Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOMILISTS

Homilies can offer valuable opportunities to remind parishioners, as the bishops do in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, that " In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation (No. 13). Homilies can help Catholics reflect on the Church's social teaching and how it might affect the choices they make as citizens. They can help connect their faith to their participation in public life and can encourage them to be active citizens, bringing their values to bear on the decisions that shape local and national policies. Moreover, many Scripture readings throughout the liturgical year lend themselves to raising questions about what it means for us as Christians to promote justice and peace and to protect human life. These are challenges that cannot be ignored or avoided.

However, the homilist needs to be cautious in certain respects. As the bishops explain in *Faithful Citizenship*, "we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth. 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" (No. 7). The challenge for the homilist is to encourage political involvement and to highlight the moral dimensions of issues without being perceived as partisan or seeming to force the readings into a partisan appeal.

Below are some ideas and suggestions for incorporating civic responsibility themes into a homily.

* **Highlight the tradition**: The message of Faithful Citizenship will be shared most effectively if it is woven into homilies throughout the year, when appropriate in light of the readings. Rather than simply focusing on the election or a particular public issue, start with the broader context for the Catholic tradition of civic responsibility—the Scriptures, Catholic social teaching, and the words and writings of our Holy Father.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, we find messages that challenge us to consider how we can protect today's "widows, orphans, and aliens" (Dt 24:17) or care for the "least among us" (Mt 25:45) in our communities and around the world. In a democracy, this means not only providing direct assistance to those in need, but using our opportunities as citizens to actively support policies we believe will create a more just and peaceful world. The connection between faith and citizenship in Catholic teaching is not a new or isolated idea. The bishops of the United States have issued statements on civic responsibility in advance of each presidential election for more than thirty years.

You may want to use quotes from the bishops' statement on faithful citizenship. Selected quotes can be found in the "Bulletin Quotes" resource on the *Faithful Citizenship* Web site (www.faithfulcitizenship.org).

* **Promote participation in public life**: In the Catholic tradition, being a believer means being an active citizen and helping to shape a world more respectful of the life and dignity of every person. Policies must be measured by how they affect the unborn, the poor, and the vulnerable. As we approach the 2008

elections, parishioners should be encouraged to use the values of our faith as criteria for analyzing issues and candidates.

* **Ask questions rather than providing answers**: One of the best ways to encourage parishioners to give serious consideration to the connection between their faith and their choices as citizens is to ask thought-provoking questions. You may want to consider turning the "Goals for Political Life" in *Forming Consciences for Faithful* Citizenship into questions.

* **Avoid partisanship**: It is pastorally inappropriate and legally inadvisable for any parish representative to take positions or endorse materials that imply support of or opposition to a party or a candidate. Focus your comments on the moral dimension of issues, the character of the candidates in general, and the importance of participation, rather than on particular parties or candidates. Point out that our concerns do not fit the traditional categories of right and left, Republican and Democrat. We do not endorse candidates and parties because, as the bishops state in their civic responsibility statement, it often seems that " no party and too few candidates fully share the Church's comprehensive commitment to the life and dignity of every human being from conception to natural death" (No. 16).

* **Tell people to vote, not how to vote**: References to particular candidates should not be made. Challenge parishioners to become informed and to examine the moral and human consequences of their vote. You can raise questions without giving answers, encouraging believers to let their faith shape their politics.

* **Promote prayer for all politicians**: Remind our people of the need to pray for all of the candidates and their political parties. St. Paul reminds us of our obligation (1 Tim 2:1-4) to intercede for civil authorities that they would always strive to promote the common good.

Additional Homily Resources

Additional resources can be found at the *Faithful Citizenship* website (www.faithfulcitizenship.org). These include more specific homily ideas for the following Sundays

July 6, 2008—the Fourth of July weekend

September 21, 2008—as summer ends and voters focus their attention on the campaigns

October 26, 2008—Two weeks before the election