

June 15, 2008

A MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR DECISIONS IN PUBLIC LIFE

This is my fourth and last column devoted to the U.S. bishops' November 2007 document: "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship – A Call to Political Responsibility." As faithful citizens, we Catholics should be actively involved in the political process. We bishops do not tell Catholics how to vote nor do we take sides in partisan politics. However, it is our responsibility to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth.

The Church has a rich body of teaching, called Catholic social teaching, which forms a moral framework to help Catholics examine candidates' positions and party platforms on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace. I will examine the final three key themes in Catholic social teaching in this column and then give some of the goals that are challenges for us in building our society in accordance with Jesus' Gospel values.

5. Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The economy must serve the people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is our way of continuing God's creation. In fact, work is our way of exercising stewardship and care for creation – for the earth, sea, air, and all creatures.

Economic decisions and institutions should be judged according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person. Jobs should be available with decent, safe working conditions and just, living wages for all without discrimination because of sex or

race. Workers have the right to organize, join a union, bargain collectively, strike, and to exercise these rights without reprisal.

Economic freedom, initiative, and the right to private property are affirmed by the Church's teaching. Workers, owners, employers, and unions should work together to provide decent jobs, to build a just economy, and to advance the common good.

The Church supports a welfare policy that reduces poverty, strengthens family life, provides affordable and accessible health care, as well as safe and affordable housing.

Agricultural policies should assure food for all, support family farms, be sustainable, and include stewardship for the earth and its natural resources.

6. **Solidarity**

We are all one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Our Catholic commitment to solidarity requires that we pursue justice, eliminate racism, end human trafficking, protect human rights, and seek peace.

In our diocese, we express solidarity through our support of Catholic Relief Services and other collections which support the poorest of the poor throughout the world. We also express our solidarity through our support of our sister diocese in Haiti and here

through Catholic Charities and our collaboration with Habitat for Humanity.

In the recent visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States and the United Nations, the pope spoke very directly about the need for solidarity throughout the world. He challenged our over-emphasis on individualism. He affirmed the importance of the United Nations and its work to alleviate global poverty and to promote human dignity and human rights, especially the right of religious liberty.

In the spirit of global solidarity, the U.S. bishops have often urged effective leadership to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so as to ensure security for Israel and a viable state for the Palestinians, respect for Lebanon's sovereignty, and peace in the region. Following the Holy See, we have urged the international community to seek a responsible transition in Iraq and to attend to the human consequences of war in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

7. **Caring for God's Creation**

Care for the earth is a duty of our faith. On August 27, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Angelus address, called for a commitment to care for creation. He warned that creation is exposed to serious risks by choices and lifestyles that can seriously degrade it. In particular he said, "Environmental degradation makes the life of the poor intolerable."

The U.S. bishops have cautioned that global climate change affects the future of God's creation and the one human family. There are

serious environmental issues in our region: land and water usage, safety of our air and water, and the responsibility of industries to the environment. Our own Office of Peace and Social Justice is now titled, “The Office of Peace and Social Justice and the Integrity of Creation.”

The U.S. bishops conclude our November 2007 document by offering ten policy goals that we hope will guide Catholics as they form their consciences and reflect on the moral dimensions of their public choices. Not all of these goals are equal and they address concerns of varying moral weight and urgency. I will list them in summary fashion:

1. Address the preeminent requirement to protect the weakest in our midst – innocent unborn children.
2. Keep our nation from addressing fundamental problems by turning to violence through abortions, euthanasia and assisted suicide, destruction of human embryos, the death penalty, and imprudent resorting to war.
3. Define the central institution of marriage as a union between one man and one woman and provide better support for family life.
4. Achieve comprehensive immigration reform that secures our borders, treats immigrant workers fairly, offers an earned path to citizenship, respects the rule of law, and addresses factors that compel people to leave their countries.
5. Help families and children overcome poverty.
6. Provide health care for the growing number of people without it.

7. Continue to oppose policies that reflect racism, hostility toward immigrants, religious bigotry, and other forms of discrimination.
8. Encourage families, community groups, economic structures, and government to work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, and the care of creation.
9. Establish and comply with moral limits on the use of military force and work for a “responsible transition” to end the war in Iraq.
10. Join with others around the world to pursue peace, protect human rights and religious liberty, and the care for creation.

It is important for us, as Catholics, to express our love for our country through engagement in public life. We contribute to public debate on important issues by focusing on moral principles that address such imperatives as the dignity of every human person, human rights, solidarity with the poorest and most vulnerable among us, and the pursuit of the common good. As faithful Catholics, we enrich civic life by bringing our deepest beliefs and values to reasoned public debate. We acknowledge freedom as a great gift, but also a summons to personal responsibility.

* * * * *

As is our tradition, the special collection taken up at Masses in all the parishes this weekend is for the support of Catholic Charities. I encourage your generosity as Catholic Charities is able to reach out to people in need in ways that we individually or our individual parishes are not able to do.

