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'Faithful citizenship' gives glimpse of political season

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- It didn't take long for the "spin" to start after the U.S. bishops reissued their 2007 document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," with a new introductory note signed by the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the chairmen of nine USCCB committees.

The reissuance without changes to the body of the text "will not please some conservatives," wrote John Gehring, senior writer and outreach coordinator for Faith in Public Life, adding that "it's good to see the bishops affirm that Catholics should not be single-issue voters."

But Father Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, emphasized a line from the introductory note, praising the "especially helpful comment" that the document "does not offer a quantitative listing of issues for equal consideration."

"To that we say, 'Amen!'" he added. "Not all issues are equal; at the core of every issue is the right to life."

Stephen F. Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America, said the introductory note "reaffirms the 2007 insistence that Catholics are morally obliged in political life to attend not only to the most important issue of abortion but also to those of family, poverty, social justice, environment and peace."

But Deal W. Hudson and Matt Smith, president and vice president, respectively, of Catholic Advocate, found in the introductory note a criticism of "those Catholics whose 'social justice' orientation narrows their issues to those of poverty and war, thus ignoring the settled issues of life, marriage, religious liberty and euthanasia."

That early reaction seems to indicate that in a polarized political environment, various constituencies in the Catholic Church will continue to respond differently to the U.S. bishops' call to political responsibility.

It's a situation with which Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, the current USCCB president, is well familiar.

In "A People of Hope," an upcoming book by John L. Allen Jr., Archbishop Dolan talked about the perception that the U.S. Catholic bishops have aligned themselves in recent years with the Republican Party.

"Certainly there is that perception, but I don't think it's always accurate," he said. "To tell the truth, I get far more criticism from people who feel we bishops are much too soft on the Democrats, who feel that we are actually in the pocket of the Democrats."

"I hate this word, but the situation is much more 'nuanced' than simply saying we're in bed with one party or the other," Archbishop Dolan added. "In general, I find bishops almost bend over backwards trying to make sure that we don't seem to favor one party over the other. ... As an American historian, I could go on at length about what I see as the tragic turning away by the Democrats from the pro-life issue. In fairness, however, the Republicans have not always been as aggressive on the issue as we might hope they would have been. In some ways, both parties have let us down."

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The bishops have issued some form of a "Faithful Citizenship" document every four years since 1976. It began as a 3,400-word document called "Political Responsibility: Reflections on an Election Year," which addressed only eight specific issues, but grew by 2007 to more than 10,000 words mentioning dozens of issues.

It used the "Political Responsibility" title for more than two decades, with various subtitles, but in 1999 became "Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium."

As early as 1997, Bishop James T. McHugh, who then headed the Diocese of Camden, N.J., urged the bishops to bring the document to a vote of the full body of bishops, rather than leaving its approval to the 50-member Administrative Committee. The first vote by the full USCCB was in 2007, seven years after Bishop McHugh's death.

Of the 1996 statement Bishop McHugh said: "More than 500,000 copies were circulated; it was often quoted or referred to in articles in Catholic journals about the election and in September a special update was sent to all the bishops urging that they continue their efforts to inform people on the moral dimensions of campaign issues."

"When we look at the election results," he added, "we must admit that our great effort was a failure. Many of those elected, especially President (Bill) Clinton, took positions directly opposed to church positions on abortion, aid to parents for educational choice, welfare, immigration, the economy and international affairs. And Catholics voted for such candidates without any apparent scruple or concern."

Challenges still remain before "Faithful Citizenship" is fully understood and implemented by U.S. Catholics, as evidenced by the results of a recent survey commissioned by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture in New York and carried out by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington.

Asked whether they had heard about "Faithful Citizenship" before the 2008 presidential elections, only 16

percent of adult Catholics said they had. More than half (54 percent) said they had not heard of the document and 30 percent were not sure.

The margin of error for the survey was plus or minus 2.8 percentage points.

Among those who were aware of "Faithful Citizenship," 43 percent said they thought the bishops had "outlined the moral principles in a way that left little doubt about which party or candidates they thought Catholics should support," while 34 percent said the bishops "stuck to moral principles and left the final choice to Catholic voters." Nearly a quarter (23 percent) said they had no impression one way or the other.

In addition, less than 1 percent of adult Catholics said they had read the full document, while 2 percent said they had read a short-form version of "Faithful Citizenship," and 8 percent said they had read excerpts in their parish bulletin or elsewhere.

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