

Political Responsibility: Reflections on an Election Year

A Statement of the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference

February 12, 1976

1. This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of our republic with its remarkable system of representative democracy. It is also a year that will test the workings of this democracy. A national election is a time for decisions regarding the future of our nation and the selection of our representatives and political leaders. As pastors and teachers, we address this Statement on political responsibility to all Americans in hopes that the upcoming elections will provide an opportunity for thoughtful and lively debate on the issues and challenges that face our country as well as decisions on the candidates who seek to lead us.

I. Public Responsibility and the Electoral Process

2. We call this year a test of our democratic institutions because increasing numbers of our fellow citizens regard our political institutions and electoral processes with indifference and even distrust. Two years ago, only thirty-six percent of those eligible voted in the national congressional elections; in contrast, forty-six percent voted in 1962. In 1972, only half of the eligible citizens exercised their right to vote, down from a peak of sixty-three percent in 1960. This trend and the alienation, disenchantment, and indifference it represents must be reversed if our government is to truly reflect the "consent of the governed."

3. Abuses of power and a lack of governmental accountability have contributed to declining public confidence, despite significant efforts to uncover and redress these problems. Equally important, government has sometimes failed to deal effectively with critical issues which affect the daily lives of its citizens. As a result, many persons caught in the web of poverty and injustice have little confidence in the responsiveness of our political institutions. This discouragement and feeling of powerlessness are not limited to the poor who feel these most intensely, but affect many social groups, most alarmingly the young and the elderly. This leads to a loss of human resources, talent, and idealism which could be harnessed in the work of social and national progress.(1)

4. However, we believe that the abandonment of political participation is neither an effective nor a responsible approach to the solution of these problems. We need a committed, informed, and involved citizenry to revitalize our political life, to require accountability from our political leaders and governmental institutions, and to achieve the common good. We echo the words of Pope Paul VI who declared: "The Christian has the duty to take part in the organization and life of political society."(2) Accordingly, we would urge all citizens to register to vote, to become informed on the relevant issues, to become involved in the party or campaign of their choice, to vote freely according to their conscience, in a word, to participate fully in this critical arena of politics where national decisions are made.

5. Certain methods used in political campaigns sometimes have intensified this disaffection. We call on those seeking public office to concentrate on demonstrating their personal integrity, their specific view on issues, and their experience in public service. We urge a positive presentation of their programs and leadership abilities. In this way, they can contribute to a campaign based on vital issues, personal competence, and real choices which will help to restore confidence in our electoral process.

II. The Church and the Political Order

6. It is appropriate in this context to offer our own reflections on the role of the Church in the political order. Christians believe that Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor should extend beyond individual relationships to infuse and transform all human relations from the family to the entire human community. Jesus came to "bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and to set the downtrodden free" (Lk 4:18). He called us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and afflicted, and to comfort the victims of injustice (Mt 25). His example and words require individual acts of charity and concern from each of us. Yet they also require

understanding and action upon the broader dimensions of poverty, hunger, and injustice which necessarily involve the institutions and structures of economy, society, and politics.

7. The Church, the People of God, is itself an expression of this love, and is required by the Gospel and its long tradition to promote justice and defend human rights and human dignity.(3) The 1971 Synod of Bishops declared that action on behalf of justice is a "constitutive dimension" of the Church's ministry and that, "the Church has the right, indeed the duty, to proclaim justice on the social, national, and international level, and to denounce instances of injustice, when the fundamental rights of man and his very salvation demand it."(4) This view of the Church's ministry and mission requires it to relate positively to the political order, since social injustice and the denial of human rights can often be remedied only through governmental action. In today's world, concern for social justice and human development necessarily require persons and organizations to participate in the political process in accordance with their own responsibilities and roles.

8. The Church's responsibility in the area of human rights includes two complementary pastoral actions: the affirmation and promotion of human rights and the denunciation and condemnation of violations of these rights. In addition, it is the Church's role to call attention to the moral and religious dimensions of secular issues, to keep alive the values of the Gospel as a norm for social and political life, and to point out the demands of the Christian faith for a just transformation of society.(5) Such a ministry on the part of every Christian and the Church inevitably involves political consequences and touches upon public affairs.

9. Christian social teaching demands that citizens and public officials alike give serious consideration in all matters to the common good, to the welfare of society as a whole, which must be protected and promoted if individual rights are to be encouraged and upheld.

10. In order to be credible and faithful to the Gospel and to our tradition, the Church's concern for human rights and social justice should be comprehensive and consistent. It must be formulated with competence and an awareness of the complexity of issues. It should also be developed in dialogue with other concerned persons and respectful of the rights of all.(6)

11. The Church's role in the political order includes the following:

(a) education regarding the teachings of the Church and the responsibilities of the faithful;

(b) analysis of issues for their social and moral dimensions;

(c) measuring public policy against Gospel values;

(d) participating with other concerned parties in debate over public policy;

(e) speaking out with courage, skill, and concern on public issues involving human rights, social justice, and the life of the Church in society.

12. Unfortunately, our efforts in this area are sometimes misunderstood. The Church's participation in public affairs is not a threat to the political process or to genuine pluralism, but an affirmation of their importance. The Church recognizes the legitimate autonomy of government and the right of all, including the Church itself, to be heard in the formulation of public policy. As Vatican II declared:

By preaching the truth of the Gospel and shedding light on all areas of human activity through her teaching and the example of the faithful, she [the Church] shows respect for the political freedom and responsibility of citizens and fosters these values. She also has the right to pass moral judgments, even on matters touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary.(7)

13. A proper understanding of the role of the Church will not confuse its mission with that of government, but rather see its ministry as advocating the critical values of human rights and social justice.

14. It is the role of Christian communities to analyze the situation in their own country, to reflect upon the meaning of the Gospel, and to draw norms of judgment and plans of action from the teaching of the Church and their own experience.(8) In carrying out this pastoral activity in the social arena, we are confronted with complexity. As the 1971 Synod of Bishops pointed out: "It does not belong to the Church, insofar as she is a religious and hierarchical community, to offer concrete solutions in the social, economic, and political spheres for justice in the world"(9) (emphasis added). At the same time, it is essential to recall the words of Pope John XXIII:

. . . it must not be forgotten that the Church has the right and duty not only to safeguard the principles of ethics and religion, but also to intervene authoritatively with her children in the temporal sphere when there is a question of judging the application of these principles to concrete cases.(10)

15. The application of Gospel values to real situations is an essential work of the Christian community. Christians believe the Gospel is the measure of human realities. However, specific political proposals do not in themselves constitute the Gospel. Christians and Christian organizations must certainly participate in public debate over alternative policies and legislative proposals, yet it is critical that the nature of their participation not be misunderstood.

16. We specifically do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc; nor do we wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing candidates. We urge citizens to avoid choosing candidates simply on the personal basis of self-interest. Rather, we hope that voters will examine the positions of candidates on the full range of issues as well as the person's integrity, philosophy, and performance. We seek to promote a greater understanding of the important link between faith and politics and to express our belief that our nation is enriched when its citizens and social groups approach public affairs from positions grounded in moral conviction and religious belief. Our view is expressed very well by Pope Paul VI when he said:

While recognizing the autonomy of the reality of politics, Christians who are invited to take up political activity should try to make their choices consistent with the Gospel and, in the framework of a legitimate plurality, to give both personal and collective witness to the seriousness of their faith by effective and disinterested service of men. (11)

17. The Church's responsibility in this area falls on all its members. As citizens we are all called to become informed, active, and responsible participants in the political process. The hierarchy has a responsibility as teachers and pastors to educate the faithful, support efforts to gain greater peace and justice, and provide guidance and even leadership on occasion where human rights are in jeopardy. The laity has major responsibility for the renewal of the temporal order. Drawing on their own experience and exercising their distinctive roles within the Christian community, bishops, clergy, religious, and laity should join together in common witness and effective action to bring about Pope John's vision of a well ordered society based on truth, justice, charity, and freedom.(12)

18. As religious leaders and pastors, our intention is to reflect our concern that politics--the forum for the achievement of the common good--receive its rightful importance and attention. For, as Pope Paul VI said, "politics are a demanding manner--but not the only one--of living the Christian commitment to the service of others."(13)

III. Issues

19. Without reference to political candidates, parties, or platforms, we wish to offer a listing of some issues which we believe are central to the national debate this year. These brief summaries are not intended to indicate in any depth the details of our positions in these matters. We wish to refer the reader to fuller discussions of our point of view in the documents listed in the summary which appears below. We wish to point out that these issues are not the concerns of Catholics alone; in every case we have joined with others to advocate these concerns. They represent a broad range of topics on which the bishops of the United States have already expressed themselves and are recalled here in alphabetical order to emphasize their relevance in a period of national debate and decision.

A. Abortion

20. The right to life is a basic human right which should have the protection of law. Abortion is the deliberate destruction of an unborn human being and therefore violates this right. We reject the 1973 Supreme Court decisions on abortion which refuse appropriate legal protection to the unborn child. We support the passage of a constitutional amendment to restore the basic constitutional protection of the right to life for the unborn child (Documentation on the Right to Life and Abortion, 1974; [Pastoral Plan on Pro-life Activities](#), 1975).

B. The Economy

21. Our national economic life must reflect broad values of social justice and human rights. Current levels of unemployment are unacceptable and their tremendous human costs are intolerable. We support an effective national commitment to genuine full employment. Our strong support of this human right to meaningful employment is based not only on the income it provides, but also on the sense of worth and creativity a useful job provides for the individual. We also call for a decent income policy for those who cannot work and adequate assistance to those in need. Efforts to eliminate or curtail needed services and help in these difficult economic times must be strongly opposed (The Economy: Human Dimensions, 1975).

C. Education

22. All persons of whatever race, condition, or age, by virtue of their dignity as human beings, have an inalienable right to education.

23. We advocate:

(1) Sufficient public and private funding to make an adequate education available for all citizens and residents of the United States of America and to provide assistance for education in our nation's program of foreign aid.

(2) Governmental and voluntary action to reduce inequalities of educational opportunity by improving the opportunities available to economically disadvantaged persons.

(3) Orderly compliance with legal requirements for racially integrated schools.

(4) Voluntary efforts to increase racial and ethnic integration in public and nonpublic schools.

(5) Equitable tax support for the education of pupils in public and nonpublic schools to implement parental freedom in the education of their children (To Teach as Jesus Did, Nov. 1972).

D. Food Policy

24. The "right to eat" is directly linked with the right to life. This right to eat is denied to countless numbers of people in the world. We support a national policy in which:

(a) U.S. world food aid seriously combats hunger and malnutrition on a global basis, separates food aid from other considerations, gives priority to the poorest nations, and joins in a global grain reserve.

(b) U.S. domestic food programs meet the needs of hungry and malnourished people here in America, provide strong support for food stamps to assist the needy, the unemployed, the elderly, and the working poor, and strive to improve and to extend child nutrition programs.

(c) U.S. agricultural policy promotes full production and an adequate and just return for farmers (Food Policy and The Church: Specific Proposals, 1975).

E. Housing

25. Decent housing is a basic human right. A greater commitment of will and resources is required to meet our national housing goal of a decent home for every American family. Housing policy must better meet the needs of low- and middle-income families, the elderly, rural areas, and minorities. It should also promote reinvestment in central cities and equal housing opportunity. Preservation of existing housing stock and a renewed concern for neighborhoods are required (The Right to a Decent Home, 1975).

F. Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy

26. Human dignity requires the defense and promotion of human rights. Many regimes, including communist countries and some U.S. allies, violate or deny their citizens' human and civil rights, as well as religious liberty. Internationally, the pervasive presence of American power creates a responsibility to use that power in the service of human rights. In the face of regimes which use torture or detain political prisoners without legal recourse, we support a policy which gives greater weight to the protection of human rights in the conduct of U.S. affairs (Resolution on the 25th Anniversary of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1973).

G. Mass Media

27. We are concerned that the communications media be truly responsive to the public interest. We strongly oppose government control over television programming policy, but we deplore unilateral decision making by networks. We urge that broadcasters, government, private business, and representatives of the viewing public seek effective ways to ensure accountability in the formulation and implementation of broadcast policy. We recommend exploring ways to reduce the commercial orientation of the broadcasting industry to better serve the public (Statement on the Family Viewing Policy, 1975).

H. Military Expenditures

28. The arms race continues to threaten humanity with universal destruction. It is especially destructive because it violates the rights of the world's poor who are thereby deprived of essential needs, and it creates the illusion of protecting human life and fostering peace. We support a policy of arms limitation as a necessary step to general disarmament which is a prerequisite to international peace and justice (U.S. Bishops on the Arms Race, 1971 Synod).

29. This is not an exclusive listing of issues of concern to us. We are also concerned about issues involving the civil and political rights of racial and ethnic groups, women, the elderly, and working families. We support measures to provide health care for all of our citizens and the reform of our criminal justice system. We are concerned about protection of the land and the environment as well as the monumental question of peace in the world.

IV. Conclusion

30. In summary, we believe the Church has a proper role and responsibility in public affairs flowing from its Gospel mandate and its concern for the human person and his or her rights. We hope these reflections will contribute to a renewed sense of political vitality in our land, both in terms of citizen participation in the electoral process and the integrity and accountability of those who hold and seek public office.

31. We pray that Christians will follow the call of Jesus to provide the "leaven" for society (Mt 13:34; Lk 13:20), and heed the appeal of the Second Vatican Council:

To enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good. . . to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society.(14)

(1) Joint Economic Committee Hearings, October 20, 1975; *New York Times*, February 1, 1976; *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 1976.

(2) *A Call to Action*, Pope Paul VI, 24, 1971.

(3) *Human Rights and Reconciliation*, Synod of Bishops, 1974.

(4) *Justice In The World*, Synod of Bishops, 1971.

(5) *Justice In The World*, *ibid.*

(6) *A Call To Action*, *op. cit.*, 4, 50. *The Church In The Modern World*, Second Vatican Council, 43, 1965.

(7) *The Church In The Modern World*, *op. cit.*, 76.

(8) *A Call To Action*, *op. cit.*

(9) *Justice In The World*, *op. cit.*

(10) *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII, 160, 1963.

(11) *A Call To Action*, *op. cit.*, 46.

(12) *Pacem In Terris*, Pope John XXIII, 35, 1963.

(13) *A Call To Action*, *op. cit.*

(14) *The Church In The Modern World*, *op. cit.*, 43.