for reform rooted in values that respect the essential dignity of each person, ensure that human life is protected, and recognize the unique needs of the poor.

- **Where does the candidate stand on the rights of parents to choose the educational setting for their children and the state's obligation to provide the means to exercise that right?**
 - **Where does the candidate stand on extending quality health care benefits as a right to all people?**
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REFLECTION

“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.”⁸

USEFUL WEBSITES

USCCB Faithful Citizenship

<http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/>

USCCB Social Development and World Peace

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/>

USCCB Pro-Life Office

<http://www.usccb.org/prolife/>

Vatican Document Regarding Catholics in Political Life

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html

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 2. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Declaration on Euthanasia* (5 May 1980). II
 3. Pope John Paul II, Message to the president of the Association of Italian Catholic Doctors (9 November 2004).
 4. Second Vatican Council, Document on Religious Freedom: *Dignitatis Humanae*, (7 December 1965). 13
 5. Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 2426.
 6. Pontifical Council for the Family. *Family, Marriage and “De Facto” Unions* (26 July 2000). 9.
 7. Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 2229.
 8. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*. September 2003.
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