

PERSPECTIVE Public Policy

from a Catholic Viewpoint

Political Responsibility During an Election Year

The campaign season is in full-swing in North Dakota. Candidates are going from door to door. Citizens are voicing their opinions on issues and expressing their support or opposition for particular candidates or political parties. Still others remain silent, either because of apathy or frustration with the political process.

How should Catholics respond to the political process? What does the Catholic Church have to offer to the public square? How should a Catholic vote? These are questions often asked during an election year. To the disappointment of some, there are no straightforward answers to some of these questions. However, to the disappointment of others, Catholic tradition does provide principles that can guide us in our political life.

Perhaps the most important principle is also the hardest to apply: **A person's political life should never be separated from the person's life as a Christian.** The so-called separation of church and state does not apply to our personal lives. If we are to love and serve God with *all* our heart, with *all* our soul, with *all* our mind, and with *all* our strength, we cannot set aside the "political" part of our lives from our lives as Christians and, especially, our calling to love our neighbor.

Applying our Christian faith to the political process is not always easy. Most political discussion is dominated by views, agendas, and words that have little meaning from a Christian perspective. Even worse, the political world is shaped by an artificial "left/right" and "liberal/conservative" spectrum. In Catholic teaching, everyone has an obligation to participate in the political process. When fulfilling this obligation, however, we must resist the temptation to become so partisan that we lose sight of the principles that make us Christians. We must ground our actions in the teachings of the Church and be motivated by a consistent love for others.

The United States Catholic Conference has identified the following six principles rooted in Catholic teaching that can guide us as we confront issues this election year:

- 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 Option for the Poor
- Solidarity

Issues for Campaign Season in North Dakota

Last November, the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference issued a "political responsibility" document outlining the Church's views on political behavior and important political issues. Following that example, the North Dakota Catholic Conference has identified several issues that it feels are important this year.

The list is not meant to cover every issue. The issues chosen represent a broad range of topics that we see as important at this time. Not every issue has the same moral significance. All, however, have some moral dimension. Supporting references to Church documents are provided. However, we believe that each of these positions is universally acceptable, no matter what faith tradition from which a person comes.

Abortion

What is the candidate's position on legislation that would protect the right to life of unborn children from conception? What is the candidate's position on the use of taxpayer funds for abortion?

Abortion is the fundamental human rights issue of our day. (*Evangelium Vitae*, No. 58; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2273.) The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports legislation that would protect the right to life of unborn children from conception, no matter what the reason for the abortion or destruction of human life. The North Dakota Catholic Conference also opposes the use of taxpayer funds for abortion.

Agricultural Policy

What is the candidate's position on agricultural policies that encourage a broad-based system of small to moderate-sized family owned and operated farms over policies that favor the concentration of agricultural ownership?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports such agricultural policies. This position stems from a long history of Catholic teaching emphasizing the importance of ownership and voice in the subject of one's labor. (See, e.g., *Rerum Novarum*, Nos. 15-16; *Laborem exercens*, Nos. 53, 102; *Economic*

Justice For All, No. 233.) It also stems from the principle that economic policies should exist to

preserve families and a wide distribution of ownership.

Capital Punishment

What is the candidate's position on efforts to permit the use of the death penalty in North Dakota?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference opposes use of the death penalty in North Dakota. In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II said that "punishment. . . ought not to go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: In other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today, however, . . . such cases are rare if not practically nonexistent." (No. 56; see also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 2266-2267.)

As citizens, we need to face our own public responsibilities; to register and vote; to understand issues and assess candidates' positions and qualifications; and to join with others in advocating for the common good. Together, we can make this election an opportunity for informed debate and clear choices about the future.

U.S. Catholic Bishops

Economic Help For Families

What is the candidate's position on the state

government providing financial resources to low income persons through a welfare system that rewards work and supports families without denying assistance to children based on the age or welfare dependence of their mother?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports a welfare system that rewards work and supports families without denying assistance to children based on the age or welfare dependence of their mother. Such a system provides a “safety net” necessary in society that supports children and families. (See *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 26; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 1908, 2211.)

Education

What is the candidate’s position on legislation to provide financial assistance to all parents enabling them to exercise their right to choose the elementary and/or secondary schools, including religiously oriented schools, which are best suited for their children (e.g., tax credits, grants, parental vouchers, scholarships, etc.)?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports such legislation. Education is a basic human right. (*Pacem in terris*, No. 13; *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 26; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1908.) Moreover, parents have a fundamental right to choose a school for their children and public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise. (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 6; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2229.)

Environment

What is the candidate’s position on policies that seek to arrest, reverse, and prevent environmental pollution and to promote sustainable development for all, recognizing regulation, investment and sacrifice are necessary to promote such policies?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports such policies. In the encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, Pope

John Paul II said: “It is the task of the State to provide for the defense and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces.” (No. 40; see also, *Evangelium Vitae*, No. 10; and Pope John Paul II’s 1990 World Day of Peace Address: *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*.)

Euthanasia

What is the candidate’s position on legislation that would allow a physician to administer or prescribe a lethal injection or drug overdose to assist in the suicide of any person, including patients diagnosed as terminally ill?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference opposes any such legislation as contrary to the respect and dignity of human life. (*Evangelium Vitae*, No. 65; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 2276-2279.)

Gambling

What is the candidate’s position on efforts to expand legalized gambling in North Dakota?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference opposes efforts to expand legalized gambling in North Dakota. Although the gambling itself may not be morally objectionable, the social effects of widespread availability of gambling can be detrimental to the common good.

Health Care

What is the candidate’s position on the state government providing resources to low income persons by preserving the guarantee of health care for poor families and children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports initiatives that provide health care to all persons, including poor families and children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. According to the *Catechism*, basic health care is a human right that society has an obligation to provide when necessary. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 2211, 2288.)

Maternal Support

What is the candidate's position on legislation that provides resources to mothers that choose life for their unborn children, such as health care coverage for poor pregnant women and a guarantee of health insurance coverage for those women who can afford it?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports such legislation. In his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II calls upon civil leaders to enact social policies that give women the resources to choose life for their unborn children. (Nos. 59, 90.) Health care coverage for poor pregnant women is an example of such a policy. In addition, women who can afford health insurance should be guaranteed it will not be denied to them because they are pregnant.

Rights of Conscience for Health Care Providers

What is the candidate's position on legislation that would protect individual health care providers, health care facilities, and payers of health care from participating in a health care service that is contrary to the conscience of the health care provider, health care facility, and payer of health care?

The North Dakota Catholic Conference supports efforts to protect all persons and entities from participating in a health care service that is contrary to their conscience. Present law provides such protection only under limited conditions and does not address concerns raised by new technology and new forms of health care delivery. Under no circumstances should someone be forced to participate in a procedure that

North Dakota Catholic Conference Committee Goals for 1996-97

Education Committee

- Coordinate parents throughout the State of North Dakota to speak with a united voice on matters concerning the welfare of their children's education.
- Develop policy positions on issues that affect the education of children in ND and assist the North Dakota Catholic Conference in disseminating

violates his or her religious beliefs. (See *Dignitatis humanae*, No. 2; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2106.)

Catholic Conference Hires Health Care Advocate

The health care mission of the Catholic Church is important to the North Dakota Catholic Conference and North Dakotans. North Dakota has fifteen Catholic hospitals and 13 Catholic long-term care centers. The number of North Dakotans that receive health care in Catholic sponsored facilities is above the national average. To help further the health care mission of the Catholic Church, the North Dakota Catholic Conference has hired Sister Bernadette Bodine as a Health Care Advocate.

Sister Bernadette is a member of the Benedictine community at Sacred Heart Monastery in Richardton. As the former prioress at Sacred Heart Monastery, she has sat on the boards of several Catholic health care facilities.

**Join the North Dakota Catholic Conference
Legislative Action Network and Help Make a
Difference!**

information on education bills at the federal and state levels.

- Collaborate with the State Association of Non-Public Schools on public policy issues of concern to both groups.
- Educate North Dakotans on the Catholic perspective on educational issues.

- Promote collaboration between dioceses to preserve and strengthen the Catholic identity in our Catholic schools.

Holiness and Human Life Committee

- Pursue opportunities to improve or revamp North Dakota’s informed consent on abortion law (Woman’s Right to Know legislation.)

- Pursue legislation for comprehensive rights of conscience protection for health care workers.

- Examine “family” issues, such as same-sex marriage, reform of divorce laws, and fatherlessness and make recommendations on how such issues should be handled by the North Dakota Catholic Conference in the future.

- Help coordinate the visit of Helen Alvare, the director of planning and information for the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in September of 1997.

- Track developments relating to physician assisted suicide and inform the Catholic and health care

communities on the developments and appropriate responses.

- Educate Catholic community and health care community on the Catholic position on reproductive technologies and the treatment of human embryos.

Social Concerns Committee

- Monitor and respond to the passage and implementation of the Personal Responsibility Act (federal welfare reform law).

- Promote collaboration within the human services delivery system.

- Monitor reorganization of human service delivery system.

- Explore opportunities to educate the Catholic community on the Catholic approach to environmental issues.

Health Care Committee

- Monitor and respond appropriately to changes in Medicare, Medicaid, and legislation that transfers decision making to the state and local levels of government.

- Explore and act upon opportunities to improve the health needs of children in North Dakota.

- Promote health access issues to ensure that all persons receive health care.

- Investigate and analyze the ethical questions raised by new financing mechanisms (i.e., managed care, case management), and in reference to the needs of Catholic health care providers.

- Promote an understanding of Catholic Principles regarding health and health care issues within the Catholic community.

Perspective

Public Policy from a Catholic Viewpoint

Fall Election Issue

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