

Faith & Politics

This material was created by the CONNECTIONS Group at Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago, Illinois and presented on October 17, 2004. CONNECTIONS provides service, social, speaker, and spiritual opportunities for people 35 and older, single or married.

We are members of Old St. Pat's. We were drawn here by the hope of becoming a community where we could worship, question, volunteer, work, think and participate with fellow believers. The questions we address here are one element of our concern: the intersection of faith and politics.

Does your faith influence your politics? Are faith and your view of government related? How does faith call you to action in your community or on political issues? Can you and your friends or colleagues have conversations about faith and politics that go beyond political parties and single issues?

As faithful Catholics, we seek a respectful discussion and community-led insight into the relationship between faith and politics. This is not an opportunity to promote or discourage support for any candidate, political party, or position. Instead, it's an opportunity to exchange ideas, share perspectives, raise consciousness, and deepen connections with each other.

The Separation of Church and State ~ the Intersection of Faith and Politics

Our first national political figures – the Founding Fathers – were quite familiar with the tension between faith and politics. Many had fled their home country seeking religious freedom. Our founders made the separation of church and state a fundamental principle of our Constitution.

Separation of church and state does not mean a lack of perception of the importance of the Deity. For example, the Declaration of Independence states that we are “endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights.” In our Pledge of Allegiance, we state that we are “one nation, under God.” Our currency declares: “In God we trust.” And for years we swore on a bible in a court of law to attest to the credibility of our testimony.

What is best for families, our communities, our nation, our world? Can we balance Catholic social teaching, Christian principles, and doctrinal positions on issues when we find that certain candidates align with those views on some issues, yet not on others? How, if at all, does our faith influence our politics?

A headline in the Green Bay Gazette declares: “Faith communities feel pressure of politics.” The article states: “The value-laden politics of the 2004 presidential election are dividing faith communities across the country, especially Catholics, who have traditionally been more Democratic than Republican. The issues of abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, the war in Iraq and gay marriage are tearing congregations apart.”

In 1960, John F. Kennedy stated: "I'm not running to be a Catholic president. I'm running to be a president who happens to be Catholic." A U.S. Senate Candidate from Illinois recently declared that Christ would not vote for his opponent because the opponent "voted to behave in a way that it is inconceivable for Christ to have behaved." Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington DC, referring to the practice in some dioceses of denying Communion to pro-choice candidates and the people who vote for them, said: "I do not favor a confrontation at the altar rail with the Sacred Body of the Lord Jesus in my hand." These quotations reflect some of the many challenges and issues at the intersection of faith and politics.

Catholic Social Teaching Challenges Us to Deal With Today's Social Concerns

How do we sort through the intersection of faith and politics as Catholics? Catholic social teaching over the last century provides wise guidance. Below is a summary of this teaching, contrasted with concerns of today's world.

People deserve dignity; we are made in the image of God.

- In Albania, organized crime rings trick teenage girls into sex slavery and trafficking.
- In Kenya, 38% of females between 15 and 19 years old have undergone female genital mutilation. In some communities, the rate exceeds 80%.
- In the U.S. in 2000, 1.3 million pregnancies were terminated by abortion.
- Supporters of embryonic stem cell research say it has enormous medical potential. Critics object to the research on moral grounds.

The obligation to "love our neighbor" has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader social commitment.

- 14.4 million families in the U.S. have critical housing needs. City officials cited the lack of affordable housing as the leading cause of homelessness.
- Requests for shelter by homeless families increased 15% in 2003, with 88% of the cities reporting an increase. Nationally, children make up nearly 40% of the homeless population.
- Nearly 1/3 of American women report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives.

How we treat the poor and the most vulnerable is a moral test of a society.

- 12 million children in the United States live under the federal poverty level. Child poverty is higher in America and globally than ever before in history.
- 26.7 million Americans - including 1 in 8 children - are currently uninsured.
- In 2001, infants born to Black mothers were more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday as infants born to White mothers.

The state is an instrument to promote human dignity, protect human rights, and build the common good.

- Child trafficking is a global human rights tragedy affecting over 1 million children each year.

Each of our rights has a corresponding responsibility.

- “Those to whom much is given, much is expected.” Luke 12:48
- Philosopher journalist Walter Lippman stated, “For every right that you cherish you have a duty which you must fulfill. For every hope that you entertain, you have a task you must perform. For every good that you wish could happen... you will have to sacrifice your comfort and ease. There is nothing for nothing any longer.”

All people have a right and a responsibility to participate in political institutions so that government can achieve its proper goals.

- Almost 50% of Americans don't vote.

All workers have a right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, safe working conditions, and to organize and join unions.

- In India, children trapped in debt bondage roll cigarettes 14 hours a day.
- In Pakistan, children are forced to weave carpets in dark rooms.
- The number of families living below the poverty line in the U.S. as part of the “working poor” has increased in recent years as median income has declined.

How we treat the environment is a measure of our stewardship for God's creation.

- Opponents of oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge say it will destroy an irreplaceable Arctic environment. Supporters say drilling is important because it will reduce our reliance on foreign countries.
- Water is the most common substance on earth, but the lack of clean water for drinking and sanitation has become a crisis in many parts of the world. Americans and Europeans waste large amounts of clean tap water, but spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year on water in plastic bottles.

Pope John Paul II said, "Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements." Peace is the fruit of justice.

- Combatants and their sympathizers in many countries -- including Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Rwanda -- have raped women as a weapon of war with near complete impunity.
- In some countries, children as young as seven are recruited or kidnapped to serve as soldiers in military forces.

All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society.

- Only two advanced industrialized countries - the U.S. and Japan - allow the death penalty.
- This December, religious leaders in India will consider several proposed legal changes for India's 140 million Muslims — including whether to give a married woman the right to collect inheritance along with her brothers.
- 50,000 women and children are trafficked into the U.S. each year as sex slaves, domestics, seamstresses, and agricultural workers.

- Some priests have denied communion to gay-rights supporters wearing rainbow-colored sashes.

We are one human family. Our responsibilities to each other cross national, racial, economic and ideological differences.

- In October 2004, the archbishop of Manila said that the Catholic Church hasn't done enough to promote responsible family planning in the fast-growing Philippines.
- Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, people who are, or are perceived to be, Muslim or of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent have reported increased discrimination, harassment, and racial profiling.

Should the Ten Commandments appear in public buildings? Should the Church deny Communion to Catholic politicians or their supporters who support abortion rights, euthanasia, gay marriage or stem-cell research? Are Catholic social teaching and the issues described above part of the conversation?

The late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago recognized the difficulty of addressing these issues. He suggested that we create a unified and consistent ethic of life by addressing these issues as a “seamless garment.” He challenged us to have a seamless respect for life in the many issues we face - from the womb to the tomb.

So how do our faith and our politics intersect? How do we know what the Lord asks of us? According to the Prophet Micah, the Lord asks that we act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God.



Discussion Questions:

1. Does your faith call you to action? If so, how? How might you take action in your community or on political issues in the future?
2. What role, if any, does the institution of the Catholic Church play in directing or informing your political views?
3. Our Constitution states that there should be separation of Church and State. How, if at all, is your view of the role of government related to your faith?
4. What role, if any, should faith play in a political leader’s positions? What do you think about the use of religious or faith references in political campaigns?
5. Some say that United States is deeply divided over politics, do you agree? If so, how can we, as people of faith, help heal that divide?

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