

Bishops warn that church teaching is nonpartisan

David Gibson Religion News Service | Oct. 5, 2011



With the 2012 campaign gearing up before an angry and divided electorate, U.S. Catholic bishops on Tuesday reminded Catholic voters that they can't cherry-pick from church teachings to justify their own political preferences, and cautioned both sides not to edit the bishops' statements into 'voter guides' to back one party or another.

The bishops' warning came in a special introduction to 'Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,' a 30-page document on the responsibilities of Catholic voters that has been issued before every presidential election cycle since 1976.

As recently as 2008, the bishops' document has been pilloried by activists who say it tilts too far to the right or the left. The bishops themselves say the document has been 'misused to present an incomplete or distorted view of the demands of faith in politics.'

This time, the bishops say flatly that the document 'does not offer a voters guide, scorecard of issues, or direction on how to vote.'

The bishops' document aims to apply 'Catholic moral principles' to a host of issues, and warns against 'misguided appeals to `conscience' to ignore fundamental moral claims.' At the same time, the bishops warn that it should not be used to 'reduce Catholic moral concerns to one or two matters,' or used to justify 'partisan, ideological, or personal interests.'

That phrasing seems to take direct aim at both liberal-minded Catholics who say supporting abortion rights is a matter of individual conscience, as well as conservative-leaning Catholics who say opposing abortion outweighs all other issues.

Yet perhaps the biggest challenge for the bishops is to get their message read by rank-and-file Catholics. A recent poll of U.S. Catholics showed that just 16 percent have ever heard of the bishops' document on politics, and just 3 percent say they have read the statement in past election cycles.

The introductory note condenses the bishops' priorities to six main issues, including opposition to abortion and 'other threats to the lives and dignity of others who are vulnerable, sick or unwanted.' It continues with the need for conscience protections for health care workers and Catholic institutions, and the fight against gay marriage.

The bishops then cite the economic crisis and the fight against poverty, the need for immigration reform, and finally the "serious moral questions" raised by war, terrorism and violence, especially in the Middle East.

Whatever the bishops intended, Catholics on both sides found support for their positions.

Counting himself among those who want to see "Faithful Citizenship" overhauled, conservative activist Deal Hudson said the 2012 edition nonetheless serves as a pre-emptive "corrective ... to those who would `spin" the bishop's words into support of pro-abortion politicians."

Hudson, who helped the Bush White House court Catholic voters, has argued that unless "Faithful Citizenship" is rewritten to emphasize opposition to abortion, it would give "Catholic voters another carte blanche to cast their vote for any pro-abortion candidate they want."

On the other side, Stephen Schneck, a political scientist at Catholic University of America and an outspoken Democrat, welcomed the fact that the entire document was not reworked to reflect a more conservative slant.

"I'm just overjoyed that the bishops stuck with the status quo," Schneck said. "I think this is a wonderful document in its current form."

There had been speculation that the nation's nearly 300 active Catholic bishops would debate the document at their annual fall meeting in Baltimore in November. That debate could have exposed political differences within the hierarchy and resulted in a recast version of "Faithful Citizenship."

Top leaders of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops were aware of those risks, church officials said. An executive committee led by the USCCB's president, Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, decided to write a new two-page introduction and simply republish the document from 2007 with the new introduction.

"I think we have to see this as something of a win for the moderates," Schneck said. "This could have been dramatically rewritten. And there were concerns on both sides of the political dial on how it might have been rewritten."

The goal, said one church official familiar with the bishops' thinking, was "to make everybody a little uncomfortable."

"Democrats can't ignore abortion and gay marriage," said the official, who requested anonymity to speak candidly, "and Republicans can't say that's all that matters."

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