

# An Agenda For An American Catholic Action

by Deacon Keith A. Fournier

**“There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called ‘spiritual’ life with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called ‘secular life,’ that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture.”**

**—Pope John Paul II**



**F**or years preceding the last great council, Vatican II, seeds of renewal were sprouting throughout Europe. These seeds included the flourishing of an entire model of lay apostolate geared toward what we might call the “evangelization of culture.”

I use this term to refer to an understanding of our baptismal mission, which recognizes we all have a vocation to participate in the mission of the Church according to our state in life and compels us to be faithful to that call. This two-pronged understanding would later be referred to by that great council as the “universal call to holiness” and the “lay apostolate.”

The real issues are that Catholics understand the fundamental truth that every area of human life, personal and social, and therefore every area of human culture, is meant to be affected and changed by its contact with the ongoing redemptive mission of the Church—and that they live and act in a manner consistent with that recognition.

That mission, which participates in the

mission of the whole Church, is accomplished primarily through the lives, words and actions of her lay sons and daughters living their lives redemptively in every segment of human society.

Great movements were growing among the faithful in the European continent during this time before the great Council. Among them was one called “Catholic Action.”

Structurally, the model was very different than what we would currently build because these were different times. The Second Vatican Council has given extraordinary direction to the lay faithful that must be incorporated in any new Catholic Action effort.

Also, the “Catholic Action” that existed in countries such as France, Italy and Spain and in Latin America faced a different cultural challenge (at least on some fronts) than we do in 21st century America. Structurally, “Catholic Action” was an organization of the lay faithful coming directly under the direct control of the local bishop.

The model being proposed now—by

the Church, by the hour and by me in this article—is structurally quite different. However, like its model, it is also oriented toward the recovery of a Catholic influence in every segment of American society and culture.

In English-speaking countries, the terms “Catholic Action” and “lay apostolate” were used interchangeably. “Catholic Action” had been defined by Pope Pius XI as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.” However, as the development of directive pastoral counsel toward the participation of the lay faithful unfolded, the role of the lay faithful in the world became much clearer.

The definition was seen as partial, the lay faithful (later to be wonderfully addressed by John Paul II as “The lay members of Christ’s faithful” in his encyclical “Christifidelis Laici”) were honored as having their own unique task in evangelization of human culture.

A great merit of this movement and development of understanding was that a dialogue of prayer and pastoral consideration ensued on the lay apostolate, with

specific focus not only on their call to holiness (the “universal call” to holiness) but on their unique and indispensable role in bringing Christian influence to bear on human society and culture.

We may refer to that as “cultural conversion.” The difficulty, then and now, has been to root such efforts, particularly when they involve political participation, in a solid understanding.

## THE CHALLENGE

Catholic *must* be the “noun.” My experience in political action and policy work has all too often involved working with people who have acted as though Catholic is an adjective. In other words, they are Catholic conservatives. Or they are Catholic\_\_\_\_, fill in the blank.

Sometimes, Catholic Christians who rediscover their call to the evangelization of culture (particularly in its subset of political participation) engage in a sort of Catholic version of the old evangelical protestant Christian problem of using proof texts from the Bible to support their political positions.

The difference is that some of these Catholics use quotes from papal encyclicals or Vatican II documents as their proof texts. Interestingly, they seem to like the Latin names—I guess they hope it sounds more Catholic. The problem is a similar one.

In both approaches, whether using the Bible or Church Documents as proof texts, the result can be lacking—rather than *inform* political positions by the scripture or tradition, people can end up (knowingly or unknowingly) trying to justify their own political positions by reference to authority.

You simply cannot fit faithful Catholics (or I would argue faithful Christians of any confession or communion) in the prevailing categories of

left or right, liberal or conservative. Nor should either major party ever have a lock on our support.

Informed, faithful and engaged Catholic citizens are beginning to see the connection between the social teaching of their Church (which is true for all persons and not just those who believe) and their politics. They are gathering around what I call four pillars of political and social participation: the dignity of life; the primacy of family; authentic human freedom; and solidarity with the poor.

We are not first Democrats or Republicans, conservatives or liberals. We are Catholics. “Catholic is the Noun.”

## PAST EFFORTS TO ORGANIZE AMERICAN CATHOLICS:

### The “Religious Right”

Though the movement simplistically called the “religious right” tried to include us in its movements at the latter end of the 20th century, we were never at home there. Those Catholics who tried to fit into the culture of the “religious right” often learned they had about as much of a home therein as their immigrant ancestors did in some of the original colonies.

Though we often shared what has been called the “social conservative” agenda, the “religious right” (even though mostly well intended) was built upon—and thrived within—a persecuted minority model of activism. The term was used to marginalize and denigrate many well-intended Christians who engaged in political activism.

However, much of the movement was premised upon an “anti” approach to effecting social, political and judicial change. Its emphasis was mostly on opposing the current problems and not on proposing alternatives. It spoke more often of what was wrong with the culture

rather than proposing a better way and how to build a truly just social order with the principles derived from the social teaching of the Christian Church.

The principles of engagement that motivated some of these efforts were limited at best and terribly flawed at worst. Some of the efforts associated with that movement were built upon on a model of engagement with the world that was, at root, at odds with a Catholic world view and founded on flawed principles of engagement.

They also had limited mobilizing potential.

For example, the concept of defending our rights that permeated some of the efforts of sincere evangelical Christians in political (and legal) activism, missed a deeper truth—we ultimately are called to give our rights away if it means bringing others to the Lord.

**“Christians are not simply one more interest group in America or in any nation.”**

Then there was the call to secure a “place at the table” that operated (and still operates) as a mobilizing principle for many grass roots political efforts led by evangelicals of the last decade. This is the prevailing model of political action that mobilized many Christians associated with the “religious right.” They moved from an almost apolitical approach of cultural engagement to a potentially even worse mistake. They initially arose out of their apolitical complacency to protect themselves. That is understandable. However, it was, as a principle of cultural engage-

ment, limited and consequently often very ineffective.

Christians are not simply one more interest group in America or in any nation. We are, in the words of the ancient Christian manuscript entitled “A Letter to Diognetus,” called to become the “soul of the world.”

We are called to carry on the redemptive work of the Lord by “going into all the world” and humanizing, transforming and elevating human society. Our purpose is to promote the common good. We serve the only eternal table, to which the entire human race is invited.

These limited visions of political participation were not only prevalent among some of our evangelical friends in the conservative movement. Many of the Catholic efforts at political participation that either sprung from their efforts or worked alongside them (and, may I add, in efforts at legal activism as well) were also rooted in these limited visions.

Some of our own Catholic efforts were first conservative movements which we figuratively “wrapped a rosary” around. In other words, we sometimes put proof texts from Church documents on our own political ideas or we adopted a model used by our evangelical Protestant brethren that actually, at its deepest level, is antithetical to a Catholic worldview.

However, we are even less at home in what is left of the “left” in America. That is, of course, if we actually read what the Church teaches and not what some “agendaizer” on the contemporary political left tries to tell us that the Church teaches.

The contemporary American left or liberal movement, left faithful Catholics behind on most of the issues that once attracted us (if it ever had any real claim on their political participation) when it ceased speaking of a “living” or “family” wage and catered more to the elites in the

current Hollywood establishment and the crowd who define choice as unimpeded abortion along with the bizarre collection of “liberals” that have co-opted a once decent label and now populate and control much of the Democratic party.

The party that built its influence among American Catholics on an alleged commitment to the poor, now champions as a right the killing of children in the first home of their mothers womb.

## “Things are true not because they are Catholic; they are Catholic because they are true.”

Many of the approaches to political participation, both on the right and on the left, were “outside in” rather than “inside out.” For some Catholic Christians who got involved, they sometimes ended up in the conundrum of trying to support political positions with the teachings of the Church, as though the Catholic faith was a coat that you put on, rather than the very core of our identity from which we inform all of our participation in the social arena, including politics.

### A Catholic Model

**A** Catholic approach should seek to first inform our political participation by the great principles found in the treasury that is our faith and our social teaching. It should also recognize the great truth of human freedom and the vast area within which prudent judgment can lead to otherwise faithful Christians disagreeing on matters of public policy.

We need to always promote the truth as taught by the Church, no matter what it is labeled in the limiting language of contemporary political parlance. As Francis Cardinal George said

so well at his installation in Chicago, “The faith is neither liberal nor conservative, the faith is true.” Things are true not *because* they are Catholic; they are Catholic because they are true.

And if they are true, they are true for all.

We must build a different model than the “religious right,” the “religious left” or most of what is currently out there in this field of political action ripe for harvest.

Our political participation must always be rooted in our baptismal vocation and geared toward serving the common good by promoting human life and dignity, the family, authentic human freedom and solidarity with the needy.

We must present a redemptive model, a model of being the “soul” of the world. We must build a Catholic model of political participation. There are *many* issues in the so-called political arena where faithful Catholics can—and do—differ. We must be careful to remember that we are first Catholics and from that base we seek to inform our participation by our faith.

We are not first conservatives or liberals—we are Catholics. We are American Catholics. There is a hierarchy of truths we speak of in Catholic theology. We now need an understanding of the hierarchy of values and how it applies to political participation and faithful citizenship.

**W**e need to be particularly careful in our common task of building an “American Catholic Action” on two other fronts that seem to be rearing their heads as we move toward the next great political event in America, the presiden-

tial race of 2004 and the issues that are rising to prominence.

## 1. The Competency of the Church

As the Council Fathers reiterated, the Church is an expert in humanity. She does have much to say about every area wherein human persons are involved. While it is true that she may not speak directly to a lot of fields of human concern, she gives us guiding principles that must always be our road map.

Let's look at one area right out of the contemporary headlines, the current potential conflict with the nation of Iraq. On both the left and the right I have heard and read articulate and concerned Catholics taking differing positions on

she is, would we say the same about Him if He was in our midst? I am certain we would not. Yet we profess that He continues to guide us through the "magisterium," the teaching office of our Church. There is a growing tendency in some neo-conservative circles to dismiss this caution, indeed to somehow insinuate that the Church is not competent to speak to this issue. Again, here is where making sure that "Catholic is the Noun" becomes so important!

## 2. We Must Inform All Our Life And Our Participation By Our Faith

There is an extraordinary treasury of teaching in the Catholic Church that has great relevancy on economic issues, jus-

If we act as though the Church speaks only to faith and morals and assume by that expression that the Church teaching only affects our personal life or our religious life we do not understand the very heart of our faith, our baptismal obligation, the mission of the Church or the implications of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ on our own vocation to participate in the ongoing mission of the Church.

It is time for Catholic Christians to understand that the mobilizing principle for our action is to serve the common good and to lead by proposing, modeling and building a better way that helps all men and women to reach the fullness of their own human destiny. In the political arena, that way cries out for a form of an "American Catholic Action."

In responding to this challenge, our message and our mission must be clear at all times. Our spokespersons, our leaflets, our manuals, all must speak from the heart of the Church, be popular, understandable and defensible. Now is the time for all faithful Catholics, other Christians and all people of faith and good will to double our prayer and roll up our sleeves of service.

I am a Christian. I am a Catholic Christian. I am an American Catholic Christian. All three terms found my identity and my obligations in my efforts to be a faithful citizen.

I believe the social teaching of the Catholic Church provides the raw material from which a new public philosophy can and must be constructed. It is filled with the truth about the human person and how we are to live together. It is not simply for the religious. Rather, the Church walks the way of the person and speaks truth for all who will listen.

This new public philosophy must be built around the major themes so beautifully articulated in the document of the American bishops entitled "Faithful

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this issue of major concern.

As Catholics who are loyal and patriotic Americans, we can—and do—disagree on this vital issue. As Catholics who are faithful citizens we must discern whether military action fits the "just war" analysis, long championed by our Church. This has been a guiding principle that has stood the test of time and been applied for centuries in global conflict.

We need to listen to Pope John Paul II and the magisterial teaching—and not dismiss the clear cautions coming from those sources of direction under the notion that they are somehow not competent on these issues. The Church *is* competent, she is an "expert in humanity."

If the Church is the continued presence of Jesus Christ on the earth, which

tice issues, family and living wage issues, human relationships, technology and indeed every area of human relationships, the family, the affairs of nations. The councils, the encyclical and apostolic letters—it is called the "social teaching" of the Catholic Church. To build an "American Catholic Action" we must find it, read it, pray through it and apply it in our contemporary culture.

In fact, that process is part of what it truly means to live our lives informed by faith and not fall victim to what has been called by our Church among the greatest errors of our age, that wrong separation of faith and life, faith and culture. That leads to the "two parallel lives" John Paul II warns of in the quotation with which I began this article.

Citizenship.” Those themes are neither liberal nor conservative, but truly human and rooted in truly human values.

I have played a small role in raising the issue of mobilizing Catholic citizens to vote in a manner consistent with their faith. I have spent a great amount of time, prayer, and energy seeking to mobilize Catholic citizens, no matter what their political affiliation, to recognize the implications of the values informed by their faith on their political participation.

I joined the legion of praise for “Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium,” the profound statement on political participation and responsibility, released in 1999 by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

I regularly write and speak to both the application of Catholic social teaching to faithful citizenship and the extraordinary potential a mobilized Catholic constituency could have in the conversion of culture and the progress of authentic social justice. There is a lot of work to be done.

## What Must Be Done

### EDUCATION

**B**ecause there is such a lack of understanding among Catholics concerning the implications of their faith on their public life and political participation, we need a massive educational effort! This is what the Church calls catechesis. This particular catechesis will require a kind civics lesson infused with the implications of Catholic social teaching, the greatest hidden treasure in the current Catholic experience.

Several months ago, at a Sunday vigil Mass, we were asked “How many have ever heard of Catholic social teaching?” My wife and I and the nun who assists in the parish were the *only ones who raised our hands!*

Then we heard a well-meaning parish-

ioner speak of a program in our own diocese flowing out of the “Peace and Justice” Office. Though much was inspiring, I couldn’t help but be a bit suspicious. It seemed tinged with the old 60s liberal motif that has often co-opted discussions of Catholic social teaching in the current cultural, political and social climate.

In fact, that has been part of the problem. There has been a propensity to wed the *principles* found in Catholic social teaching with the *applications* of a time past.

The American bishop’s 1999 letter entitled “Faithful Citizenship” was extremely helpful. It was popularly written and insightful. Only one problem—few Catholics know it exists and even fewer have read it.

We need a massive, popular educational effort that also leads to action!

### ACTION

**F**or the mission of an American Catholic Action to be fruitful will also require the mobilization of a dynamic movement of Catholic citizens and the building of mediating associations of committed Catholics to engage in the cultural mission, specifically through policy and political participation. That will require building organizations geared toward action, led by the lay faithful.

There is a lot of talk in anticipation of the presidential election of 2004 about a “Catholic vote,” again. But the problem is—there is none. Perhaps there never truly was in the sense of a fully informed and activated Catholic voice. Gone is the past demographic, rooted in the large cities with their ethnic neighborhoods, of a predictable blue-collar Democrat Catholic vote. Those days are over.

However, there is no real Republican Catholic vote either—in the sense of a Catholic rush to the GOP, no matter

what some of our friends in engaged conservative evangelical political movements, or some Catholic pundits seek to tell the world. Even though Catholics are socially conservative, they do not consider themselves to be a part of the Religious Right.

Don’t get me wrong. It is possible that there could be a new Catholic voting pattern built—and that is why I have helped to build “Your Catholic Voice.” The mission of “Your Catholic Voice” is to motivate, educate and activate Catholic citizens for political and social participation as a response to their baptismal vocation and the call of our Church to be faithful citizens.

### CONCLUSION

**A** lot of work has to be done in both education and mobilization if we are going to build an “American Catholic Action.” In doing the work we must always remember that Catholic is the Noun. It defines who we are, in relationship to Jesus Christ, his Church, and her saving mission to the whole world.

I, for one, am weary of the political labels of liberal and conservative. They simply do not work. The constrictive nature of the current political labels, categories and loaded political conversation often impede an authentic Catholic discussion and discourages Catholic citizen participation.

I loved the words of Cardinal George when he accepted the invitation to serve in Chicago: “The faith is neither liberal nor conservative, the faith is true.” The implications of that faith in the formation of our political judgments and participation will not easily fit these labels, either.

Nor should we who are Catholic allow ourselves to be co-opted or compromised by either “the left” or “the right.”

There are many political issues where Catholics can—and do—disagree. They

involve prudential judgments. For example, efforts to adopt conservative or liberal approaches to tax policies and call them Catholic not only do a disservice to the debate but miss the point. Faithful Catholics can actually be conservative” or even liberal as it relates to the tax system.

However, there is a hierarchy of values.

There are some issues where it is absolutely clear and we must be faithful. For example, in the areas concerning the inviolable dignity of every human life, from conception to natural death; the primacy of family; authentic human and religious freedom; and solidarity with the poor and needy, we must not compromise.

There is a lack of a popular, authentic Catholic voice articulating the treasury of truth called the Church’s social teaching in a popular and accessible way. Remember, as Catholics we do not believe that what the Catholic Church teaches on social issues is true just for Catholics, it is true for all people. After all, as the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council noted, the Church “is an expert in humanity.”

We need to be versed in and able to offer the principles of Catholic social teaching afresh, in every generation, as a path to authentic social justice for all men and women. That is one of the vital tasks of our age—not only for the sake of Catholics, but also for all citizens.

The social teaching of the Catholic Church is a treasury. That treasury includes vital human insights on life, true freedom, family, good governance, and solidarity that can help immensely in our common social task as Americans.

The Catholic Church refuses to alter its bedrock conviction concerning the dignity of all life from conception to natural death—in spite of the loaded rhetoric that has hijacked the word “choice” at the expense of our obliga-

tions to the least of our brethren.

It insists that every abortion is the taking of innocent human life and cannot be condoned. Though based on a different moral analysis, it also calls for mercy to trump retribution in its current opposition to the states’ use of capital

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punishment, insisting that it is no longer required to protect the common good.

The Church is the guardian of the family. She is her greatest protection against social, political, verbal and legal engineers bent on redefining the family. The family is the first and vital cell of every human society and, in the words of John Paul II, “the future of the world passes through the family.”

The Church insists that religious freedom is a basic human right. This Church encourages the market economy but condemns a “savage capitalism” which forgets that the end of all human work is the human person—not the accumulation of capital. It champions the poor and calls the powerful to recognize that to “...those to whom much is given, much is required.” This is all because the Church champions authentic freedom and always guards, loves and protects the poor.

It is time for a Catholic voice and a Catholic voter movement that understands these kinds of principles, articulates them in a popular framework and informs their own political participation by them. It is time for an “American Catholic Action.” It must include Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and non-aligned voters. Such a movement could foster the vital public conversation America so desperately needs as she faces

this new century and millennium.

Our “post 9/11” America is ripe for such a movement. It seems that the loud voices of fear that sought to make the American church/state model a barrier to such a conversation have lost their dominance. Both major parties

are now discussing the role of faith in public life. And both parties are seeking the “Catholic vote.”

To my brothers and sisters who share my Catholic faith—this could truly be our hour. A time to move from being a “diaspora” community in America to helping to build an authentic environment for the flourishing of the human community and a vibrant model of freedom, social justice, solidarity, and inclusion.

Let us begin! †

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