

Faithful Citizenship in the 2004 Elections

Prepared by the Peace & Justice Commission with excerpts from the US Bishops Statement



A Call to Faithful Citizenship.

Every four years since 1976, the Administrative Committee of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued a statement to communicate

the Church's teaching that every Catholic is called to an active and faith-filled citizenship. What follows are excerpts from their 2003 Statement, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility." Complete copies of the statement are available online or in paper form in the foyer.

Faithful citizenship calls Catholics to see civic and political responsibilities through the eyes of faith and to bring our moral convictions to public life. The Catholic community is a diverse community of faith, not an interest group. 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. 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.

Elections are a time for debate and decisions about the leaders, policies and values that will guide our nation. Since the last presidential election, our nation has been attacked by terrorists and gone to war twice. We have moved from how to share budget surpluses to how to allocate the burdens of deficits. We face difficult challenges for our nation and world.

Our Church is also working to heal wounds. Our community of faith and especially we, as bishops, are working to face our responsibility and take all necessary steps to overcome the hurt, damage and loss of trust resulting from the evil of clerical sexual abuse. While working to protect children and rebuild trust, we must not abandon the Church's important role in public life and the duty to encourage Catholics to act on our faith in political life.

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? How can we secure a place at the table for the hungry and those who lack health care? 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.

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

At this time, some Catholics may feel politically homeless. 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 Bishops urge all Catholics to register, vote, and become more involved in public life. 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 Bishops also issue challenges to themselves and the larger "Church":

- As an institution, we are called to be **political but not partisan**. The Church cannot be a cheerleader for any one party or candidate. Our cause is the protection of the weak and vulnerable and defense of human life and dignity.
- The Church is called to be **principled but not ideological**. We cannot compromise our basic values or teaching, but we should be open to different ways to advance them.
- We are called to be **clear but also civil**. A Church that advocates justice and charity must practice these virtues in public life. We should be clear about our principles and priorities, without impugning motives or name-calling.
- The Church is called to be **engaged but not used**. We welcome dialogue with political leaders and candidates, seeking to engage and persuade public officials. But we must be sure the events and "photo-ops" are not substitutes for work on policies that reflect our values.

The call to faithful citizenship raises a fundamental question for all of us. What does it mean to be a Catholic living in the United States in the year 2004 and beyond? As *Catholics*, the election and the policy choices that follow it call us to recommit ourselves to carry the values of the Gospel and church teaching into the public square. As *citizens and residents of the United States*, we have the duty to participate now and in the future in the

debates and choices over the values, vision and leaders that will guide our nation.

This dual calling of faith and citizenship is at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in the United States. Faithful citizenship calls us to seek "a place at the table" for all God's children in the elections of 2004 and beyond.

Online Resources

Faithful Citizenship Online Resources:

www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/index.htm

Includes full text of Bishops' statement as well as other resources

NETWORK Lobby: www.networklobby.org

A Catholic social justice lobby founded by women religious. Visit the Legislative Action Center to send e-mails to your representative on a variety of issues.

Oregon Votes 2004: www.oregonvotes.org

Secretary of State website: learn more about registering to vote, voting in Oregon and issues and candidates on the ballot

Project Vote Smart: www.vote-smart.org

Find contact information for your Federal & State elected officials with just your zip code!

Other Resources

Voter Registration Cards are available in the parish foyer under the Peace & Justice Bulletin Board. April 27th is the last day to register to vote for the May 18, 2004 Primary Election. October 12th is the last day to vote for the November 2, 2004 General Election.

Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility.

Copies of the full text of the Bishops' statement are available in the foyer under the Peace & Justice Bulletin Board