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Catholic Church

# Political Responsibility: Choices for the 1980's

## A STATEMENT OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE BOARD





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# Political Responsibility: Choices for the 1980's

*Statement of the  
Administrative Board of the USCC  
October 26, 1979*

The hallmark of a democratic nation is its ability to engage the voice of its people in a broad range of public decisions. The United States, we fear, may be losing this capacity.

Consider the evidence. Fewer of our citizens are registering to vote. Fewer of the registrants are actually going to the polls. Our voting rolls have lost fifteen million citizens in the last ten years. For our national elections, the rate of participation has been dropping for the last 20 years. Thus, the rate for the 1976 election was down sharply from the 1960 turnout and the rate for 1978 was the lowest for a national election since 1942. Our voter participation rates are now among the lowest in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, fewer and fewer Americans believe it is worth their time and concern to follow campaigns, form positions on the candidates and issues, and assert those positions at the polls. The result of this disaffection is also clear: an erosion in the very foundations of American political life. Thus, we take the eve of the national campaign year as the occasion to affirm again the importance of responsible political participation. In 1976 we issued a statement calling for "a committed, informed citizenry to revitalize our political life."<sup>2</sup> We now reiterate that call with a greater sense of urgency, and we ask all citizens to help restore our elections as the vital and popular forum they can and must be if our nation is to address democratically the crucial issues of the coming decade.

## **I. PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS**

The reasons for the crisis in voter disaffection are many and complex, but we would like here to cite just three of its major causes.

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<sup>1</sup>In the 1978 Congressional elections 37.9% of those eligible to vote actually did so. In contrast, 46% voted in 1960. In the 1976 Presidential elections 54.4% of eligible voters turned out as compared to 63.8% in 1960.

<sup>2</sup>*Political Responsibility: Reflections On An Election Year*, February 12, 1976.

First, large numbers of Americans evidently feel a sense of powerlessness. To a large degree, this feeling is justified by the evidence of our eyes and ears.

Some leaders of the political estate have done much in recent years to weaken it and even to discredit it. We know too well their abuses of power, evasions of responsibility, and refusals to face up to tough choices. Many of our citizens have simply thrown up their hands and turned away from politics and government *per se*.

We can share some of these feelings without also condoning the withdrawal they have caused. It makes little sense to let these difficulties force us to abandon citizenship, since this only invites the problems to deepen and threaten to become a permanent feature of our political life. If this happens, what hope can there be? The sensible response is to return to citizenship with the will and dedication to breathe new life into it.

Secondly, as the patterns of our national life evolve, popular debate of issues becomes more complex and harder for the ordinary person to follow. Because of economic pressures and rapid social change, some of the traditional organizing principles of American politics no longer carry the force they once did—for example, the longstanding loyalties and identities of social institutions, geographic regions, and political parties. At the same time, we have yet to see a fresh and vital set of organizing principles take shape either to renew or supplant the older ones.

The avenues of contemporary communications hold the promise of shaping new forums for popular debate, but we have yet to see compelling evidence that the mass media will fulfill this promise. They seem as likely to abet disaffection as to help to remedy it.

Finally, another cause of low participation is the persistent fact of widespread poverty in America. The poorer a person is, the less likely the person is to vote. Voting relies on a degree of hope, and there seems to be little reason for the people most in need to feel hopeful in this economy. Poverty shuts off the gates to the American mainstream and its institutions of influence and power. Thus, the poor have little concrete reason to see a stake in voting.

Consequently, unless we address America's social and economic inequities in the coming campaign and election, we will continue to weaken the franchise for millions of our people, run the risk of creating an insidious form of dual citizenship, and jeopardize the great democratic experiment we proudly call America.

We fear that some of the current popular reactions against the government and government programs reveal an excessive individualism and a decline in our commitment to the common good. It is important for all Americans to realize the extent to which we are all interdependent members of a national community. Increasingly, our problems are social in nature, demanding solutions that are likewise social. To fashion these solutions in a just and humane way requires the active and creative par-



ticipation of all. It requires a renewed faith in the ability of the human community to cooperate in governmental structures that work for the common good. It requires, above all, a willingness to attack the root causes of the powerlessness and alienation that threaten our democracy.

All Christians have a call to citizenship and political life. In the words of Pope Paul VI, “The Christian has the duty to take part in the organization and life of political society.”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, we urge all citizens to use their franchise by registering to vote and going to the polls. Demand information from the campaigns themselves and from the media coverage of those campaigns. Make candidates declare their values, so you can compare those values with your own. Take stands on the candidates and the issues. If the campaign year is to engage the values of the American people, the campaigners and voters alike must share the responsibility for making it happen. Become involved in the campaign or party of your choice. Finally, use the debates of the coming year to better understand the issues and inform your conscience.

## II. THE CHURCH AND THE POLITICAL ORDER

It is appropriate in this context to offer our own reflections on the role of the Church in the political order. Christians believe that Jesus’ commandment to love one’s neighbor should extend beyond individual relationships to infuse and transform all human relations from the family to the entire human community. Jesus came to “bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and to set the down-trodden free.” (Luke 4:18) He called us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and afflicted and to comfort the victims of injustice. (Matt. 25) His example and words require individual acts of charity and concern from each of us. Yet they also require understanding and action upon the broader dimensions of poverty, hunger and injustice which necessarily involve the institutions and structures of economy, society and politics.

The Church, the People of God, is itself an expression of this love, and is required by the Gospel and its long tradition to promote and defend human rights and human dignity.<sup>4</sup> In his recent encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II declares that the Church “must be aware of the threats to [humanity] and of all that seems to oppose the endeavor ‘to make human life ever more human’ and make every element of life correspond to humanity’s true dignity—in a word, [the Church] must be aware of *all that is opposed to that process.*”<sup>5</sup> This view of the Church’s ministry and mission requires it to relate positively to the political order, since social injustice and the denial of human rights can often be remedied only through governmental action. In today’s world concern for social justice and human development necessarily require persons and organi-

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<sup>3</sup>A *Call to Action*, Pope Paul VI, 24, 1971.

<sup>4</sup>*Human Rights and Reconciliation*, Synod of Bishops, 1974.

<sup>5</sup>*Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II, 14, 1979.

zations to participate in the political process in accordance with their own responsibilities and roles.

The Church's responsibility in the area of human rights includes two complementary pastoral actions: the affirmation and promotion of human rights and the denunciation and condemnation of violations of these rights. In addition, it is the Church's role to call attention to the moral and religious dimensions of secular issues, to keep alive the values of the Gospel as a norm for social and political life, and to point out the demands of the Christian faith for a just transformation of society. Such a ministry on the part of every Christian and the Church inevitably involves political consequences and touches upon public affairs.

Christian social teaching demands that citizens and public officials alike give serious consideration in all matters to the common good, to the welfare of society as a whole, which must be protected and promoted if individual rights are to be encouraged and upheld.

In order to be credible and faithful to the Gospel and to our tradition, the Church's concern for human rights and social justice should be comprehensive and consistent. It must be formulated with competence and an awareness of the complexity of issues. It should also be developed in dialogue with other concerned persons and respectful of the rights of all.<sup>6</sup>

The Church's role in the political order includes the following:

- education regarding the teachings of the Church and the responsibilities of the faithful;
- analysis of issues for their social and moral dimensions;
- measuring public policy against Gospel values;
- participating with other concerned parties in debate over public policy; and
- speaking out with courage, skill and concern on public issues involving human rights, social justice and the life of the Church in society.

Unfortunately, our efforts in this area are sometimes misunderstood. The Church's participation in public affairs is not a threat to the political process or to genuine pluralism, but an affirmation of their importance. The Church recognizes the legitimate autonomy of government and the right of all, including the Church itself, to be heard in the formulation of public policy. As Vatican II declared:

By preaching the truth of the Gospel and shedding light on all areas of human activity through her teaching and the example of the faithful, she (the Church) shows respect for the political freedom and responsibility of citizens and fosters these values. She also has the right to pass moral judgments, even on matters

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<sup>6</sup>A *Call To Action*, 4, 50. *The Church in The Modern World*, Second Vatican Council 43, 1965.

touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary.<sup>7</sup>

A proper understanding of the role of the Church will not confuse its mission with that of government, but rather see its ministry as advocating the critical values of human rights and social justice.

It is the role of Christian communities to analyze the situation in their own country, to reflect upon the meaning of the Gospel, and to draw norms of judgment and plans of action from the teaching of the Church and their own experience.<sup>8</sup> In carrying out this pastoral activity in the social arena we are confronted with complexity. As the 1971 Synod of Bishops pointed out: "It does not belong to the Church, *insofar as she is a religious and hierarchical community*, to offer concrete solutions in the social, economic and political spheres for justice in the world."<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis added.) At the same time, it is essential to recall the words of Pope John XXIII:

. . . it must not be forgotten that the Church has the right and duty not only to safeguard the principles of ethics and religion, but also to intervene authoritatively with her children in the temporal sphere when there is a question of judging the application of these principles to concrete cases.<sup>10</sup>

The application of Gospel values to real situations is an essential work of the Christian community. Christians believe the Gospel is the measure of human realities. However, specific political proposals do not in themselves constitute the Gospel. Christians and Christian organizations must certainly participate in public debate over alternative policies and legislative proposals, yet it is critical that the nature of their participation not be misunderstood.

We specifically do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc; nor do we wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing candidates. We urge citizens to avoid choosing candidates simply on the personal basis of self-interest. Rather, we hope that voters will examine the positions of candidates on the full range of issues as well as the person's integrity, philosophy and performance. We seek to promote a greater understanding of the important link between faith and politics and to express our belief that our nation is enriched when its citizens and social groups approach public affairs from positions grounded in moral conviction and religious belief. Our view is expressed very well by Pope Paul VI when he said:

While recognizing the autonomy of the reality of politics, Christians who are invited to take up political activity should try to make their choices consistent with the Gospel and, in the

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<sup>7</sup>*The Church in The Modern World*, 76.

<sup>8</sup>*A Call To Action*, 4.

<sup>9</sup>*Justice in The World*, 37.

<sup>10</sup>*Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII, 160, 1963.

framework of a legitimate plurality, to give both personal and collective witness to the seriousness of their faith by effective and disinterested service of [humanity].<sup>11</sup>

The Church's responsibility in this area falls on all its members. As citizens we are all called to become informed, active and responsible participants in the political process. The hierarchy has a responsibility as teachers and pastors to educate the faithful, support efforts to gain greater peace and justice and provide guidance and even leadership on occasions when human rights are in jeopardy. The laity has major responsibility for the renewal of the temporal order. Drawing on their own experience and exercising their distinctive roles within the Christian community, bishops, clergy, religious and laity should join together in common witness and effective action to bring about Pope John's vision of a well-ordered society based on truth, justice, charity and freedom.<sup>12</sup>

As religious leaders and pastors, our intention is to reflect our concern that politics receive its rightful importance and attention and that it become an effective forum for the achievement of the common good. For, in the words of John Paul II, "[humanity's] situation in the modern world seems indeed to be far removed from the objective demands of the moral order, from the requirements of justice, and even more of social love. . . . We have before us here a great drama that can leave nobody indifferent."<sup>13</sup>

### III. ISSUES

Without reference to political candidates, parties or platforms, we wish to offer a listing of some issues which we believe are important in the national debate during 1980. These brief summaries are not intended to indicate in any depth the details of our positions in these matters. We refer the reader to fuller discussions of our point of view in the documents listed in the summary which appears below. We wish to point out that these issues are not the concerns of Catholics alone; in every case we have joined with others to advocate these positions. They represent a broad range of topics on which the Bishops of the United States have already expressed themselves and are recalled here in alphabetical order to emphasize their relevance in a period of national debate and decision.

#### A. Abortion

The right to life is a basic human right which should have the protection of law.

Abortion is the deliberate destruction of an unborn human being and therefore violates this right. We reject the 1973 Supreme Court decisions on abortion which refuse appropriate legal protection to the unborn child.

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<sup>11</sup>*A Call To Action*, 46.

<sup>12</sup>*Pacem in Terris*, 35, 1963.

<sup>13</sup>*Redemptor Hominis*, 16.



We support the passage of a constitutional amendment to restore the basic constitutional protection of the right to life for the unborn child. (*Documentation on the Right to Life and Abortion*, 1974, 1976; *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*, 1975.)

## **B. Arms Control and Disarmament**

The dangers of the arms race are a challenge and a concern to the whole human family. The primary moral imperative is that the arms race be stopped and the reduction of armaments achieved. With respect to nuclear weapons, at least those with massive destructive capability, the first imperative is to prevent their use. As possessors of a vast nuclear arsenal, we must also be aware that not only is it wrong to attack civilian populations but it is also wrong to threaten to attack them as part of a strategy of deterrence. We urge the continued development and implementation of policies which seek to bring these weapons more securely under control, progressively reduce their presence in the world, and ultimately remove them entirely. (*To Live in Christ Jesus*, 1976; *The Gospel of Peace and the Danger of War*, 1978.)

## **C. Capital Punishment**

In view of our commitment to the value and dignity of human life, we oppose capital punishment. We believe that a return to the use of the death penalty can only lead to further erosion of respect for life in our society. We do not question society's right to punish the offender, but we believe that there are better approaches to protecting our people from violent crimes than resorting to executions. In its application, the death penalty has been discriminatory toward the poor, the indigent and racial minorities. Our society should reject the death penalty and seek methods of dealing with violent crime which are more consistent with the Gospel vision of respect for life and Christ's message of healing love. (*Community and Crime*, 1978.)

## **D. The Economy**

Our national economic life must reflect broad values of social justice and human rights. Above all, the economy must serve the human needs of our people. It is important to call attention to the fact that millions of Americans are still poor, jobless, hungry and inadequately housed and that vast disparities of income and wealth remain within our nation. These conditions are intolerable and must be persistently challenged so that the economy will reflect a fundamental respect for the human dignity and basic needs of all.

We recognize that the present political atmosphere is characterized by a heavy emphasis on budget austerity, particularly with regard to federal spending. Some believe that the reduction of government spending for social programs is the most effective way of combatting inflation.

# ISSUES ... Abortion ... Arms Control The Economy ... Education ... Family Health Care ... Housing ... Human R



Regional Conflict in the World ... Abortion  
Capital Punishment ... Education ... Family

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**Life ... Food and Agricultural Policy ...**  
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**Family Life ... Food and Agricultural Policy ...**



There is no doubt that inflation is a serious national problem. It weakens the economic stability of our nation and erodes the economic security of our citizens. Moreover, its impact is most severe on the poor and those who live on fixed incomes. However, economic policies which attempt to reduce inflation by cutting back on human needs programs or by increasing unemployment are simply unacceptable.

Current levels of unemployment and the tremendous human costs which they represent are unnecessary and should not be tolerated. We support an effective national commitment to genuine full employment as the foundation of a just and responsible economic policy. We believe that all Americans who are willing and able to work have a right to useful and productive employment at fair wages. We also call for a decent income policy for those who cannot work and adequate assistance to those in need. (*The Economy: Human Dimensions*, 1975.)

## **E. Education**

All persons of whatever race, condition or age, by virtue of their dignity as human beings, have an inalienable right to education.

We advocate:

1. Sufficient public and private funding to make an adequate education available for all citizens and residents of the United States of America and to provide assistance for education in our nation's program of foreign aid.

2. Governmental and voluntary action to reduce inequalities of educational opportunity by improving the opportunities available to economically disadvantaged persons.

3. Orderly compliance with legal requirements for racially integrated schools.

4. Voluntary efforts to increase racial ethnic integration in public and nonpublic schools.

5. Equitable tax support for the education of pupils in public and nonpublic schools to implement parental freedom in the education of their children. (*Sharing the Light of Faith*, 1979; *To Teach as Jesus Did*, 1972.)

## **F. Family Life**

The test of how we value the family is whether we are willing to foster, in government and business, in urban planning and farm policy, in education, health care, in the arts and sciences, in our total social and cultural environment, moral values which nourish the primary relationships of husbands, wives and children and make authentic family life possible.

Implicit government policy and explicit government planning and programs can contribute to an erosion of the health and vitality of the family. Comprehensive decisions of a national or regional scope must take into account their impact on family life. Families, especially those whose influence is lessened by poverty or social status, must be allowed their





rightful input in those decisions which affect their daily lives. (*A Vision and Strategy: The Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry, 1978.*)

## **G. Food and Agricultural Policy**

The right to eat flows directly from the right to life. We support a national policy aimed at securing the right to eat for all the world's people.

Internationally, U.S. food aid should effectively combat global hunger and malnutrition, be aimed primarily at the poorest countries and neediest people without regard to political considerations. In order to help stabilize prices and assure adequate supplies, the U.S. should join in a world grain reserve fair to both producers and consumers. Economic assistance should emphasize helping other nations move towards food self-sufficiency.

Domestically, nutrition programs should help meet the needs of hungry and malnourished Americans, especially children, the poor, the unemployed and the elderly. It is essential that the food stamp program be funded at adequate levels. (*Food Policy and the Church: Specific Proposals, 1975.*)

Through its income support programs, its credit and research programs, its tax policies, its strategies for rural development, and its foreign aid, the U.S. should support the maintenance of an agricultural system based on small and moderate-sized family farms both at home and abroad. (*The Family Farm, 1979.*)

## **H. Health Care**

Adequate health care is an essential element in maintaining a decent standard of living. yet the high costs of health care and uneven access to basic health resources make it impossible for many in our society to meet their basic health needs. Therefore, we support the enactment of a national health insurance program. While endorsing no particular legislative proposal at this time, we have identified a set of principles which should govern the development of a national health plan. For example,

- Access to adequate health care is a basic human right.
- Coverage should be universal in scope.
- National standards for health services should be adopted.
- Benefits should be comprehensive, including preventive health care.
- The program should give consumers a reasonable choice of providers.
- Cost controls should be established and used to encourage provider initiative and lower the cost of service.

(*USCC Statement on National Health Insurance, 1974.*)

## **I. Housing**

Decent housing is a basic human right. A greater commitment of will and resources is required to meet our national housing goal of a decent home for every American family. Housing policy must better meet the needs of

low and middle income families, the elderly, rural areas and minorities. It should also promote reinvestment in central cities and equal housing opportunity. Preservation of existing housing stock and a renewed concern for neighborhoods are required. (*The Right To A Decent Home*, 1975.)

## **J. Human Rights**

Human dignity requires the defense and promotion of human rights in global and domestic affairs. With respect to international human rights, there is a pressing need for the U.S. to pursue a double task: (1) to strengthen and expand international mechanisms by which human rights can be protected and promoted; and (2) to take seriously the human rights dimensions of U.S. foreign policy. Therefore, we support U.S. ratification of the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Further, we support a policy which gives greater weight to the protection of human rights in the conduct of U.S. affairs. The pervasive presence of American power creates a responsibility to use that power in the service of human rights. (*U.S. Foreign Policy: A Critique From Catholic Traditions*, 1976.)

Domestically, human rights is also a subject of great importance. Discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity, or age continues to exist in our nation. Such discrimination constitutes a grave injustice and an affront to human dignity. It must be aggressively resisted by every individual and rooted out of every social institution and structure. (*To Do The Work of Justice*, 1978; *Brothers and Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism In Our Day*, 1979)

## **K. Mass Media**

We are concerned that the communications media be truly responsive to the public interest and that future laws that govern the airwaves fully protect the common good. We strongly oppose government control over television programming policy. At the same time we deplore unilateral decision-making by networks. We firmly believe that responsible licensing, use and programming of the public airwaves cannot be accomplished simply by relying on the forces of the marketplace. We recommend exploring ways to reduce the commercial orientation of the broadcasting industry to better serve the public. (*Statement on the Family Viewing Policy*, 1975.)

## **L. Regional Conflict in the World**

Three situations of regional conflict which are of significance for the whole international system, and where U.S. policy has a substantial, indeed a decisive influence, are South Africa, the Middle East and Central America.

We address ourselves particularly to South Africa not unmindful of the urgency of achieving majority rule in Rhodesia and the independence of

Namibia. Nevertheless, South Africa is the object of substantial economic, political, and military interest on the part of the United States. Both U.S. foreign policy and its influence on corporate activity in South Africa should be directed toward change of the racial policies of that government. Even more effective leverage would be achieved if the United States, as the leader of the western nations, could develop a coordinated policy with them regarding South Africa. (*Southern Africa: Peace or War*, 1976.)

In the Middle East the quest for peace continues and the relevant parties bear distinct yet interdependent responsibilities. First, the international community, especially its principal diplomatic actors, inevitably influences the future of the Middle East. Second, the United Nations is a vital element in any Middle East negotiations, and its diplomatic and peace-keeping role will undoubtedly be crucial to a long-term resolution of the conflict. Third, the regional parties, whose conflicting claims of justice are the essence of the political and moral problem in the Middle East, are the key to peace. Finally, the religious communities with roots in the Middle East must reflect the best of our traditions in supporting the movement for peace with justice for all the people of the region. We have a continuing concern for the protection of the basic rights, both civil and religious, of the Christian minorities in the Middle East, and we encourage the local churches there to continue their steadfast witness to the faith. (*The Middle East: The Pursuit of Peace With Justice*, 1978.)

In Central America challenges to long-standing patterns of injustice and domination by large sectors of the population have been met by brutal repression. Fundamental social, economic and political changes advocated by the Church at the Puebla Conference call us in the U.S. to examine how our policies of military assistance and economic investment are related to existing patterns of injustice. U.S. policy should be directed toward fostering peaceful but fundamental change designed to benefit the poor of Central America.

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This is not an exclusive listing of the issues that concern us. As Pope John Paul II has said, "The Church cannot remain insensible to whatever serves true human welfare any more than she can remain indifferent to whatever threatens it. . . ." <sup>14</sup> Thus we are also advocates for the civil and political rights of the elderly, the handicapped, immigrants and aliens. We oppose excessive government interference in religious affairs as well as any unjust bias of government against religious institutions. We support measures to reform our criminal justice system. We are concerned about protection of the land and the environment as well as the monumental question of peace in the world.

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, 13.





#### IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, we believe that the Church has a proper role and responsibility in public affairs flowing from its Gospel mandate and its respect for the dignity of the human person. We hope these reflections will contribute to a renewed political vitality in our land, both in terms of citizen participation in the electoral process and the integrity and accountability of those who seek and hold public office.

We pray that Christians will provide courageous leadership in promoting a spirit of responsible political involvement. May they follow the example of Jesus in giving special concern for the poor, and may all their actions be guided by a deep love of God and neighbor.

For in the world of American politics, as in all human communities, the words of Pope John Paul II apply:

What is in question here is the human person. We are not dealing with the 'abstract' [human person] but the real, 'concrete,' 'historical' person. . . . Every person coming into the world on account of the mystery of the redemption is entrusted to the solicitude of the Church. . . . The object of her care is [human persons] in their unique, unrepeatable human reality, which keeps intact the image and likeness of God himself. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Idem.*



