Diocesan Social Action Office

Called to Faithful Citizenship

A Call for Civil Discourse within our Parishes Regarding Matters of Faithful Citizenship

In an address to Catholic social action leaders on February 11, 2006, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of the Archdiocese of Washington, decried the lack of civility in the public discourse that has become common place. "We seem caught between extreme political conservatives on the one hand and extreme liberal relativists on the others," said the Cardinal.

According to Cardinal McCarrick, "we must find civility in the way we approach our neighbors who may have other points of view than we do. There has to be a communion of heart and voice and it is this communion that we must seek and whose presence in our communities and in our Church we must build, never giving up the struggle to accomplish it."

During an election year, the divisions that Cardinal McCarrick is referring occur in some of the discussions that take place in our parishes on matters of faith and politics. Unfortunately, such discussions too often turn into nasty, partisan debates. They can result in hurtful feelings, misunderstandings and alienation within the parish community. They can even jeopardize our ability as Church to be "communities of salt and light" in the larger society. Parishioners, who gather as a Eucharistic community throughout the year, can end up in polarized debates that are mean spirited, disrespectful and lacking in Christian virtue. Attacks and accusations are sometimes made regarding ones commitment to the teaching of the Church on faithful citizenship. Others may be criticized as lacking in doctrinal purity or the courage to stand for ones convictions. In brief, such behavior is inconsistent with who we are as a faith community.

Pastoral and lay leaders can set the tone for civil dialogue within the parish community. They can and should provide guidelines to ensure that discussions on matters of faith and politics are respectful, and consistent with Church teaching. The Diocesan Social Action Office has developed a "Pledge for a Civil Dialogue" that we hope our parishes find helpful.

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Pledge for a Civil Dialogue on Faithful Citizenship

In recognizing that we are the Body of Christ and that we strive to live as disciples, we commit ourselves:

1. to become fully informed about the teaching of the U.S. Bishops regarding Faithful Citizenship. The teaching of our Bishops is rooted in Holy Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching, a rich and vast tradition which includes encyclicals of our Popes. As Catholics, we are called to inform ourselves about the wisdom and pastoral experience of our church leaders regarding moral issues being debated in elections and throughout our society. Parishioners should commit to reading Faithful Citizenship prior to conducting a parish discussion or forum. Reliance on media accounts, second hand reporting, or inadequate study can sometimes be an obstruction to constructive dialogue. The document can be accessed at www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/index.htm or by contacting the local office of your local Catholic Commission.

2. to manifest a true love of neighbor throughout our discussions regarding Faithful Citizenship, acting with charity throughout our discourse. This entails respecting the dignity of each person and respecting the opinions of others. It means listening to others with an open mind and heart, avoiding stereotypes or labels. It means striving to understand others before we are understood.

3. to avoid name calling or emotionally charged rhetoric in our discourse. Such attacks can be hurtful, divisive and alienating. On the other hand, disagreements are expected when we have discussions about faith and politics. Participants should commit to "stay at the table" and not walk away from opinions different than their own. When disagreements occur, one may consider asking clarifying questions. Disagreements can actually result in a better understanding of the common ground that exists among parishioners. The goal of our dialogue is not to "score points, " but to strengthen our common ground for the sake of the common good.

4. to commit ourselves to act in a non-partisan manner in our parish discussions. Our dialogue should reflect that, as Church, we are "the body of Christ" not delegates to the Republican or Democrat Conventions. The objective of our dialogue is not to convince each other about the merits of our favorite candidates but to evaluate issues and positions on the basis of Catholic teaching. A high priority is to develop a well informed Christian conscience to guide us in making prudent decisions regarding the candidates and their positions.

5. to agree that none of us holds the complete truth regarding matters of faith and politics. A little humility goes a long way in parish discussions of Faithful Citizenship. Try not to monopolize the conversation. Try to be open to the possibility that your mind could be changed by the opinions of others who offer informed perspectives based upon Church teaching.

I agree to this pledge in order to have honest, open discussion in an atmosphere of civility and with the goal of seeking the common good as informed by the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching.

Signed: _____

For further resources on Faithful Citizenship:

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