

Faithful Citizenship

By Bishop Richard G. Lennon
Let Us Love One Another
Universe Bulletin
October 31, 2008

The past few weeks leading up to last Tuesday's primary election in Ohio have seen the media following the candidates and their stand-ins as they crisscrossed the state speaking to as many people as possible to further their campaigns. The local news broadcasts, both radio and television, and the print media were lavish in their coverage. They presented what the candidates said and what they did not say. They enjoined voters to be engaged by exercising their right and duty to be part of the process of identifying candidates for the fall election.

It has been interesting to hear the various comments people have made about all of this. They run the gamut from "I'm sick of hearing all of this." to "This is the American way," and everything in between.

Not to be outdone, the Catholic bishops in our country weighed in last fall on the matter of citizenship. In fact, they did what they have been *doing every four years since 1976*. They had something to say to the Catholic community about the importance of citizenship and the active involvement of Catholics as citizens. This past November, however, there was a notable difference in the bishops' effort which I believe is very significant and challenging.

In the past the emphasis in the bishops' documents was to identify fundamental and significant issues that impact on the very life of our nation. In identifying these issues the documents would basically present a summary of Catholic teaching on why each was fundamental or significant and what the Church actually taught about

each of them. In the latest document, however, the emphasis has shifted. The shift involves the addition of an extensive section on the formation of conscience. It encourages us to root the exercise of one's citizenship in the formation of one's conscience. The bishops are calling believers who cherish their Catholic faith to better prepare themselves to enter into the political realm by developing a properly formed conscience.

Our faith, that is our acceptance of God at the heart of lives and thus our acceptance of His teachings, needs to permeate our lives and animate our activity including political activity. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches "it is necessary that all participate each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good ... as far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life." (CCC nos. 1913-1915)

This obligation is not merely fulfilled by voting, as important as this is. No, this obligation includes much more. "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States" teaches that if we are to be true to our faith then a correctly formed conscience is an imperative for all of us. This is the teaching of our conference of bishops.

Along with this newly expanded and developed emphasis, the document raises up a number of major individual issues which involve "significant moral dimensions that should be carefully considered in each campaign and as policy decisions are made in the years to come." These issues are presented under the following categories:

- Human life
- Family life
- Social justice
- Global solidarity

In both parts of the document one can say the goal is to help Catholics "focus on what protects or threatens

human life and dignity." If we are able to see this and begin to engage many of our fellow Catholics in this direction, then we will be making a positive step forward for the true good of our society and for the world.

To help achieve this growing understanding and appreciation I have asked a number of people to join with me in making this document, first of all, known by as many as possible. Secondly, my hope is that we might help all of our Catholic people to appreciate and understand this teaching in ways that make it formative for all of us in our responsibilities as citizens.

I have asked Father Donald Dunson of St. Mary Seminary faculty to gather theologians together to prepare and make available presentations on forming consciences, particularly in light of political activity. Also, I have asked Tom Allio of the Diocesan Social Action Office and his colleagues to offer presentations on the full range of major individual issues identified by the bishops.

In addition, Father Joseph Hilinski, the director for continuing formation, will be working on programs for priests, deacons and certified pastoral ministers. Franciscan Brother Patrick Shea of the Diocesan Legal Office will offer papers and workshop presentations on various legal issues.

As you can see, I envision a very full program going forward on this issue. It is because I am proud of the document from the bishops and especially the direction it sets for all of us. We are all called to participate in life around us, including political life, for the good of all. This document presents a solid step forward. I hope all of us take advantage of talks, workshops, programs and other offerings on Faithful Citizenship. The world around us will be a better place for our bringing our faith convictions to the conversations affecting public life.