

Guidelines for Pastors and Parishes on Advocacy and Political Action

Catholic Social Teaching

The principles of Catholic social teaching should be the moral framework from which we address all issues in the political arena. Among those principles are:

- The life and dignity of the human person,
- Human rights and responsibilities,
- The call to family and community,
- The dignity of work and rights of workers,
- The preferential option for those who are poor and vulnerable
- Solidarity, and
- Care for God's creation.

Guidelines for Advocacy and Political Action

While it is increasingly accepted that major public issues have moral dimensions and that religious values have public consequences, there is often confusion and controversy over the participation of religious individuals and groups in public life.

Following are some practical guidelines for pastors and parishes on advocacy and political action which will clarify what is allowed on an individual basis and an institutional basis. Since these are only guidelines, each (arch) diocese, (arch) diocesan agency and parish, in consultation with its bishop, remains free to make its own determination as to what activities are proper for its personnel and committees.

1 Individual citizens are free to fully engage in partisan politics. The Church encourages all citizens to vote. In light of that, the Church urges voters to examine the

positions of candidates for public office on the full range of issues, as well as on their personal integrity and performance.

Religious leaders, however, should avoid taking public positions on candidates or publicly participating in political party matters even when acting in their individual capacity. Although not prohibited, it may be difficult to separate their personal activity from their public role as a church leader.

2 Unlike individuals, churches and other institutions that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code may in no way engage in partisan politics such as supporting or opposing individual candidates for office.

That means that no diocesan or parish entity or organization or other 501 (c) (3) exempt church organization should engage in voter education which directly or indirectly suggests that a particular candidate or party should be supported or opposed. That also means that no one candidate should be invited to a parish function during an election campaign, unless all candidates for that office are invited.

Advocacy on “issues” is not a partisan activity. Therefore, church organizations may take positions on public policies such as proposed legislation and ballot initiatives which can be referendums, constitutional amendments or changes to statutes.

3 Parishes and other church organizations should, in some cases, engage in issue-oriented activities and political action.

The local diocesan attorney should be consulted for local guidelines but limitations on the extent of such political action and advocacy are not generally a problem for parishes or active institutions, since that activity would be an insubstantial part of their total work. The following are examples of such acceptable activity:

- Conducting meetings and gatherings designed to share the Catholic Church’s teaching regarding the moral and ethical dimensions of public-policy issues and/or legislation.
- Preaching to parishioners about the sanctity and dignity of human life and the concept of the common good and exhorting them to “faithful citizenship.”
- Organizing participation in Catholic Advocacy Day and/or diocesan-sponsored issue-oriented events.
- Distributing fliers containing both a statement about issues before the Congress, the California Legislature or local government and the names and addresses of elected representatives.
- Encouraging individuals to contact their state or federal legislators in order to educate them and to develop support/opposition for legislation.

The following types of activities may be conducted with appropriate advice from the California Catholic Conference or from the (arch) diocese.

- Urging parishioners to register, to vote and to participate actively in Church-sponsored “get-out-the-vote” drives and other nonpartisan voter-education initiatives.
- Sponsoring multi-issue candidate forums to which all candidates for a particular office are invited.
- Conducting single-issue forums which present both sides of the issue objectively.
- Conducting signature-gathering efforts to qualify an initiative for the ballot, whether on or off parish property.

4 No (arch)diocesan or parish entity or organization may endorse, oppose or evaluate any political party or candidate for public office. No such organization can contribute in any way to a political candidate, party, campaign or political action committee. church property or personnel should not be used in campaign ads.

The following are examples of activities which are not allowed:

- Urging readers or listeners to vote for or against a particular candidate or party;
- Labeling a candidate or party as “pro-school aid” or “anti-life”; such a practice removes objectivity by not allowing readers to evaluate a candidate’s position themselves;
- Using plus (+) or minus (-) signs to evaluate a candidate or party;
- Rating candidates or parties on a scale of “1 to 10” for example, or otherwise saying “X is good,” “Y is better”;

The use of marked sample ballots.

5 Although Churches have no jurisdiction over public sidewalks and other public property in their vicinities, church parking is private property and the general public has no right to distribute partisan materials thereon. This may be difficult to control, but parish leaders should nevertheless deny permission for any such activity.

6 The California Catholic Conference staff reviews all of the statewide ballot initiatives and referenda. The bishops, after appropriate consultation, may choose—either individually or as a conference—to support, oppose or take no position on each measure.

When neither the California Catholic Conference nor the (arch) diocese has taken a public position on a specific measure, a parish or Catholic organization should not do so without previous consultation with the bishop.

Granting the use of church facilities to supporting or opposing groups should rarely be allowed. Only with the specific permission of the diocesan bishop and the local pastor should church facilities be used for signature gathering to place an initiative on the ballot.

All public policy materials distributed in parishes must be prepared by the (arch) diocese, the California Catholic Conference (CCC) or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).