

MY FATHER'S HOUSE

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A Man Without a Party

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I, like millions of Americans born after the Depression but before the Second World War, grew up as a staunch Democrat. My grandparents, my parents and my aunts and uncles all considered the Democratic Party to be the party of the people – especially the working people, but most especially the poor working people. We considered FDR as the savior who brought us out of the Depression. The labor movement got its early start through the great leaders of the Catholic Church. And both the Democrats and the labor unions inculcated the best principles of Catholic social philosophy, namely the dignity of the person and the rights of the worker to a just pay, a family wage, medical benefits, and proper working conditions.

Countless million of American Catholics considered that to be Catholic and Democratic were one and the same. Not only were the Democrats the leaders fighting for the working class, but also the leaders in the Civil Rights movement, especially under JFK and his brother, Bobby. All that was before the Democratic Party turned its back on the most defenseless of our citizens, namely the unborn. Since that time, the pro-abortion plank of the Democratic party has imposed a severe burden on the conscience of millions of Catholics. Meanwhile, the Republican party has emerged as the more family-friendly party insisting that a marriage must consist of a man and a woman. Also, they are now the pro-life party.

Bishop Curtiss' Response

Our dilemma has been very well expressed by Archbishop Curtiss of Omaha, Nebraska, writing in the August 18 issue of his archdiocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Voice*. What follows is an excerpt from his article.

“It is a strange reversal of roles these days for people who call themselves liberal to be supporters of abortion while those who are opposed to abortion are called conservative. Traditionally, liberals have championed the cause of ... the working poor and those who cannot compete in the marketplace. They have championed individual rights against economic and political pressure, and provided a voice for those who were voiceless in our society.”

“This is the reason that most immigrant Catholics were at one time members of the Democratic Party in this country. This was the party that looked out for the interests of minority people and their security in a highly competitive society so that the gap between the wealthy and the poor would not continue to widen. This effort resulted in a coalition of different movements in this country: labor unions, liberal politicians, and social activists in the Church.”

“But then a strange development began to take place. Somehow the issue of women's rights became linked with the issue of abortion. It became a liberal issue to promote equal rights for women, and the right of a woman to control her own agenda and her own destiny and her own body. The Church was generally supportive of this liberal development, as long as Catholic women maintained objective moral standards regarding sexuality and human life. But the issue of abortion was another matter. Once a distinct living person is formed in the womb, the mother does not have absolute right over this separate person. The fetus is not just a gob of protoplasm or an ‘intrusive biological force,’ as I heard the other day on the radio. It is a

distinct living person with a soul. To say that this distinct person has no rights is not a liberal position, but an elitist one. To rid the world of unwanted people is a totalitarian principle, not a democratic one.

“And so...the platform of the Democratic party introduced a pro-abortion plank that was clearly anti-life and therefore anti-Catholic...Instead of promoting a liberal cause in support of birth mothers and their babies, the Democratic party embraced an elitist cause by promoting the destruction of pre-born and partially-born human life.

“Catholic Democrats, therefore, have an obligation in conscience to do everything they can to reverse the pro-abortion policy of their party and to support those candidates who will protect human life in the womb.

“Catholic Republicans, on the other hand, have the obligation in conscience to see that their party plank against abortion is acted upon rather than ignored in legislative processes across the nation.”

The Response of the American Bishops

Recently, the bishops of the United States published a pastoral entitled “Faithful Citizens: Bringing Moral Vision to Public Life.” It is a magnificent document, one that should be read, studied and lived by every faithful American citizen. Following is a condensation of the main points of this challenging pastoral.

Faithful Citizens: Bringing Moral Vision to Public Life

“One of our greatest blessings in the United States is our right and responsibility to participate in civic life. the constitution protects the right of individuals and of religious bodies to speak out without governmental interference, endorsement or sanction. It is increasingly apparent that major public issues have clear moral dimensions and that religious values have significant public consequences. Our nation is enriched and our tradition of pluralism enhanced when religious groups contribute to the debate over the policies that guide the nation.

“Catholics are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test public life by the moral wisdom anchored in Scripture and consistent with the best of our nation’s founding ideals. Our moral framework does not easily fit the categories of right or left, Democrat or Republican. Our responsibility is to measure every party and platform by how its agenda touches human life and dignity.

“In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation. Every believer is called to faithful citizenship, to become an informed, active and responsible participant in the political process.

Challenges to Believers

“Our nation has been blessed with great freedom, vibrant democratic traditions, unprecedented economic strengths, abundant natural resources and a generous and religious people. Yet not all is right with our nation. Our prosperity does not reach far enough. Our culture does not lift us up; instead it may bring us down in moral terms. signs of the challenges surround us: abortion, poverty (especially among youth), violence, scandal, intense partisanship. All of these things destroy the lives and dignity of countless thousands.

“The new millennium requires a new kind of politics, focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls, more on the needs of the poor and vulnerable than the contributions of the rich and powerful, more on the pursuit of the common good than the demands of special interests. As Catholics and as voters, this is not an easy time for faithful citizenship. Faithful citizens not only consistently participate in public life; they are disciples who view these responsibilities through the eyes of faith and bring their moral convictions to their civic life.

“Sometimes it seems few candidates and no party fully reflect our values. but now is not a time for retreat. The new millennium should be an opportunity for renewed participation. We must challenge all parties and every

candidate to defend human life and dignity, to pursue greater justice and peace, to uphold family life and to advance the common good.

What Catholics Offer

“Catholic teaching offers a consistent set of moral principles for assessing issues, platforms and campaigns. Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we start with the dignity of the human person. Our teaching calls us to protect human life from conception to natural death, to defend the poor and vulnerable, and to work toward a more just society and a more peaceful world. No polls or focus groups can release us from the responsibility to speak for the voiceless, to act in accord with our moral convictions. The Catholic community also offers its own firsthand experience. Through our many Catholic institutions we have broad experience serving those in need. We know the needs of the poor.

Finally, the Catholic community is large and diverse. We are Republicans, Democrats and Independents. We are members of every race, come from every ethnic background and live in urban, rural and suburban communities. We are CEO’s and migrant farm workers, senators and persons on public assistance, business owners and union members. But we are all called to a common commitment to protect human life and stand with those who are poor and vulnerable. Thus, we bishops wish to suggest some issues which we believe are important in the national debate.

Protecting Human Life

“Human life is a gift from God, sacred and inviolable. This is the teaching that calls us to protect and respect every human life from conception until natural death. We urge Catholics and others to promote laws and social policies that protect human life and promote human dignity to the maximum degree possible. Laws that legitimize abortion, assisted suicide and euthanasia are profoundly unjust and wrong.

“We support constitutional protection for unborn human life, as well as legislative efforts to oppose abortion and euthanasia. We encourage the passage of laws and programs that promote childbirth and adoption over abortion and assist pregnant women and children. We support aid to those who are sick and dying by encouraging effective palliative care. We call on government and medical researchers to base their decisions regarding biotechnology and human experimentation on respect for the inherent dignity and inviolability of human life from its very beginning.

“The Church has always sought to have conflicts resolved by peaceful means between and among nations. Church teaching calls on us to avoid and to limit the effects of war in many different ways. Thus, direct and intentional attacks on civilians in war are never morally acceptable, nor is the use of weapons of mass destruction or other weapons that cannot distinguish between civilians and soldiers.

“War, genocide and starvation threaten the lives of millions throughout the world. We support programs and policies that promote peace and sustainable development for the world’s poor. We urge our nation to join the treaty to ban anti-personnel land mines and to promptly ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty as a step toward much deeper cuts in and the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. We further urge our nation to take more serious steps to reduce its own disproportionate role in the scandalous global trade in arms.

“Society has a right and duty to defend itself against violent crime and a duty to reach out to victims of crime. Yet our nation’s increasing reliance on the death penalty is extremely troubling. It has become clear, as Pope John Paul II has taught, that inflicting the penalty of death is cruel and unnecessary.

Promoting Family Life

“We must strive to make the needs and concerns of families a central national priority. Marriage as God intended it provides the basic foundation for family life and needs to be protected in the face of the many pressures working to undermine it. Tax, workplace, divorce and welfare policies must be designed to help families stay together and to

reward responsibility and sacrifice for children. Just wages should be paid to those who support their families. Special efforts should be taken to aid poor families.

“The education of children is a fundamental parental responsibility. All parents – the first, the most important educators – should have the opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, including private and religious schools.

“Communications, whether print media, radio, television or Internet, play a growing role in society and family life, shaping the values of our culture. We support regulation that limits the concentration of control over these media; disallows quick sales of media outlets that attract irresponsible owners seeking a quick profit; and opens these outlets to a greater variety of program sources, including religious programming. We support the development of the TV rating system and of the technology that assists parents’ TV supervision.

“The Internet, since it offers vastly expanded capabilities for learning and communicating, should be available to all students regardless of income. Because it poses a serious danger by giving easy access to pornographic and violent material, we support vigorous enforcement of existing obscenity and child pornography laws with regard to material on the Internet, as well as efforts by the industry to develop technology that assists parents, schools and libraries in blocking out unwanted material.

Pursuing Social Justice

“In accordance with God’s plan for human society, we are called to commit ourselves to protect and promote the life and dignity of the human person and the common good of society as a whole. We must always remember God’s special concern for the poor and vulnerable and make their needs our first priority in public life. We are concerned about a wide range of social issues:

Economic issues. Church teaching on economic justice insists that economic decisions and institutions be judged on whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person. We support policies that create jobs with adequate pay and decent working conditions, increase the minimum wage so it becomes a living wage and overcome barriers to equal pay and employment for women and minorities.

Labor. We affirm the Church’s traditional teaching in support of the right of all workers to choose to organize and bargain collectively and to exercise these rights without reprisal. We also affirm Church teaching on the importance of economic freedom, initiative and the right to private property, which provide resources to pursue the common good.

Poverty. Efforts to provide for the basic financial needs of poor families and children must enhance their lives and dignity. The goal should be reducing poverty and dependency, not simply cutting resources and programs. We seek approaches that promote greater responsibility and offer concrete steps to help families leave poverty behind.

Social Security. We are also concerned about the income security of low- and average-wage workers and their families, when they retire, become disabled or die. In many cases, women are particularly disadvantaged. Any proposal to change Social Security must provide a decent and reliable income for these workers and those who depend on them.

Health care. Affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right. We support health care that is affordable and accessible to all.

Housing. The lack of safe, affordable housing is a national crisis. We support a recommitment to the national pledge of “safe and affordable housing” for all and effective policies that will increase the supply of quality housing and preserve, maintain and improve existing housing.

Farm policy. The first priority for agriculture policy should be food security for all. Food is not like any other commodity: It is necessary for life itself. Our support for food stamps, the Women, Infant and children program (WIC) and other programs that directly benefit poor and low-income people is based on our belief that no one should face hunger in a land of plenty. Farmers deserve a decent return for their labor. Our priority concern for the poor calls us to advocate especially for the needs of farm workers whose pay is often inadequate and whose housing and working conditions are often deplorable. We also urge that public policies support the practice of sustainable agriculture and careful stewardship of the earth and its natural resources.

Environment. Care for the earth and for the environment is a “moral challenge” in the words of Pope John Paul II (1990 World Day of Peace message). We support policies that protect the land, water and air we share, and encourage environmental protection, sustainable development and greater justice in sharing the burdens of environmental neglect and recovery.

Immigration. The gospel mandate to love our neighbor and welcome the stranger leads the Church to care for immigrants, both documented and undocumented.

Violence. This concern leads us to promote a greater sense of moral responsibility, to advocate a reduction in violence in the media, to support gun safety measures and reasonable restrictions on access to assault weapons and handguns and to oppose the death penalty.

Discrimination. Our society must also combat discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity or age. Such discrimination constitutes a grave injustice and an affront to human dignity. We support judiciously administered affirmative action programs as tools to overcome discrimination and its continuing effects.

Practicing Global Solidarity

Since the human family extends across the globe, our responsibility to promote the common good requires that we do whatever we can to address human problems wherever they arise around the world. As a very wealthy and powerful nation, the United States has a responsibility to help the poor and vulnerable, promote global economic prosperity and environmental responsibility, foster stable and peaceful relations among nations and uphold human rights in the world community.

“We urge the United States to provide debt relief to overcome poverty in the poorest countries, which are shackled by a debt burden that forces them to divert scarce resources from health education and other essential services.

“We should play a leading role in helping to alleviate global poverty through foreign aid programs and support sustainable development and provide new economic opportunities for the poor without promoting population control and through trade policies that are tied to worker protection, human rights and environmental concerns.

“More concerted efforts to ensure the promotion of religious liberty and other basic human rights need to be an integral part of U.S. foreign policy. We also need more consistent support for the United Nations, other international bodies and international law.

“Persons fleeing persecution should be provided safe haven in other countries, including the United States. We urge a more generous immigration and refugee policy based on providing temporary or permanent safe have haven for those in need.

“The U.S. should take an affirmative role, in collaboration with the international community, in addressing regional conflicts. Assistance in resolving these conflicts must include a willingness to support international peacekeeping, as well as long-term post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Recommitting Ourselves

“Building peace, combating poverty and despair and protecting freedom and human rights are not only moral imperatives; they are wise national priorities. Given its enormous power and influence in world affairs, the United States has a special responsibility to ensure that it is a force for justice and peace beyond its borders. “Liberty and justice for all” is not only a profound national pledge; it is a worthy goal for any world leader.

“We hope these reflections will contribute to a renewed political vitality in our land. We urge all citizens to register, vote and stay involved in public life, seeking the common good and renewing our democracy.

“As Catholics, we can celebrate the new millennium by recommitting ourselves to carry the values of the gospel and Church teaching into the public square. As citizen, we can and must participate in the debates and choices over the values, vision and leaders that are taking our nation into the new century. This dual calling of faith and citizenship is at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in the United States.”

7 Themes of Catholic Social Teaching

These key themes are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition:

- 1. Life and dignity of the human person.** Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Human life is sacred and each person has inherent dignity. Calls to advance human rights are illusions if the right to life itself is subject to attack.
- 2. Call to family, community and participation.** The human person is not only sacred but inherently social. The God-given institutions of marriage and the family are central and serve as the foundations for social life. They must be supported, not undermined. Beyond the family, every person has a right to participate in the wider society and a corresponding duty to work for the advancement of the common good and the well-being of all, especially the poor and weak.
- 3. Rights and responsibilities.** As social beings, our relationships are governed by a web of rights and corresponding duties. Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things that allow one to live a decent life – faith and family, food and shelter, health care and housing, education and employment.
- 4. Option for the poor and vulnerable.** The Bible and the Church call on all of us to embrace a preferential love of the poor and vulnerable.
- 5. Dignity of work and the rights of workers.** The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's act of creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers, owners and managers must be respected.
- 6. Solidarity.** Because of the interdependence among all the members of the human family around the globe, we have a moral responsibility to commit ourselves to the common good everywhere.
- 7. Care for God's creation.** Our use of the world must be directed by God's plan for creation, not simply by our own benefit. Our stewardship of the earth is a kind of participation in God's act of creating and sustaining the world.

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