



THE ISSUES, THE CANDIDATES AND YOUR VOTE 2002

It is important to keep in mind that when the Church involves herself in social action, she does so as the flowering of her life of faith. We are impelled to this course because the convictions of faith that we profess in word and deed demand that we be actively concerned about justice in our society.

*- John Cardinal Deardon
Action on Behalf of Justice*

Michigan citizens will have the opportunity in 2002 to shape the future of Michigan government and the federal government for years to come. Voter enacted term limits require that 27 of 38 Senate members and 23 of 110 House members will be new faces. In addition, Michigan citizens will elect a new Governor, Attorney General and Secretary of State. On the federal level one United States Senate seat will be decided along with fifteen seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Scores of local government positions will also be decided.

Too many citizens take the right to vote for granted, forgetting that it is a cherished ideal many long for in other countries. Voting turnout in non-presidential years is always lower than in presidential election years. Every opportunity to vote is an opportunity to shape policy and bring about change. As citizens of the United States, we have a moral obligation to exercise our franchise to vote.

Our faith informs us that it is important for every citizen to bring together the guidance of the Gospel and the opportunities of our democracy to help shape a society more respectful of human life and dignity, and more committed to justice and peace. Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of the Catholic faith. This faith calls people to work for justice, serve those in need, pursue peace and work toward the full realization of the dignity and rights of people around the world. Catholic social teaching should serve as an instrument to inform the faithful on issues of public policy.

To assist Catholic voters in this moral obligation, the Michigan Catholic Conference provides various election year materials for parish use. This issue of *FOCUS* provides a framework for important moral questions and matters of justice using the elements of Catholic social teaching.

LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Abortion and the Death Penalty

Human life is a gift from God, one that we are all called to protect, nurture and sustain. The right to life, the most basic of all human rights, must be protected by law.

The Church rejects the 1973 United States Supreme Court abortion decision that denied legal protection to unborn children. Further, the Church rejects the use of partial birth abortions as barbaric acts that move our nation one step closer to acceptance of infanticide. Efforts to restrict abortion legislatively and to provide constitutional protection for unborn human life are supported. Laws and policies on stem cell research, cloning and related issues must respect and protect human life from the moment of conception.

The Catholic Church in Michigan has uniformly dealt with the death penalty as but one facet of a consistent ethic of life. In 1973, 1985 and 1999, the Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors issued statements in opposition to the institution of the death penalty stating, “We believe that a principled and consistent rejection of death-dealing as a policy is required to uphold the dignity of human persons and the value of human life.”

The death penalty is constitutionally prohibited in Michigan. In fact, in 1846 Michigan was the first governmental jurisdiction in the English-speaking world to abolish the death penalty. Because all life is sacred, from conception to natural death, the cruel and unnecessary death penalty should always be rejected as poor public policy and abusive toward the ethic of life.

Where does the candidate stand on abortion?

Where does the candidate stand on the death penalty?

CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION

We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society in economics and politics, in law and policy, directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined.

As God established the family as the basic cell of human society, public policies must support the concept of family. Therefore, the needs and concerns of families must be a central priority. Marriage, as God intended it, provides the basic foundation for family life and needs to be protected in the face of the many pressures working to undermine it.

Participation in political and community life is an essential aspect of growth and progress. Public policies that encourage full participation in civic life and encourage financial and other commitments to assist the poor and vulnerable in our society will help create a fullness of community and enhance the common good for all members of society.

Where does the candidate stand on the issue of creating incentives for adoption?

Where does the candidate stand on government mandating benefits be provided to unmarried partners?

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

Education and Health Care

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 learn. 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, education 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 number one 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 child. Expanding educational choice then is not an option. It is a requirement of social justice.

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.

In addition, health care institutions must be allowed a “right of conscience” to enable these entities to refrain from providing, referring or paying for services that violate their moral tradition.

The Catholic Church has a centuries-old tradition of providing essential medical care to the poor, the sick and the most vulnerable. Individual and institutional health care providers can and should maintain their mission and their services without compromising their social and moral teachings.

Religious freedom of conscience has been a fundamental principle of our republic for more than two hundred years.

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 benefits as a right to all people?

Does the candidate support a healthcare environment where religious healthcare providers are allowed to operate in a manner consistent with religious beliefs?

OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

Basic Human Needs

Catholic tradition calls for the community to put first the needs of the poor and vulnerable. Society as a whole, acting through public and private institutions, has the moral responsibility to enhance dignity and protect human rights. In addition to the clear responsibility of private institutions, government has an essential responsibility in this area. This does not mean that government has the primary or exclusive role, but it does have a positive moral responsibility in safeguarding human rights and ensuring that the minimum conditions of human dignity are met for all. Using that gauge, it must be understood that governmental programs must be designed to enhance the principles of work, family and self-reliance.

The Church is opposed to measures which would deny benefits to children who are born to unwed mothers or to mothers already receiving assistance; which treat immigrants differently from others in society; and, which unjustly classify individuals in need of assistance as abusers and exploiters of the system.

Proposals on child-care, transportation and basic job training skills are essential elements in ensuring that individuals have the tools they need for self-sufficiency and should be supported.

Where does the candidate stand on the role of government in providing assistance and services to the poor and vulnerable members of our society?

THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. The Church teaches that work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. Most importantly, work is the ordinary way people meet their material needs and community obligations. In Catholic teaching, the principle of a living wage is integral to our understanding of human work.

Wages must be adequate for workers to provide for themselves and their families in dignity. While the minimum wage is not a living wage, the Church has traditionally supported increasing the minimum wage.

Wages must provide a reasonable standard of living. This is especially true for those who work in the service industry as well as those who perform manual labor. Reasonable compensation for those who find themselves unemployed must also be part of the public policy equation if we are to have a just society that values the inherent dignity of each individual.

Work environments must also be safe and free from discrimination or harassment. A productive workforce must include elements of respect and common values shared by both management and labor.

Where does the candidate stand on the minimum wage law? Living wage?

Where does the candidate stand on the level of unemployment compensation?

SOLIDARITY

We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. Learning to practice the virtues of solidarity means learning that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

The concerns for workers extend beyond the borders of the United States. Increasingly we live and act in a global marketplace. We are members of one human family, not simply rivals in a global economy. Globalization is here to stay. The question is whether globalization will lift people up or push them down; whether it will drive people apart or bring them together, whether it will increase gaps between rich and poor, or build new economic bridges between the peoples of the world. Because of the United States' economic power and unique role in this process, Catholics in the U.S. have a particular responsibility to reflect and act on these matters.

Where the global economy leaves individuals behind, it is the moral function of government to protect human rights and secure basic rights of all members of the human family. Government must assume responsibility for guaranteeing that the minimum conditions for social activity, including both human rights and justice, are met. The Church's teaching on international justice and peace is not just a mandate for a few large agencies, but a challenge for every Catholic and every individual who seeks to lead our nation and state.

Does the candidate support a governmental role in global relief services?

How does the candidate address issues of globalization and solidarity with those who are left behind?

Where does the candidate stand on protection of human rights across the world?

CARE OF GOD'S CREATION

*We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation.
This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.*

The capacity for moral decision making is central to what it means to be human. Stewardship requires a careful protection of the environment and calls us to use our intelligence to discover the earth's productive potential. Energy policy is an important issue. The Church's teaching on the preferential option for the poor affirms the need for public policy to share the risks and rewards fairly among all people including customers and shareholders of energy companies. Protection of the poor should be a centerpiece of any energy policy.

Another environmental concern is the safety of food, water and air. Since food is not just a commodity, but is essential for human life, how it is produced and made available is of major concern to both urban and rural dwellers. An ethical concern for nature must serve as a guiding principle in questions related to food, agriculture and land development.

We have an obligation to protect and nurture the environment for future generations. The proper management and preservation of our natural resources is a fundamental tenet of environmental justice. Caring for God's creation must incorporate conservation and sustainability for our children's children.

Where does the candidate stand on energy policy and its effects on the poor?

How does the candidate address proper stewardship of God's creation?

The basic premise of a liberal democracy is that governments are instituted to serve people. Therefore, individuals as voters have a right and a duty to seek out the opinion of candidates on these important questions which bear upon the moral and physical well being of all the people in Michigan.

The public policy questions facing the state and nation attest to the need for elected officials who will base their decisions on moral and principled values. The issues discussed in this *FOCUS* are the major moral questions, which Catholics, as voters, and their candidates must collectively decide through the democratic process. There are numerous other issues that can be classified as belonging under one of the seven tenets of Catholic social teaching. Together, these key issues are important in discerning the question of who will best promote policies for the common good. If each citizen is to assume his or her civic and moral responsibility, it is important to investigate the positions of candidates for public office and then VOTE for the candidate of choice.

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