

Faithful Citizenship

Time for Catholic Action: Responding to the Bishop's Call

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

In November of 1999, in anticipation of the 2000 U.S. presidential elections, the Catholic Bishops of America issued a statement called “Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium.” It further developed themes beautifully articulated in a pastoral letter they had penned entitled “Living the Gospel of Life.”

In 2003, just before another vital presidential election, they have recently released “Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility.” However, I must now ask the question: How many Catholics and other Christians have actually even read the statement?

Our bishops have spoken with clarity, prophetic insight and pastoral wisdom. In so doing they have answered the prayers of millions of Catholics, other Christians, and all people of good will. On this eve of the upcoming presidential election, many had prayed and hungered for a simply written, understandable explanation of the implications of Christian faith on political participation.

These statements are the answer to that prayer and provide both bread for the journey and tools for the task of

rebuilding the infrastructure of a society in disrepair! They present a strategic blueprint for what must become a new *Catholic Action* for America...and beyond.

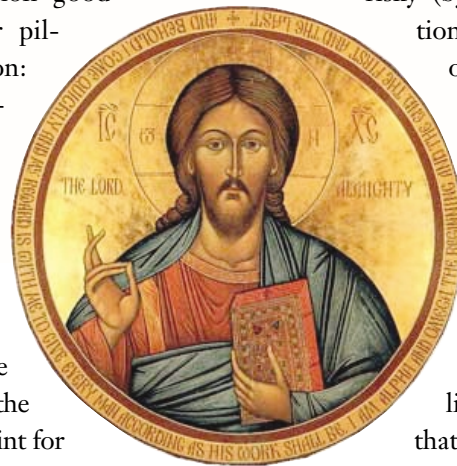
I am a co-founder of “Your Catholic Voice,” a movement of Catholics serving the common good through our four pillars of participation: life; family; freedom; and solidarity with the poor. We are trying to respond to the bishop’s call by offering the truths contained in the social teaching of the Church as a blueprint for building a truly just society for all men and women.

Like many other Catholics seeking to inform my political and social participation by my faith, I have spent years—both on my knees and in the activist trenches—in the struggle to end what Pope John Paul II properly labeled the “culture of death,” and to build what he calls a new “culture of life” and a “civi-

lization of love.”

Captured by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council concerning the mission of the Church in the modern world, and informed by the extraordinary teaching of Pope John Paul II, with his infectious enthusiasm for the “new evangelization,” I have labored in the “vineyard” of the culture for decades. I have come to understand that the missionary “fields” of our age must include the call to social, cultural, economic and political participation. These are the fields ripe for harvest!

I have gone to Court as a lawyer, lobbied Congress, and even engaged in risky (by some people’s evaluations) ecumenical efforts, all of which were aimed at utilizing every possible resource I could to effect lasting cultural change and conversion. I refuse to just “curse the darkness” because I believe that Christians are called to light the torch of truth that alone can dispel it. We carry on the redemptive mission of the Lord whom we serve.



First undertook cultural evangelization as a layman, and for years now, I have continued the task as a Catholic deacon. Deacons are ordained not to the priesthood but “unto the ministry” and one of our tasks is the work of charity and social justice. I am living as a mis-

sionary in a nation that I love called America, which is essentially post-Christian. I know that the fields of our age are indeed ripe for the harvest. One of the most vital fields in the Christian mission to the culture is the arena called political participation.

When the American bishops issued their 1998 letter entitled “Living the Gospel of Life: The Challenge to American Catholics,” I joined the chorus of praise and redoubled my prayer and evangelical action in this social apostolate. But, to my chagrin, I often met with cynicism and suspicion of my actions from some unlikely circles. I was the subject of labels, both political and theological. Yet I simply sought to be a faithful Catholic Christian and a faithful citizen. I still do. In my experience, that cynicism is all too often entrenched

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among even some Catholics in America.

The 1999 statement entitled “Faithful Citizenship” was another welcome drink for me, flowing from the waters of wisdom that always flow from the heart of the Catholic Church to the center of the world into which she is sent. It also came at just the right time. My activism had become a parched desert. I was disillusioned and tired.

My activism (like my ecumenism) has always been rooted in a deep belief that the teaching of the Catholic Church, including her social teaching and her call to authentic ecumenism was neither optional nor theoretical. Social teaching is meant to be lived in the real daily trenches of the human experience, and it is made to be given away to the whole human race.

“Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility” (2003) is one more building block and teach-

ing aid in the continuing challenge of responding to the call. Those who say the bishops aren’t doing enough have not read these documents. Their task is to teach—and they have done an outstanding job!

It is the faithful who have not done enough!

Now is the time to build movements for effective Catholic action among the lay faithful dedicated to bringing these teachings into the arena of public policy. That Catholic action is the essential task of the lay faithful. In an increasingly hostile culture, the beauty of the social message of the Church must not be hidden under a bushel. The bishops have taught well. Now the faithful must act.

If Catholic faith is the fullness of

Christianity (which I believe that it is), then, even though our faith may be profoundly personal to us as Catholics, it must never be private, in the sense of being kept to ourselves. It is radically public. In fact, the right to hear the Gospel is the first right of every human person. Our lives could be the only “gospel” many people might ever hear.

Also, the insights and teaching of the Church’s social tradition offer solutions to many contemporary problems. These principles provide the path to building a more just and truly human society for all men and women, not just those who believe. It is the Catholic Church that has the most cohesive and developed body of social teaching among all Christian communities. That is why Catholics have the gravest obligation. The biblical maxim applies quite profoundly here: “To those to whom much



is given, much more will be required.”

These statements on “Faithful Citizenship” simply and profoundly, make the path of our “Catholic Action” clear. Now it is up to the faithful to walk in it and to bring other people along in a train that is bound for freedom.

A little over one hundred years ago, on the feast of Francis of Assisi, that “little poor man” who heard the Lord’s call to “Go and rebuild my Church,” Pope St. Pius x made a rather obvious statement:

“The subtle raising of multiple questions and the most eloquent dissertation on rights and duties matters little if all this does not end in action.”

It is time for a new “Catholic Action.” †

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