

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

November 8, 2011 at 6:26am

Thumbs Up & Thumbs Down in Ohio & Michigan

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Distinctly Catholic

A Thumbs Down to the the Ohio Catholic Conference and a Thumbs Up to the Michigan Catholic Conference.

Today, voters in Ohio will vote in a referendum on a recently passed law that drastically restricts union bargaining rights. The law would deny public employee unions the right to bargain for pension and other benefits, as well as negating binding arbitration and forbidding public employee strikes. The measure to repeal the new law is called Issue 2.

To be clear, the new law does not deal with the specifics of any given contract between the state government and public workers. It deals with a principle: Do public employee unions have the right to collectively bargain or not? This is not a tough question for a Catholic. A long line of papal teachings dating back to Pope Leo XIII's seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* affirms the rights of worker to organize and bargain collectively.

The Ohio Catholic Conference issued a "reflection guide" which acknowledges that tradition, stating, "Catholic Social Teaching has a long history of supporting worker rights and calling both workers and management to mutual partnerships where both the needs of labor and the needs of management are freely and openly acknowledged and addressed."

But, instead of applying that teaching to the situation at hand, the Ohio bishops punted. After listing several pro and con arguments about Issue 2, they write:

A voter's position on Issue 2 involves a prudential judgment where people of good will may differ as to the specifics of this proposal. We encourage voters to carefully review SB 5 in light of our church's historic support for worker rights, and our continued call for fair and balanced worker benefits. Such benefits should reflect current economic realities and support the needs of both

public employers (citizens) and workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society. The Catholic Bishops of Ohio are neutral on Issue 2.

Well, of course, all political decisions require prudential judgment in one way or another. But when prudential judgment is stretched so far as to remain agnostic on a union-busting law, such prudential judgment is no longer operating within the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. There may be other reasons for a person to support the union-busting law, but those reasons find no comfort nor sustenance in Catholic Social Teaching. The Ohio bishops get a big thumbs down. Anyone reading this who lives in Ohio should get out and vote to overturn the union-busting law.

Just north of Ohio, in Michigan, the state senate passed an anti-bullying law but, at the last minute, the committee bill that was brought to the floor was amended to include an exemption for religiously motivated bullies. Amy Sullivan, at Time Magazine's "Swampland" has the story. She writes, "On Wednesday, the Republican-controlled state senate passed an anti-bullying bill that manages to protect school bullies instead of those they victimize. It accomplishes this impressive feat by allowing students, teachers, and other school employees to claim that "a sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction" justifies their harassment."

The exemption for those who wish to bully in the name of God was pushed by social and political conservatives who are taking legitimate concerns about religious liberty and contorting them. As Sullivan writes, "Freedom of religious expression doesn't give someone the right to kick the crap out of a gay kid or to verbally torment her. It doesn't give someone the right to fire a gay employee instead of dealing with the potential discomfort of working with him." To allow religious liberty concerns to be demeaned and degraded by serving as a cover for bullies not only defeats the purpose of the anti-bullying law, it makes it harder for those of us concerned about religious liberty to make our case appropriately.

The Michigan Catholic Conference supported the anti-bullying bill that emerged from committee, but to their great credit, when the religious exemption was added on the floor of the senate, the Michigan bishops withdrew their support for their bill. In a phone interview yesterday, Dave Maluchnik, the Director of Communications for the Michigan Catholic Conference, confirmed that the bishops withdrew their support for the bill because of the religious exemption amendment. The bishops are saying, in effect, that you do not need to bully anyone in order to present the Church's teaching and their wise decision to withdraw their support for the amended bill rather than see their legitimate concerns about religious liberty get dragged through the political mud illustrates a commitment to principle that is as admirable as it will prove politically shrewd. Nothing, repeat nothing, will be gained for the cause of religious liberty by distorting it into a cover for bullies or hitching it to a rightwing politico-social agenda.

A BIG thumbs up to the Michigan Catholic Conference.

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