



Calling Catholics to Political Responsibility

BY FRED KAMMER, S.J.

Every four years since 1976, in preparation for U.S. elections, the U.S. bishops have issued a statement on Catholic political responsibility. Since 2007, this document has been entitled *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*. In the first part, the bishops discuss their right to speak out politically:

Some question whether it is appropriate for the Church to play a role in political life. However, the obligation to teach the moral truths that should shape our lives, including our public lives, is central to the mission given to the Church by Jesus Christ. Moreover, the United States Constitution protects the right of individual believers and religious bodies to participate and speak out without government interference, favoritism, or discrimination.

The bishops emphasize how participation of people of religious conviction enriches the nation's tradition of pluralism.¹

For the bishops, the Catholic community brings two major contributions: (1) a consistent moral framework for assessing political issues drawn from reason illuminated by Scripture and Church teaching; and (2) broad experience in serving those in need including "educating the young, serving families in crisis, caring for the sick, sheltering the homeless, helping women who face difficult pregnancies, feeding the hungry, welcoming immigrants and refugees, reaching out in global solidarity, and pursuing peace."²

In addition to these two primary contributions, I would add two other Catholic contributions: (1) a passion for social justice; and (2) realism about power and evil. Seeming contradictory, these two additions actually stand in healthy tension with one another. Our faith-filled passion keeps us committed to working for justice when others have given up on political advocacy, chosen the all too common course of being swayed by the polls, or been silent in the face of popular opinion.

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Furthermore, our realism about power and evil makes us ever watchful about what is possible, probable, and/or foolish or prophetic. We recognize limits in what we can do on particular issues at specific times; and we steward our energy, time, and money to fight the battles where we can be most effective. All the while we recognize that certain issues call for prophetic actions that may seem foolish in the world's eyes but which plant the seeds for future harvests.

Two other important distinctions shape Church statements about public issues and help in understanding our prophetic advocacy as individuals and Catholic institutions. The first distinction, made thirty years ago by the bishops in their comprehensive pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, addresses various "audiences":

We write, then, first of all to provide guidance for members of our own Church as they seek to form their consciences about economic matters. No one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world. At the same time we want to add our voice to the public debate about the directions in which the U.S. economy should be moving. We seek the cooperation and support of those who do not share our faith or tradition. The common bond of humanity that links all persons is the source of our belief that the country can attain a renewed public moral vision.³

This distinction affects how we seek to persuade both fellow Catholics and others in this pluralistic society. It also colors the use of moral reasoning, logic, data, ministry experience, and even the Scriptures.

The second distinction is between *principle* and *policy application*. For example, there is a principle in Catholic teaching dating back to 1891 about the right of workers to receive a decent family wage.⁴ That principle is distinct from the question of whether to support a particular minimum wage bill—a policy application. The bishops indicate that there are an important set of bridges, however, from principle to policy applications:

In focusing on some of the central economic issues and choices in American life in the light of moral principles, we are aware that the movement from principle to policy is complex and difficult and that although moral values are essential in determining public policies, they do not dictate specific solutions. They must interact with empirical data, with historical, social, and political realities, and with competing demands on limited resources. The

soundness of our prudential judgments depends not only on the moral force of our principles, but also on the accuracy of our information and the validity of our assumptions.⁵

Because of the bridges from principle to policy applications, the "moral authority" of policy applications is different:

Our judgments and recommendations on specific economic issues, therefore, do not carry the same moral authority as our statements of universal moral principles and formal church teaching; the former are related to circumstances that can change or that can be interpreted differently by people of good will. We expect and welcome debate on our specific policy recommendations. Nevertheless, we want our statements on these matters to be given serious consideration by Catholics as they determine whether their own moral judgments are consistent with the Gospel and with Catholic social teaching.⁶

With Catholics, the bishops appeal to Church teaching and conscience, with a distinction between principle and policy application, but urging careful consideration of the policy applications. With "people of the book," the appeal can include reference to Scripture. With others and non-believers, the bishops often appeal to reason and human dignity and a hope that the bridges to policy application are convincing in themselves.

In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops describe our responsibilities for political life, forming conscience, and Catholic Social Teaching. They specifically discuss issues of human life, peace, marriage and family life, religious freedom, the option for the poor, economic justice, health care, migration, Catholic education, justice, violence, discrimination, care for creation, communications, media, culture, and global solidarity. Reading the entire text is essential preparation for the upcoming federal, state, and local elections.

The bishops specifically do not endorse or oppose candidates, and it is explicit policy of our Conference of Bishops not to do so in elections or judicial appointments. Their focus is on the moral quality of issues and positions, leaving to voters the exercise of well-informed conscience and prudence in choosing candidates. They acknowledge that, "These decisions should take into account a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue."⁷ It is not enough for a candidate or party to give "lip service" to even the most important moral issues. There also must be a commitment to action on issues that will be effective in making change or, as noted earlier, embody a prophetic commitment to change.



FAITHFUL CITIZENS: Calling Catholics to Political Responsibility

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*, November, 2015, no. 11.
- ² *Ibid.*, no. 12.
- ³ U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, November 13, 1986, no. 27.
- ⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, no. 63.
- ⁵ *Economic Justice for All*, no. 134.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 135.
- ⁷ *Forming Consciences*, no. 37.

BANNING ALL OF THE BOXES

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ENDNOTES

- ⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder. *Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Selected Age Groups by Sex for Orleans Parish: 2014*.
- ⁶ The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010. *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility*; Washington, DC. p. 4.
- ⁷ Holzer, Harry, Steven Raphael, and Michael A. Stoll. *Employment Barriers Facing Ex-Offenders*. Urban Institute Reentry Roundtable. May 19-20, 2003. pp. 11-12.
- ⁸ Pager, Devah. 2002. *The Mark of a Criminal Record*. Northwestern University.
- ⁹ Rodriguez, Michelle. *Op. cit.* pp. 6-7.
- ¹⁰ The methodology is loosely based on that used by The Economy League's 2011 analysis titled, *The Economic Benefits of Employing Formerly Incarcerated Individuals*.
- ¹¹ Research by Harvard economist Bruce Western found that the annual earnings of a worker with a criminal record are, on average, 40 percent lower than workers of similar age, education, and location who do not have a record. Additionally, the rate of wage growth over time is 30 percent lower than for workers without a criminal record.
- ¹² Average annual earnings estimates by education level were generated by Jeanie Donovan using 2014 U.S. Census Bureau's Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) for Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) 02400, 02401, and 02402.
- ¹³ Average annual earnings for workers with a criminal record were estimated by reducing the average annual earnings of the average worker in New Orleans with a similar education level by 40 percent, based on findings of Western et al.
- ¹⁴ Lifetime earnings are based on income growth rates of 1.3%, 1.4%, 1.5%, and 1.8% for each education level, respectively, with the average age of a released inmate estimated at 30 and anticipating 35 years of participation in the labor force.
- ¹⁵ Harlow, Caroline Wolf, 2003. *Education and Correctional Populations*. U.S. Department of Justice.
- ¹⁶ Nally, John, Susan Lockwood, and Taiping Ho. 2012. "The Impact of Education and Employment on Recidivism." *Justice Policy Journal*. Vol. 9, No. 1.
- ¹⁷ Henrichson, Christian, and Valerie Levshin. 2011. "Estimating Marginal Costs for Cost-Benefit Analysis in Criminal Justice." Vera Institute of Justice.
- ¹⁸ Economy League of Greater Philadelphia. 2011. *Economic Benefits of Employing Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Philadelphia*.
- ¹⁹ Austin, James. 2015. *Op. cit.* p. 15. Average length of stay was calculated only for those 1,123 released inmates who completed a felony, misdemeanor, or city sentence.

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