

Catholic Conscience and Public Policy

A statement by the Catholic Bishops of Pennsylvania

Introduction

Many of the deeply seated values which we Americans share are rooted in our Catholic faith. These values should be reflected in the public discussion and debate that molds the direction of our society. The voice of religion and faith should never be silenced by an increasingly secular culture. Integral to the Constitution of the United States are the inalienable rights and freedoms of each person to speak, to practice one's religion, and to participate in the governance of this country. Unfortunately, in recent times there have been attempts to marginalize religious beliefs and to dismiss any religious values from the public policy debate. This tendency is not reflective of our American heritage. Catholics have a right and a responsibility to participate in the debate on matters affecting the common good, to exercise good citizenship, and to participate in the building of a just society. From the beginning of our country Catholics have exercised responsible citizenship and have been active participants in the political process, as well as have shed their blood to defend this country.

Public policy issues are varied and often complex. Some are relatively simple, such as driving laws or establishing standards for the manufacture of goods. Others relate to human dignity, the protection of basic human rights, and the assurance that freedom of religion will not be eroded. Because laws often have a moral and ethical dimension, the natural moral law and Gospel values foundational to our Catholic faith have a role to play in the fashioning of public policy.

In establishing his Church, Christ gave to the apostles and their successors the responsibility of speaking on behalf of faith and morals and applying that teaching to the circumstances of our day. Thus it is our task as bishops to articulate the values rooted in our Catholic faith as they apply to public policy today.

At times, individuals or organizations argue that Gospel values, and therefore those who articulate them, have no role in the public arena and should not participate in public policy issues. As shepherds of God's people, it is the right and responsibility of the Church's leaders to guide and form consciences of their people by declaring the Church's position on the rights of workers, access to health care, concern for the poor, and the right to life, the rights of the sick and dying, and the right to be free from government mandates which violate religious beliefs.

This question and answer guide is designed to clarify how the Church acting through Christ's ordained leaders, the bishops, the successors of the apostles, has a responsibility in the shaping of public policy.

What is the Church?

The Church is a community of believers established by Christ "through which he communicates truth and grace to all" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 771). Christ established the Church to care for human beings and lead them to heaven. Its doctrine is a reflection of Christ's revelation. Christ's teachings on the commandments of God are true and not subject to human approval, human tampering, or majority vote. Since the Church lives in the midst of society, the Church cannot remain indifferent to public policy issues. The Church must be free to speak in the public arena on the important issues of the day since these issues affect the destiny of immortal souls.

The Catholic Church and its people have played an important and influential role throughout the history of the United States. From the very beginning of our country the Church has been in the forefront building up this great nation by providing quality health care, education, social services, and pastoral care, and by lifting millions of immigrants and their descendants out of poverty into the middle class and beyond.

How does the Church participate in civic life?

The Church participates in civic life primarily through the lives of its members - men, women, and children who live out their faith in the course of their daily work, study, leisure, activities, and family life, and through the exercise of their duties of citizenship. Contemporary secular culture presents a challenge for the believer. This is one of the reasons why the Church seeks to inform the faithful on all issues of public concern. By the public proclamation of Christian doctrine, Church leadership offers a unique and valuable perspective on public policy issues which have social and moral consequences.

Each individual Catholic is both a citizen of our nation and a member of the Church. Thus it is in the conscience of each of us individually that the issues of Church and State overlap. We must thus be prepared to bring to our civic life the moral imperatives of our personal conscience. It was Thomas Jefferson who reminded the nation that there is no distinction between public and private morality. In a letter to James Madison, dated August 28, 1789, he wrote: "I know but one code of morality for all, whether acting singly or collectively."

What is the State's responsibility to the Church and its beliefs?

The State is called to safeguard and guarantee the free exercise of the Church's rights - and that of the other religious bodies - without interference, endorsement or sanction. The Church should enjoy the same rights as any other organization, namely to express its beliefs, to teach its members, and to participate actively in public discussions.

How does the Church understand "religious freedom"?

Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God, and so has the duty to seek the truth. Catholic teaching understands religious freedom as one of the fundamental rights of all human persons. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "The right to religious liberty is neither a moral license to adhere to error, nor a supposed right to error, but rather a natural right of the human person to civil liberty, *i.e.* immunity, within just limits, from external constraint in religious matters by political authorities. This natural right ought to be acknowledged in the juridical order of society in such a way that it constitutes a civil right" (CCC # 2108). An essential dimension of this religious freedom is also the right to free association: to found organized communities of faith which are churches and other institutions. In other words, political authorities have a duty to insure the freedom of every person to profess one's faith, to live it, and to hand it on to one's children. Our nation's founders wanted to protect freedom of religion - not legislate freedom from religion.

How does the Church remain faithful to its mission in a pluralistic society?

The Church has a mandate from Christ to witness to the Gospel. The Church gives this witness by ministering to God's people in many ways including education, health care, and social service. The Church also has the responsibility of educating its members in all Catholic doctrine, including its social teaching, shedding light on the moral dimensions of public policy initiatives,

and calling forth works of charity and justice. Freedom for the Church and its institutions to carry out core teachings on human life, marriage, justice, and the common good must be respected by civil law and public officials. When the Church or other religious groups have the freedom to follow their mission, our society's respect for tolerance, pluralism, and diversity is upheld.

How does the Church exercise "faithful citizenship"?

The Church has a history of active participation in serving all people of the community. Consider, for example, the Church's outreach to the poor and marginalized, health care, housing, and education. The Church continues to clarify social and moral issues based on both natural law - the law written in every person's heart - and divinely revealed truth. Few speak today more clearly, consistently, or eloquently for the fundamental issues of justice: life, human dignity, protection of marriage and family, solidarity, and the common good than the Catholic Church. These very concepts reflect the fundamental values of Catholic social teaching.

In applying Gospel values to issues of public policy, the bishops and the Church's agencies need the freedom to speak out. The position of the Church on public policy is made known by the ordained leaders of the Church and reflected by those groups and individuals who speak with a voice consistent with the Church's teaching. The Church's teaching or public policy position is not authentically reflected in groups or individuals, even when they claim to speak in the name of the Church, that assert their own divergent views. Nor is the position of the Church found in public opinion polls which purport to show what members of the Catholic Church think. Such efforts do not represent the Church's public policy positions which are based on God's revelation, his commandments and the Church's theological and moral tradition.

Christ has determined that the Church's bishops are the authoritative teachers of the Catholic Church. They are the ones who communicate the Church's understanding of the basic moral and social justice principles that must guide the application of Catholic teaching to public policy. Voters, politicians, and media should look to the bishops as the official teachers of the Church in determining and evaluating proposed policies in the light of Catholic teaching. Catholic voters, candidates, and elected officials should not need to hide their faith but should embrace the call to be active, faithful citizens bringing to public life the moral values of their faith.

The bishops have written: "We urge our fellow citizens to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or self-interest. As bishops, we do not wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing or opposing candidates. We hope that voters will examine candidates on the full range of issues and on their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance." (*The Challenge of Faithful Citizenship*)

Does the Church seek to impose its morality? Doesn't that violate the separation of church and state?

The Constitution protects the free exercise of religion, even as it prohibits the establishment of a state-sponsored religion or church. The separation of church and state - so often misunderstood - in no way implies a separation of law from morality nor morality from public life. Some people claim that morality cannot and should not be legislated. This overlooks the important fact that law often makes a moral claim, forbidding some action or requiring another.

How do issues like mandatory insurance coverage for contraception, access to abortion, forced abortion training for medical students, same-sex marriages, etc. violate the fundamental right to religious freedom?

These types of laws and regulations require the Church to sacrifice its integrity - the very core of its beliefs, traditions, and teachings. The imposition of these coercive requirements by the State prohibits in specific areas the ability of the Church to participate in the constitutionally protected free exercise of religion. On a daily basis, the Church embraces its call to care for the sick and elderly, educate the young, protect all human life, foster families, welcome immigrants, and provide support for those who are marginalized. To force the Church to compromise its integrity by imposing regulations that are opposed to its teachings and its very conscience, not only violates the Church's right to be Catholic, but also abrogates our nation's founding principle of religious freedom.

No law should demand that religious institutions compromise their validly held beliefs. It would be outrageous if Mormon shopkeepers were forced to sell liquor, if Hindu chefs were forced to serve steak, if Jews were forbidden to circumcise their male children, or if Quaker pacifists were forced to serve in the military. Any law that made such demands would be justly scorned as a violation of civil rights. Laws that make similar demands of Catholic hospitals, universities, or families are no less repressive. Catholics have the right and the obligation to speak up on these issues.

Our nation will never be totally free until its public policy respects the conscience of all its members.

This statement and many others are also available in booklet or pamphlet form at cost plus postage/shipping. To order, call 717-238-9613 or email name, shipping and billing address, document title, and quantity to info@pacatholic.org or download an order form and price list from www.pacatholic.org to print and fax your order.