

# Guidelines for Advocacy, Lobbying and Political Action

## Words of Wisdom

**O**n his departure from the United States in 1995, Pope John Paul II said:

Democracy needs wisdom, democracy needs virtue. Democracy serves what is true and right when it safeguards the dignity of every human person, when it respects inviolable and inalienable human rights, and when it makes the common good the end criterion regulating all public and social life.<sup>1</sup>

**Amplifying this thought, the U. S. Catholic Bishops wrote in 1998:**

We encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity [more fully] to participate 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.<sup>2</sup>

## Catholic Social Teaching

**T**he principles of Catholic social teaching should be the moral framework from which we address all issues in the political arena. Among those principles are:

- ◆ The life and dignity of the human person,
- ◆ Human rights and responsibilities,
- ◆ The call to family and community,
- ◆ The dignity of work and the rights of workers,
- ◆ The preferential option for those who

- are poor and vulnerable,
- ◆ Solidarity, and
- ◆ Care for God's creation.<sup>3</sup>

## The Church's Vision

The U. S. bishops in their 1999 pastoral letter, *Because God Loves You*, articulate their vision for us, saying:

Because God loves you, you can care for the weak, remove injustices, alleviate poverty, annihilate oppression, and restore righteousness in our world. The love of God in you gives you strength to defend the unborn, support the elderly, and lift the hearts of those without hope...in every person beats a heart yearning to be loved.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that the Church seeks to lift up the moral dimension of public issues, not to tell people how to vote or to evaluate political parties or candidates.

## Guidelines

**W**hile it is increasingly accepted that major public issues have moral dimensions and that religious values have public consequences, there often is confusion and controversy over the participation of religious individuals and groups in public life. Following are some practical guidelines for pastors and parishes on advocacy, lobbying and political action which will clarify what is allowed on an individual basis and an institutional basis. Since these are only guidelines, each diocese, diocesan agency and parish, in consultation with its bishop, remains free to make its own deter-

mination as to what activities are proper for its personnel and committees.

**I.** Individual citizens are free to engage fully in partisan politics. The Church encourages all citizens to vote. In light of that, it urges voters to examine the positions of candidates for public office on the full range of issues, as well as on their personal integrity and performance.

Religious leaders, however, should avoid endorsements or other political activity, contributions, or political activism even when acting in their individual capacity. Although not prohibited, it may be difficult to separate their personal activity from their role as a Church leader.

**II.** Church organizations may take positions on public policies and legislative proposals because such advocacy is not partisan activity. Unlike individuals, churches and other institutions, which qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code, *may in no way* engage in partisan politics such as supporting or opposing individual candidates for office. That means that no diocesan or parish entity or organization or other 501(c)(3) exempt church organization should engage in voter education communications which directly or indirectly suggest that a particular candidate or party should be supported or opposed. No candidate should be invited to a parish function during an election campaign, unless all candidates for that office are invited.

**III.** Parishes and other church organizations *should*, in some cases, engage in

issue-oriented activities and lobbying. The local diocesan attorney should be consulted for local guidelines but limitations on the extent of such lobbying are not generally a problem for parishes or active institutions, since lobbying would be an insubstantial part of their total work.

The following are examples of such acceptable activity:

- ◆ Educational efforts, which share the Church's teaching on human life, human rights, social justice, and peace and highlight the moral and ethical dimensions of public-policy issues and/or legislation.
- ◆ Encouragement of letter writing campaigns and other contacts with state or federal legislators designed to educate them and to develop support for legislation.
- ◆ Distribution of flyers containing a statement about an issue or issues before the Congress, the California Legislature or local government, containing the names and addresses of elected representatives.
- ◆ Preaching, with emphasis on deepening the understanding of the sanctity of human life, and distribution of pertinent information concerning particular issues, especially those affecting human life.

The following types of activities are encouraged but must be developed with caution:

- ◆ Urging parishioners to register and vote and to participate actively in church-sponsored voter registration efforts,

“get-out-the-vote” drives, and other nonpartisan voter-education initiatives.

- ◆ Sponsoring multi-issue candidate forums to which all candidates for a particular office are invited.
- ◆ Conducting single-issue forums which are nonpartisan and which present both sides of the issue objectively

**IV.** Surveys or questionnaires of political candidates may be distributed at churches, or reported in parish bulletins only if the following criteria are met:

- ◆ The California Catholic Conference or the diocesan attorney have been consulted as to the validity and objectivity of surveys or questionnaires;
- ◆ The surveys/questionnaires involve a variety of issues of importance to the voters.
- ◆ The surveys/questionnaires are objectively conducted and the results are accurately reported *verbatim* and free of bias;
- ◆ Reports of surveys/questionnaires contain only results, not analysis or commentary on the issues.
- ◆ Reports of the surveys/questionnaires must contain a disclaimer that the parish does not endorse or oppose candidates and that the surveys are distributed to inform and educate voters.

**V.** No diocesan or parish entity or organization may endorse or oppose or evaluate any political party or candidate for public office. No such organization can contribute in any way to a political candidate, party, campaign or political action

committee. Church property, or personnel should not be used in campaign ads.

The following are examples of activities which are not allowed:

- ◆ Urging readers or listeners to vote for or against a particular candidate or party;
- ◆ Labeling a candidate or party as “pro school aid” or “anti-life”; such a practice removes objectivity by not allowing readers to evaluate a candidate’s position themselves;
- ◆ Using plus (+) or minus (-) signs to evaluate the candidate or party;
- ◆ Rating candidates or parties on a scale of “1 to 10” for example, or otherwise saying “X is good,” “Y is better”;
- ◆ The use of marked sample ballots.

**VI.** Although churches have no jurisdiction over public sidewalks and other public property in their vicinities, church parking is private property and the general public has no right to distribute partisan materials thereon. This may be difficult to control, but parish leaders should nevertheless deny permission for any such activity.

**VII.** The California Catholic Conference staff reviews all of the statewide ballot initiatives and referenda. The bishops, after appropriate consultation, may choose, either individually or as a conference, to support, oppose or take no position on each measure.

When neither the CCC nor the diocese has taken a public position on a specific measure, a parish or Catholic organization should probably not do so without previous

consultation with the bishop. Granting the use of Church facilities to supporting or opposing groups should rarely be allowed.

Because the conducting of a signature drive for an initiative would be considered a lobbying activity and must be counted in determining whether the parish/diocese has engaged in more than insubstantial lobbying during a taxable year, the gathering of signatures on Church property or at Church activities is not encouraged or appropriate unless specifically authorized by the local bishop.

Do not hesitate to contact the California Catholic Conference, your diocesan ministry contacts or your diocesan attorney for further assistance. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has a more detailed set of guidelines on its website: [www.usccb.org/ogc](http://www.usccb.org/ogc).

<sup>1</sup>Departure Statement, October 8, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* (Washington, D.C., USCC, 1998), no. 34.

<sup>3</sup>*Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium* (USCC; Washington, DC), Nov. 18, 1999.

<sup>4</sup>*Because God Loves You, A Message from the U.S. Catholic Bishops* (USCC, Washington, DC., 1999).

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