



ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SYRACUSE

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

240 E. ONONDAGA STREET, SYRACUSE, NY 13202-2608

September 2, 2020

Dear Collaborators in Pastoral Ministry,

The recent political conventions in our nation signal the ramping up of campaign activity in approach to the U.S. General Elections on Tuesday, November 3rd. As the Catholic Bishops of the United States teach in the document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, “As Catholics, we bring the richness of our faith to the public square. We draw from both faith and reason as we seek to affirm the dignity of the human person and the common good of all... For all Catholics, including those seeking public office, our participation in political parties or other groups to which we may belong should be influenced by our faith, not the other way around” (Introduction).

I am a firm believer of the necessity to participate in the electoral process. However, such involvement needs to be informed and not simply based on partisan politics. It is important that we and those in our care understand the moral framework that undergirds the exercise of our vote. A key and non-negotiable tenet is the dignity and sanctity of human life from conception until natural death. Recently, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, the President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, reminded Catholic politicians that they should in no way promote or endorse legal protections for abortion and euthanasia. In fact, he called upon them to improve “bad and sinful legislation”.

Accordingly, I would like to invite you to provide materials to parishioners to help them understand the Catholic Church’s principles and teachings on contemporary issues. It is important that we help the faithful inform their consciences on the critical issues of the day, as they learn the positions of candidates for office, and seek to exercise their right to vote. This being stated, I must remind you that none of these materials may endorse a particular candidate or political party which is prohibited by law and which can affect a church’s 501 c (3) tax exempt status.

Please find attached a summary of the *Guidelines for Political Activity* from the New York State Catholic Conference for your information. May our education process inspire us to respond to the call to faithful citizenship, during election season and beyond.

In the Name of Jesus,

Most Reverend Douglas J. Lucia
Bishop of Syracuse

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Guidelines for Political Activity

While the Catholic Church often speaks to issues that are both moral and political, it directs its attention to the issues, not to political parties or candidates.

All activities of the Church, (and its parishes, schools and affiliated organizations) in the political arena must conform to the requirements of section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. This prohibits tax-exempt organizations from participating or intervening in political campaigns on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.

As a result, Church organizations, as well as individuals as representatives of Church organizations, are prohibited from engaging in partisan political activities, including raising money for candidates or political parties, making or distributing statements favoring or opposing candidates or parties, running for elected office, or otherwise participating in political campaigns.

Church employees and officials, however, including clergy and religious, acting in their individual capacity as private citizens, may participate freely in the political process, provided they are not acting as representatives of Church organizations or utilizing Church facilities or assets. There may be times when it is difficult to distinguish between activities undertaken as a private citizen and activities undertaken as a Church representative, and prudence should be exercised in this regard.

While we are aware that other tax-exempt organizations may not always abide by the law, we, as Church, are committed to obeying the law.

Church organizations should be particularly cautious when asked to distribute voter education materials prepared by outside organizations. Such organizations may not be subject to the section 501(c)(3) requirements and may intend to favor or oppose particular candidates. We recommend that all voter education materials be reviewed and approved by the diocesan attorney or the State Catholic Conference prior to authorization for distribution.

Permissible Church Activities

- Endorsing/opposing legislation, including ballot referenda
- Homilies/bulletin inserts on moral issues, and on the moral responsibilities of voters
- Providing educational materials on public policy issues, but not candidates, to parishioners
- Arranging for groups to meet with their elected officials to advocate for or against legislation
- Encouraging letter-writing, phone calls and other contacts with candidates and elected officials about issues
- Inviting all candidates for public office to a Church-sponsored public forum, debate, or candidates' night
- Conducting a nonpartisan voter registration drive on Church property

- Distributing unbiased candidate questionnaires or voting records on a wide variety of issues

Prohibited Church Activities

- Endorsing/opposing candidates for political office
- Homilies/bulletin inserts regarding specific candidates
- Distributing or permitting distribution of partisan campaign literature under Church auspices or on Church property
- Arranging for groups to work for a candidate for public office
- Funding or financial support of any candidate, political action committee, or political party
- Inviting only selected candidates to address your Church-sponsored group, or permitting/hosting political meetings on Church property
- Conducting voter registration that is slanted toward one party
- Rating candidates numerically, or “favorably” or “unfavorably”
- Sharing parish resources, including mailing lists, with political campaigns or parties

The above guidelines serve as a summary of the principle rules regarding political activity for tax exempt organizations. A more complete explanation of the regulations governing 501(c)(3) organizations is available from the New York State Catholic Conference.

Neither these guidelines nor any other church document should be used to endorse candidates or otherwise instruct people how to vote on candidates, nor to inhibit Catholics, acting as private citizens, from partisan political activity. Any questions which may arise should be referred to the Chancery Office of your (Arch)Diocese or the New York State Catholic Conference.

Updated February 27, 2020