

Election &
Political
Activities Guide:
A Handbook
for the
2008 Elections
from the
Michigan
Catholic
Conference

ELECTION & POLITICAL ACTIVITIES GUIDE: A HANDBOOK FOR THE 2008 ELECTIONS FROM THE MICHIGAN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

As Catholics, we are called to carry the values of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church into the public square. As citizens of the United States, we have a duty to participate in the framing and the debate of public issues and in the selection of those who occupy positions of civic leadership. These dual responsibilities to faith and citizenship are at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in a free and democratic nation.

This guide is intended to encourage Catholic clergy and laity to facilitate the involvement of their faith communities in appropriate election related activities. These activities are designed to increase parishioner interest in the policy issues that will characterize this election season's debate, to focus their attention on candidate positions, and encourage them to exercise their right to vote. Questions about electoral matters, and requests for additional handbooks, provided at no cost to the parish or diocese, should be directed to the Michigan Catholic Conference. 510 South Capitol Avenue, Lansing Michigan 48933. (517) 372-9310. mccinfo@micatholicconference.org



Founded in 1963, the Michigan Catholic Conference serves as the official voice of the Catholic Church in Michigan on matters of public policy, and promotes a social order that respects the dignity of the human person and serves the common good in the spirit of the Beatitudes and in accord with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Introduction • 2
- II. Faithful Citizenship and Conscience Formation • 3
- III. Public Policy Issues of Concern to the Church • 5
- IV. Guidelines on Electoral Politics for Pastors and Parishes • 7
- V. Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network • 10
- VI. Resources for Further Reading • 12

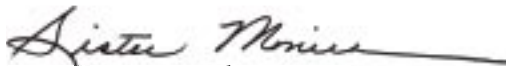
I. INTRODUCTION

In past election cycles the Michigan Catholic Conference has sought to help educate parish officials and parishioners on electoral matters through various publications. While each was well assembled and highly informative, this publication seeks to provide such information in one handbook that parishes can place in their vestibules, use in small group gatherings, or allow for parishioners to take home to their families.

The Church's role in the political sphere typically invokes provocative questions. What about the separation of Church and state? Can the parish conduct candidate nights or debates? What issues should I as a Catholic be concerned about? What campaign literature am I able to distribute in the parish? These, and many other questions typically arise in an election year when candidates and parties seek to promote their interests through Church organized settings. The information provided in this handbook seeks to answer such questions but, more important, it has been produced to help Catholics understand their role in the public sphere and to encourage participation in political life.

State issues such as the promotion of life and human dignity, education, economic and social justice and environmental protection are addressed here. Federal issues, such as war and peace, are addressed at the national level through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. As we move closer to the general election, the Conference will post on its website and distribute to parishes candidate questionnaires, information related to ballot questions and any other pertinent election issue that may come forward.

Welcome to the Michigan Catholic Conference's *Election and Political Activities Guide: A Handbook for the 2008 Elections from the Michigan Catholic Conference.*



Sister Monica Kostielney, R.S.M.
President and C.E.O.

II. FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP AND CONSCIENCE FORMATION

Most Americans are familiar with the term “separation of church and state,” a watchdog phrase that is commonly employed in the call for the parting of religion and faith from policy matters. From a historical perspective, the term may be traced, in part, to President Thomas Jefferson, who in 1802 spoke of a “wall of separation.” The United States Constitution speaks to this important issue through two clauses within the First Amendment:



- the Establishment Clause, which prohibits government from creating a national religion; and
- the Free Exercise Clause, which protects freedom of religion.

The phrase “separation of church and state,” however, does not formally exist in any document that gave birth to our nation and its laws.

Yet frequently lost in the “separation” rhetoric is each citizen’s moral obligation to participate in the democratic process, regardless of his or her religious belief. The Catholic Church, which views the wedding of Church and state as a suppression of religious freedom and other inalienable human rights, calls for the faithful to participate in the democratic process by bringing their moral and social message to the public debate. This concept may be described as “Faithful Citizenship.” Casting ballots, joining political parties, contacting legislators, organizing get-out-the-vote efforts, and participating in community forums are just a few examples of how one may blend their faith with politics. The United States is a pluralistic nation. Our society is enhanced and flourishes because of the right of minority groups and those of differing viewpoints to bring forth their perspectives on important social issues of the day.

“Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.”

Pope Benedict XVI, Celebration of Vespers and Meeting With the Bishops of the United States of America. 16 April 2008

The Church does not seek to, nor does she have an interest in telling Catholics which candidate to vote for or against. The Church does have the responsibility of informing the consciences of Catholics in accordance with God’s truth. It is within this formation of conscience that the individual Catholic voter must open himself to the teachings of the Church and to bring moral truths to the public square. For example, a well-formed conscience does not accept the intentional destruction of human life or racism as acceptable public policy. These are not principles held exclusively by Catholics; rather, they are principles based in moral and natural law that all faiths and people of goodwill can agree upon. Christians believe that Jesus’ commandment to love one’s neighbor extends beyond individual relationships to all human relations, from the family to the entire community.

“We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.”

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007

The Church joins the public debate to share its experiences in serving the powerless and to add its values to the political dialogue. This kind of participation does not involve religious tests for candidates. Rather, it seeks to lift up the moral dimensions of public issues. It encourages Catholics, as believers and citizens, to use the resources of our faith in building a society that is more respectful of life and human dignity and more cognizant of the Christian obligation to seek peace and justice.

III. PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES OF CONCERN TO THE CHURCH

From education to economic justice, to the protection of human life and the promotion of the dignity of every individual, the Church speaks to a breadth of issues that are of concern to the people of Michigan. These issues may be addressed in six categories: religious freedom, human life, children and families, health care, education, and economic justice and regulatory policy. Not all issues carry equal weight—the destruction of human life through abortion, embryo destructive research or euthanasia is never acceptable, for example—but all are necessary to advance the common good and moral fiber of the state and the country.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: Freedom of conscience and of religion is a primary and inalienable right of the human person. Insofar as it touches the innermost sphere of the spirit, one can even say that it upholds the justification, deeply rooted in each individual, of all other liberties.

HUMAN LIFE: Human life must be respected and protected from the moment of conception until natural death. From the first moment of existence, a human being must be identified as a unified individual endowed with human nature and as such is the proper bearer of fundamental human rights. Every life is sacred because the person has been willed for its own sake in the image and likeness of God.

“It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person... As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 1913–1915

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: Children are among the most vulnerable members of the human family. As policies are advanced to help children, they must support families, since children's lives are nurtured or neglected, enhanced or diminished, by the quality of family life. Since the family is the primary, indispensable, and essential unit of society, policies must maintain and promote marriage, and strengthen the family.

HEALTH CARE: Equitable, accessible and ethical health care is an essential safeguard of human life. Health care is a basic human right, and genuine health care reform, recognizing the dignity of persons and the unique needs of the poor, is a matter of fundamental justice.

EDUCATION: All children, by virtue of their dignity as human beings, have an inalienable right to a quality education. Parents have the right to choose how that education is provided. Any effort to improve schools must include a commitment to educational choice.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND REGULATORY POLICIES: Of key concern is ensuring that economic policies that are advanced are shaped by moral principles. Economic choices and regulatory policies must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, support the family, care for God's creation, and serve the common good.

“The Church is called upon to manifest anew to everyone, with clear and stronger conviction, her will to promote human life by every means and to defend it against all attacks, in whatever condition or state of development it is found.”

John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio (22 November 1981) 30

IV. GUIDELINES ON ELECTORAL POLITICS FOR PASTORS AND PARISHES

While individual citizens are free to engage fully in partisan politics, churches and other 501 (c) (3) institutions that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code are not. **The Church and Church organizations are not to be involved in partisan politics.** Expressions of preference for a political party and of direct or indirect support for or in opposition to specific candidates or political parties are not permissible. **Advocacy for or against a specific issue or ballot proposal, however, is permissible and in fact is encouraged.**

The following guidelines are intended to encourage and facilitate appropriate parish and Church-organization participation in political activities:

- Do...** share the Church's teaching on human life, marriage and the family, immigration, education, social justice and peace.
- Do...** highlight the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues and ballot proposals.
- Do...** urge parishioners to join the party or campaign of their choice and, in light of Church teaching, evaluate candidate positions.
- Do...** facilitate voter education through the provision of materials only published by the local diocesan bishop, the Michigan Catholic Conference or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

- Do...** ensure that a “candidate night” or similar event is conducted within the guidelines established for tax-exempt organizations. All candidates for a particular office must be invited to the Church event and absolutely no bias toward a specific candidate or party should be conveyed.
- Do...** encourage active participation in church-sponsored voter registration efforts, “get-out-the-vote” campaigns, and other non-partisan voter education initiatives.
- Do...** urge parishioners to register to vote. Registration may be accomplished by means of the internet or through voter registration drives.
- Do...** take precautions to avoid partisanship. No diocesan or parish entity or organization shall endorse, oppose or campaign for or against any political party or candidate for public office; nor shall any funds of any such entity or organization be contributed to any political candidate, party, campaign or political action committee.

The above-mentioned points are based on extensive guidelines, which relate to diocesan newspapers, problems of constitutionality and related matters. Questions that might arise should be referred to the Michigan Catholic Conference or the diocesan attorney.

PARISH LISTS, CAMPAIGN MATERIALS, USE OF BUILDINGS: Parishioner lists should not be provided to any candidate or political party. Church-owned buildings and properties should not be made available to just one candidate or party, nor is the distribution of partisan campaign materials through official Church or parish channels permissible. Parish officials should avoid any association with the distribution of partisan campaign materials on Church-owned parking lots.

ENDORSEMENTS AND ELECTIONEERING: Pastors or other religious leaders are urged to avoid endorsements, contributions, electioneering, or other political activity. Although personal endorsements are not prohibited, it may be difficult to separate personal activity from one’s role as a representative of the Church. Officials and employees of

the Church, acting in their individual capacities on political matters, should make clear that they are not acting as representatives of the Church or any Church organization.

DISTRIBUTION OF ELECTION YEAR MATERIAL: Pastors and others should be wary of outside organizations seeking to distribute voter education materials through parishes. It may happen that issues covered in outside materials do not address the range of issues of importance to the Church. Moreover, their content, format and presentation may not satisfy IRS regulations applicable to Catholic organizations. Though distribution of these materials elsewhere may have value, they may not be appropriate for distribution in Catholic parishes.

The Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors often speaks to issues that are both moral and political. The consistent ethic of life demands a concern for all the weak and vulnerable members of our society throughout all phases of life and must be promoted through the Church's social teaching and its applications to today's social concerns. The independence and integrity of the Church's social teaching must be maintained. To this end:

Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors reaffirms the long-standing prohibition of the distribution of election year material in parishes unless published by the diocesan bishop, the Michigan Catholic Conference or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“Building a world of respect for human life and dignity, where justice and peace prevail, requires more than just political commitment. Individuals, families, businesses, community organizations, and government all have a role to play. Participation in political life in light of fundamental moral principles is an essential duty for every Catholic and all people of good will.”

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007

V. CATHOLIC LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY NETWORK

In an effort to facilitate “Faithful Citizenship,” the Michigan Catholic Conference has established a web-based action center that generates legislative advocacy from the grassroots level. Grassroots advocacy is a powerful communications method that involves a group of like-minded citizens expressing their position on important public policy issues to elected officials. To bring a strong Catholic grassroots voice to the State Capitol, the Michigan Catholic Conference has developed the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network*.

This simple-to-use web-based tool allows Catholics across the state to instantly transmit electronic messages to elected officials in support or opposition to issues of concern to the Church. The *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network* is also intended to help Catholics understand how core Church teaching directly correlates to specific legislative issues. The following are offered through this network:

- Timely action alerts urging Catholics to email or call legislators at the state or federal level;
- Sample messages to use when communicating with elected officials;
- An elected officials locator, which provides a biography and information about officials;
- The ability to write a letter to your local newspaper; and
- Information about candidates running for political office.

Those who are interested in joining the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network* can sign up by visiting www.micatholicconference.org, and clicking on the “Faithful Citizenship in Action” logo in the upper-right hand corner of the website. There is no cost to participate, and the Michigan Catholic

Conference does not share subscriber information with any other individuals, groups or organizations.



The Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network

“By divine favor, especially in modern times, human genius has produced from natural material astonishing inventions in the field of technology. Some of these have extraordinary bearing on the human spirit, since they open up new and highly effective avenues of communication for all kinds of information, ideas, and directives.”

Decree on the Media of Social Communications, Second Vatican Council

VI. RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

- Catholics in Political Life
<http://www.usccb.org/bishops/catholicsinpoliticallife.shtml>
- Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States
<http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org/>
- Michigan Catholic Conference
<http://www.micatholicconference.org/>
- Political Activity Guidelines for Catholic Organizations, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of General Counsel, July 2007
<http://www.usccb.org/ogc/guidelines.shtml>
- Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians
<http://www.usccb.org/bishops/mccarrick1104.shtml>

“The Church is involved in the political process but is not partisan. The Church cannot champion any candidate or party. Our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable.”

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2007

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors is comprised of the seven diocesan bishops of the state plus five laypersons, one priest, and one religious sister. The archbishop of Detroit is the Chairman of the Board.

His Eminence Adam Cardinal Maida
Archbishop of Detroit, Chairman

Most Reverend James A. Murray
Bishop of Kalamazoo, Vice Chairman

Most Reverend Patrick R. Cooney
Bishop of Gaylord, Secretary/Treasurer

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The Michigan Catholic Conference does not endorse or oppose any candidates, under any circumstance, and no inference of endorsement or opposition should be concluded as a result of information provided here.

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