

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 27, 2011 at 9:01am

Election 2012: Most bishops stand by 'Faithful Citizenship'

by Michael Sean Winters



People wait in line to vote outside St. Francis Hall at the Franciscan Monastery and Commissariat of the Holy Land in Washington Nov. 4, 2008.

ANALYSIS

Editor's note: This begins an occasional series of articles analyzing issues and personalities that are shaping the 2012 election.

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. bishops' decision to make no changes in their quadrennial document 'Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship' took many observers by surprise.

In 2008, Charles Chaput, then archbishop of Denver, complained in an interview that the document was 'not very clear' regarding the necessity of not voting for pro-choice candidates. 'We either ought to get rid of it, or say things much clearer,' said Chaput, who now heads the Philadelphia archdiocese.

During the 2008 election season, Bishop Joseph Martino of Scranton, Pa., interrupted a parish meeting where "Faithful Citizenship" was being discussed and claimed the document had no standing in his diocese. Martino, who has since retired, issued his own pastoral letter on voting in which he foreclosed the possibility of anyone voting for a pro-choice candidate.

Raymond Burke, archbishop of St. Louis until mid-2008 and now a cardinal leading the Vatican's chief canonical court, agreed that "Faithful Citizenship" "led to confusion" among Catholics. "While it stated that the issue of life was the first and most important issue, it went on in some specific areas to say 'but there are other issues' that are of comparable importance without making necessary distinctions," Burke told an interviewer in 2009.

This summer, Deal Hudson, who once served as the Bush administration's liaison to the Catholic hierarchy, joined in the call to amend the text, writing, "We're told that no substantial edits are being made to the 2008 version of the document, so that we can expect the 2012 version to be roughly the same as its predecessor. If so, this is a problem and needs to be remedied. The 2008 version of "Faithful Citizenship" contains several passages (Sections 34-37) that are capable of overly broad interpretation."



However, most bishops did not share the desire to revisit "Faithful

Citizenship." Stockton, Calif., Bishop Stephen Blaire, chair of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, told *NCR* that when he took over the committee in 2010 he convoked a meeting with the chairmen of other committees that had some interest in the text. "No one said the document needs to be scrapped. There was from the beginning a consensus to work with the text that had been approved in 2007."

Blaire called the 2007 text a "hard-won document," noting it had gone through several drafts, many amendments and a lot of consultation. The bishops approved it in November of that year in a plenary session 214-4.

Blaire said the committee chairs also suggested that an introductory note be drafted, "not adding or subtracting from the document but setting it in the current context." At their plenary meeting in June, New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "took the pulse" of the body of bishops, according to Blaire, and found they agreed with the approach Blaire and the other committee chairs had outlined: Don't amend the text, but add an introductory note. Last month, the conference's Administrative Committee approved the introductory note.

Blair said it is unlikely any bishops would challenge the decision at their next meeting. "It's all done," he said. The issue is not on the agenda for November meeting this year.

So, what happened? The political landscape has changed vastly since the bishops approved the document in 2007. The economy imploded in the last months of the Bush administration. President Barack Obama won the 2008 election, leading some bishops to fear an all-out push for more expansive abortion laws.

The bishops found themselves embroiled in controversy over their opposition to the health care reform law. The rise of the tea party has evidenced an anti-Catholic libertarianism on the right regarding economic issues that matches the anti-Catholic libertarianism of the left on social issues.

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Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University in Washington, cites two reasons for the bishops' decision not to revise the text. "First, they think their 2007 statement is a balanced, intelligent approach, which is faithful to Catholic teaching. Remember, it passed overwhelmingly," Reese said. "Second, they did not want a bloody decisive debate exposing their disagreement with a minority of bishops who wanted a stronger attack on pro-choice Democrats."

Reese also called the consensus among the nine committee chairs "a major achievement. Any bishop who criticizes the decision not to redo 'Faithful Citizenship' is taking on all these heavyweights, Dolan and the Administrative Committee. You have to be very brave or foolish to do that."

Hudson, despite his summertime call for a rewrite, now contends that the introductory note addressed his concerns. The 2007 document could be "quoted out of context to give a distorted view of what the bishops intended," Hudson told *NCR*. "The new introductory note clarifies the document by recognizing the distortion has occurred and warning 'against misguided appeals to 'conscience' to ignore fundamental moral claims.' This warning, in my view, applies to all Catholics who are involved in the political process, especially those who are aligned with one political party or the other."

Catholics on the more progressive side of the scale likewise found words of comfort in the introductory note. Fred Rotondaro, chairman of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, calls attention to the warning against attempts "to reduce Catholic moral concerns to one or two matters." He said, "The document undercuts those who think abortion is the only issue a Catholic should consider when voting. Abortion is important, to be sure, but it is not the only issue."

When asked if it is a coincidence that the two sentences most noted by partisans of either side of the aisle appear in the same sentence, Blaire demurred. "I wouldn't say that. There was a lot of care given to everything that was put into the document and the introductory note," he said.

Not every conservative has followed Hudson's cue. Writing at CatholicCulture.org, Phil Lawler criticized the decision to reissue the 2007 document, which he said offers "questionable advice" because it "does not draw the necessary, clear distinction ... between issues on which prudent compromise is wise (economics again) and those on which compromise is odious (abortion again)."

Lawler may misunderstand the bishops' objectives in fashioning the document. "We had to remind people that this is not a voter guide," Blaire said. "I am very strongly committed to the idea that it is not the role of the church to tell people how to vote. Our role is to provide some moral perspective so people can form their moral conscience."

Blaire told *NCR* that the bishops' conference is now focused on doing a better job calling Catholics' attention to document. A recent survey conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University found that only 16 percent of U.S. Catholics said they had heard of "Faithful Citizenship." Blaire said, "The emphasis now is: How do we promote this document? We don't always do that well."

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics in his blog Distinctly Catholic on the *NCR* website. Find it at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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