

The Catholic Church . . . Politics . . . and Public Policy

The position of the

THE ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW ORLEANS

August 27, 1990

The Catholic Church . . . *its community role*

The Catholic Church in Louisiana, since the earliest days of the settlement of the lower Mississippi territory, has had a high profile, a role of leadership, and a commitment to serve both the temporal and spiritual needs of the state's citizens.

Its help is sought by and readily given to city, state and federal authorities not only during times of crisis or greatest need but over the long range, day-to-day, arduous task of meshing government and private resources to fulfill the needs of all who cannot cope on their own.

The Church is a major contributor to the society in which we live. Its widespread social service and educational programs are evident to all. Its buildings are a part of the state's heritage and tourist lure. Its employment of thousands of men and women contributes heavily to the economy. Its presence—and the presence of other faiths—sets a moral tone and lifts life's meaning beyond the limited time we all struggle within our imperfect, secular society.

The Church also seeks, as we all should, to correct the imperfections around us and is obligated to speak to public issues confronting us all.

The Church is not something apart from society, an appendage to be ignored except when sought out to accept special assignments or fulfill specific requests. The Church is itself a part of our society—a genuine, intermeshed segment of the state community with a right to voice within that community.

That voice, however, is limited by government through regulations which threaten taxes upon churches, organizations, and their contributors because of public policy positions which government may perceive to be “political.”

We suggest that our government adopt the position of one writer who said: “Issue-oriented speech is entirely proper under the (Internal Revenue) Code's framework and is further protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution. The difference really boils down to **people** vs. **issues**. In the political arena, Church groups may not support or oppose **people**; they are encouraged, however, to support or oppose **issues**.”

Quoted by:

CARDINAL JOHN O'CONNOR, New York

“From My Viewpoint,” June 14, 1990

We seek herein to define our role in addressing **issues** and to separate that obligation from the equally important task of not involving ourselves in party politics or the endorsement of or opposition to any **candidate** for public office.



On September 1, 1987, the Catholic Bishops of the United States stated:

“We bishops specifically do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc; nor do we wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing or opposing candidates. We do, however, have a right and a responsibility as teachers to analyze the moral dimensions of the major issues of the day.”

Regrettably, the Catholic Church is frequently attacked for taking public positions, even when limiting itself to addressing certain “moral dimensions of the major issues of our day.”

For example, critics cry “church-state separation” when Catholic leaders or spokesmen address the most basic human right, the right of life. Many of those same critics applaud the Church when it addresses other human rights issues which such critics favor.

We do not advocate partisan political involvement on the part of **any** faith but merely point to the inconsistency of some “church-state” rhetoric.

We now set forth public policy guidelines for parishes and archdiocesan entities and those who speak in their behalf.

Guidelines

- I. Endorsement of or opposition to political parties or candidates for public office must be avoided.
- II. Parish and other church facilities should not be used for any activity related to the support of or opposition to any candidate for political office nor as forums for partisan debate. The pulpit is never to be used by office holders or office seekers to advance their views or their political positions nor as the forum for any individual to support or oppose a candidate or public official.
- III. Parish bulletins, parish publications, parish letterheads are never to be used to support or oppose a candidate for public office or to endorse, or oppose a specific political party.
- IV. The archdiocesan newspaper, parish bulletins, and other parish or archdiocesan sponsored publications are not to accept political advertising in support of or opposition to any candidate for public office or in support of or opposition to a political party.
- V. The distribution of marked sample ballots or the posting of political signs or billboards must not be permitted on church grounds.
- VI. No funds or in-kind donations from any parish or archdiocesan entity are to be contributed to any political action committee, political candidate, political campaign or party.
- VII. “Political education” communications which suggest, directly or indirectly, that a particular candidate or party is endorsed or opposed are not to be signed, supported, or financed by any parish or archdiocesan entity, nor may such communications be distributed on church property.

But what can we do?

While pointing to the types of activities which should be avoided, we also address what, in our opinion, are acceptable activities:

- I. Parishes and other institutions may, and in some cases should, engage in issue-oriented public activities. As a general rule, limitations on the extent of such activities would not be a problem for parishes or institutions, since these would constitute an insubstantial part of their total work. Following are examples of acceptable activity:

Educational efforts about issues and in support or opposition to legislation.

Encouragement of letter-writing campaigns and other contacts with state or federal legislators designed to educate them and to develop support or opposition to legislation.

Distribution of printed materials containing a statement about an issue or issues before the Congress or the Louisiana Legislature and containing the names and addresses of senators and representatives.

Religious and moral instruction—verbal, printed, published—concerning particular issues, especially those affecting human life.

- II. Nonpartisan voter registration campaigns and get-out-the-vote campaigns are proper and a recommended activity for parishes and church organizations.



While pastors, religious or those identified with the Church cannot be denied their individual right to speak or express their opinions in the political arena, we note that it is difficult to separate individual roles from that of Church representative. Such individuals should weigh heavily their obligations in this regard and reflect upon the spirit of the guidelines, not only the words of this limited statement.

*This document served as a model for all Louisiana dioceses.
It is reprinted here by the
Louisiana Catholic Conference.
June 2006*