

# Revisiting Faithful Citizenship

by Deacon Keith A. Fournier

In November of 1999, in anticipation of the 2000 elections, the Catholic bishops of America issued a statement called “Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility.” It further developed the themes of an earlier pastoral letter they had penned entitled “Living the Gospel of Life.”

With crystal clarity, prophetic insight and pastoral wisdom, this statement answered the prayers of millions of Catholics, other Christians, and all people of good will. On the eve of a presidential election, many had hungered for a simply written, understandable explanation of the implications of Christian faith on political participation.

I believe this statement also presented a strategic blueprint for what must now become a new “Catholic Action” for America...and beyond.

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 “civilization of love.”

Captured by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on 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 under-



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stand that the missionary “fields” of our age must include the call to social, cultural and political participation.

I have gone to court as a lawyer, lobbied Congress, engaged in risky (by some people’s evaluations) ecumenical efforts, and utilized every possible resource I could to effect lasting cultural change and

conversion. I refuse to just “curse the darkness” believing that Christians are called to light the light of truth that alone can dispel it.

My cultural evangelization was undertaken first as a layman, and now (for seven years) as a deacon. I have simply tried to live as a missionary in a

nation that I love, America, which all too often feels like a post-Christian nation. I know that that the “fields” of our age are indeed ripe for the harvest. One of those fields in the mission to the culture is the arena of 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. I have come to experience that this cynicism is all too often entrenched among Catholics in America.

The 1999 statement entitled “Faithful Citizenship” was another welcome drink for me, coming from the waters of wisdom that always flow from the Catholic Church. 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. It is meant to be lived in the real daily trenches of the human experience and made to be given away.

If in fact Catholic faith is the fullness of Christianity (which I believe it is) then, though our faith may be profoundly personal to us as Catholics, it must never be private, in the sense of “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 may be the only gospel many ever hear. Also, the insights and teaching of the social tradition of the Church offer solutions to

many contemporary problems. These principles provide the path to building a more just and truly human society. This statement simply, profoundly and in a straight-forward way makes that clear.

### The Structure of the Document

In the first part of this statement, after the bishops set the context in the sections entitled the “Challenges for Believers” and “Questions for the Campaign,” they summarized the social obligation of every baptized Catholic (for that matter every baptized Christian). They then spend the entire statement detailing the implications of how faithful citizens must act in civil society. They also

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set forth clear criteria for evaluating candidates for public office for those who are sincere about being “faithful citizens”:

“We believe every candidate, policy, and political platform should be measured by how they touch the human person; whether they enhance or diminish human life, dignity and human rights; and how they advance the common good.”

The section entitled “Themes of Catholic Social Teaching” contains one of the best summaries of this little known treasure of Catholic faith that I have read. I have long been convinced that following the themes of this body of teaching is the only way that we will make progress in what must be our unceasing, resolute and impassioned efforts to truly build a truly just and human society.

One problem is that many Catholics do not even know that the social teaching of the Church exists or, if they do know it exists, all too often do not know what the Church actually teaches concerning these vital issues. The older I get, the more

committed I am to changing that situation. That is part of why I said “yes” to the invitation to assist in building the movement called “Your Catholic Voice.”

The mission of “Your Catholic Voice” is to both “cultivate” and “activate” Catholics for a response to the call of “faithful citizenship.”

As Catholics, who are also citizens, we have the highest of obligations among all Christians. Though we have a common mission with other Christians, we alone have this full inheritance of the tapestry that is called the social teaching of the Church. That makes us more accountable. In again writing concerning this fact I am reminded of the sobering words from the

Lord that “to those to whom much is given much more will be required.”

The themes set forth in “Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium” are a great summary of Catholic social teaching. They also provide a structure for authentic social action because they are presented in an easily understood, readable fashion. They are not presented in a manner that is theologically dense, which has been the problem with some efforts to explain the social teaching of the Catholic Church in the past.

Throughout the statement, the American bishops clearly summarize the moral priorities that should direct public life. Although the priorities were addressed with an eye toward the then coming political debate surrounding the in the elections of 2000, I believe these priorities are evergreen. In fact, they provide a great summary that we should use as we prepare for the upcoming presidential cycle in 2004.

These moral priorities are:

1. Protecting human life
2. A call to family, community and participation
3. Our rights and our responsibilities
4. The “option” (or special concern and obligation) for the poor and the vulnerable
5. The dignity of work and the rights of workers
6. Our obligation in solidarity
7. Our obligation of care for God’s creation

## Your Catholic Voice

In building the movement, “Your Catholic Voice” we summarize our mission to “cultivate your faith and activate your voice” around what we call our “Four Pillars of Participation”—life, family, freedom and solidarity with the poor and needy. In so doing, we summarize the same social teaching that our bishops so clearly articulated in “Faithful Citizenship.”

“Faithful Citizenship” concludes with a stirring call to political participation in its challenge to all Catholic citizens to understand and respond to “the dual calling of faith and citizenship (which) is at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in the United States as we look with hope to the beginning of the new millennium.”

“Faithful Citizenship” reminds every baptized Catholic citizen of his or her vital obligation of faithful citizenship. We must live a unity of life and act in a manner consistent with the truth.

At the beginning of another national election cycle, the question again becomes, what will we do in response? This is the real challenge. Almost five years after it was released it is time that the “dual calling” again be explained, proclaimed and acted upon. It is time to revisit “Faithful Citizenship” and its

challenge. “Your Catholic Voice” exists for that very purpose.

Long ago I grew tired of what I experienced as an almost incessant whining in certain Catholic circles about the perceived disconnect between the faith professed by some Catholics in public life and their behavior in office. I remember the way that some who I knew tried to refer to them as “not Catholic.” I refused to do so. My response, both then and now, is that they were simply “unfaithful Catholics.”

I would also regularly hear the tired refrain “Why don’t the bishops do something?” I said then what I repeat now, the bishops are our teachers and they have done something—in fact they have done what they are ordained to do. They have taught us with clarity from the treasury of the Tradition of the Church

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and in clear fidelity to the Magisterium of that Church.

The real question, then and now, is, “Why don’t we do something?”

## Revisiting the Statement

I had hoped that after “Faithful Citizenship” was released some of the whining might have subsided. It did not. Recently, as the Church walks through a time of purification, one that I believe she desperately needs, it appears that some folks have found something else to blame on the bishops. I believe our efforts, prayers and time are always better spent focusing on living our own baptismal vocation faithfully. Then, we can become agents of change in the

world around us by using the “stuff” of our daily lives to transform the contemporary age with the truth.

My other concern back at the time that this statement was initially issued was that it, like so much of the content of what makes up the social treasury of the Catholic tradition (especially under this pontificate!), would not be read. I have long felt that the only problem with the social teaching of the Church is that it is not read, (let alone digested) and consequently cannot be “enfleshed” in an active, culturally engaging, and authentically converted movement for effective “Catholic Action.”

It was in response to that concern that I turned my efforts toward building an ecumenical work called “Common Good,” based upon four pillars of partici-

pation—life, family, freedom and solidarity with the poor and needy. I was later invited to help found and to build the movement called “Your Catholic Voice.”

It is time to revisit “Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility.” We are now living in the first century of that new millennium. This statement must be read by as many as possible, digested, and do more than get filed away on a shelf. It must find its place alongside of the entire treasury of social teaching and form a part of the new missionary task of the whole Church to the “new evangelization.” It must become “enfleshed” among the lay faithful and thereby give rise to a new “Catholic Action.”

To some the phrase “Catholic Action” is problematic. They maintain that it hearkens back to a “pre-conciliar model” of social action and conjures up a mixed legacy. I believe that it simply must now be re-presented in a “post-conciliar” context. It is time to build new models of “Catholic Action” and “Your Catholic Voice” is committed to becoming one.

Not only should Catholics in America participate in politics and policy development as faithful citizens but the future of the American experiment actually depends upon their doing so. More than a moment this is the Catholic millennium. Similarly, in every nation, the principles found within the social teaching of the Catholic Church are the path to building any truly just and fully human society.

The American bishops had it right when they warned:

“The next 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.”

**T**he foundation of civilization itself is at risk in an age that has lost its understanding of the inviolable dignity of the human person as the foundation of the entire understanding of human freedom and our obligations in solidarity. Our call as faithful Catholic citizens is now to build what the Holy Father has called a “new” and “true” humanism from the wreckage and carnage of the false and/or atheistic ideologies of the 20th century. Man is only man when he is the image of God.

The truths that are contained within the treasury of the Church’s social teaching are not meant just for religious people. Its principles form a framework for

authentic social justice, solidarity and communion for all men and women. The principles set forth within this body of insights for social building are not true

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just because they are Catholic, they are Catholic because they are true.

Our age cries out for authentic faithful Catholic leadership for all people. The “new evangelization” that Pope John Paul II has called for must begin at home. We need to both understand and incorporate the teaching of the Catholic Church in all our endeavors, including our exercise of citizenship. In so doing, we may end up being labeled with myriad political labels (I have been called many things), but what matters most is that we are fully, authentically and knowingly Catholic in both our world view and our participation. It is only then that we will truly become faithful citizens.

This call to faithful citizenship is not only so that we can “make it to heaven” or be called “orthodox.” Neither is our task to simply protect ourselves or just join with others in some part of the myriad subcultures we seem so intent on building within a nation whose dominant culture now too often seems hostile to Christianity.

Our baptismal vocation has a profoundly social obligation. We participate in the ongoing redemptive mission of Jesus Christ, lived out in the real world through His body, the Church, of which we are members and into which we have been incorporated.

We who now live our lives, by virtue of our baptism, “in Christ,” can help to redeem this culture—indeed every cul-

ture—from within by making them more human and by promoting, protecting and advancing the common good for everyone living within those cultures.

As Christians we are never called to retreat from human culture. Rather we are invited to be leaven, light and the soul of the culture; to stand on the shoulders of the saints, and to transform society from within through sacrificial lives lived in fidelity to our baptismal calling, in accordance with our state in life and in response to our unique vocational response to the one call of the Gospel and the universal call to holiness.

Part of that mission requires that we truly exercise our “faithful citizenship.”†

Read the Bishops’ full statement, *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, on the internet by visiting <http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship>.

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