



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Interim Reflections Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians

Cardinal McCarrick
Bishops' Spring Meeting Denver

June 15, 2004

The origins of this Task Force –made up of the elected chairs of seven major committees of our conference—are in our common frustration and deep disappointment at some Catholic political leaders who ignore or contradict Catholic moral and social teaching in their campaigns or votes. We do not accept the too common refrain, “I’m personally opposed, but....,” or “my votes are public and my faith is private,” or “I vote my constituency, not just my own conscience.” Politics at its best is about persuading others, connecting what we believe to how we act, and harnessing our deepest convictions and the call of conscience in the pursuit of the common good. This is what makes political life a noble calling and a vocation.

We express our gratitude to faithful Catholics in political life, thank them for their service and sacrifice, and call others to join them in protecting human life and dignity and promoting justice and peace. We need more, not fewer Catholics in public life, more people bringing their moral convictions and concern for the weakest to our powerful democracy.

Bishops as Teachers

As bishops, we are moral teachers. How well we have shared our teaching? Do our people understand what the Church teaches and why? Do they fully understand their grave responsibility to protect life from the moment of conception and to care for the weak and vulnerable? Now is a time for us to recommit ourselves to actively and unequivocally teaching our people about the sacredness of human life and human dignity and our call to care for the least among us.

We must teach clearly, consistently and persistently. We cannot compromise our message. We believe all life is precious and deserves protection, especially unborn human life. We believe the Gospel teaches that the poor deserve special priority. We share our Holy Father’s passion for peace and justice.

As the Doctrinal Note insists:

... a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.

and then goes on to insist:

The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility towards the common good.

In many ways, the challenge we face is a challenge of evangelization and catechesis. Too many Catholics, including those in public life, do not know or apply Catholic teaching on human life and dignity. The life and dignity of the human person is fundamental. Without the right to life, no other rights are possible. So we will not compromise on life, but we will not stop there. Jesus came so that we might “have life and have it more abundantly.” We believe every human person has a fundamental right to life. All issues are clearly not of equal moral worth— life comes first. But as the Doctrinal Note makes clear, those things which make life truly human – faith and family, education and work, housing and health care – demand our attention and action as well. Our conference has courageously and consistently taught and worked to protect human life and dignity. No one in America should doubt where we stand.

Bishops as Pastors

As bishops, we are pastors. We are not political leaders, but shepherds of souls, pastors of a community. Our task is not winning elections, but building a community of faith that serves as the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world,” the “leaven” in society on human life and dignity. We need to engage and persuade, to teach and preach, and when required, to challenge and call to accountability. Our mission is to bring people to the faith—to the truth of our faith. The challenge we face is determining the best ways to do this.

A bishop and pastor should be a sign of both truth and unity, teaching clearly and bringing our community of faith together around the values of the Gospel. Direct engagement in partisan elections would destroy this role. We cannot endorse parties or candidates. This would be theologically and pastorally unwise and could be politically counter-productive. We must speak the truth, but we must not allow ourselves to become used in partisan politics either by those who dispute our teaching on life and dignity or those who reduce our teaching to a particular issue or partisan cause.

Bishops as Leaders

As bishops, we are leaders in the Church and in society. We lead a community of faith, not another interest group. However, efforts to organize, engage and empower faithful Catholics represent one of the best ways to advance our moral principles. Whatever our view of sanctions, they are not a substitute for an active and informed lay Catholic voice in public life.

The fundamental issue is human life and dignity, which is threatened in so many ways – preeminently by abortion, but also by euthanasia, cloning, widespread hunger and lack of health care, by war and violence, and by crime and the death penalty. I believe we will not prevail on any of these concerns, unless we are effective leaders in building a renewed sense of genuine respect for human life and dignity. This is the work not of one campaign, but of our entire lives and our ministry as bishops.

Interim Guidance

Every bishop has the right and duty to address these realities in his own diocese. We were asked to consult broadly and offer advice and so we will. Here is our interim advice:

- We need to **teach** more clearly and help other Catholic leaders to teach more clearly on our unequivocal commitment to protecting human life from the moment of conception until natural death. This includes teaching about justice and peace,

marriage and family, and the other moral and social values that are part of Catholic doctrine. It should be reflected in our parishes and schools, our religious education and RCIA programs, our institutions of higher education, and our adult formation programs.

- We need to do more to **persuade** all people that human life is precious and human dignity must be defended. This requires more effective dialogue and engagement with all public officials, especially Catholic public officials. Relationships matter. We cannot communicate and persuade simply through newspaper columns or issuing statements. We need to dedicate ourselves to dialogue with those in public life, especially those who do not follow the Church's teaching. Either personally or through delegates we must seek opportunities to make clear and discuss these vital questions of Catholic doctrine and be open to conversation initiated by political leaders themselves.
- We need to invest more in **mobilizing** Catholics to support our principles and policies. Bishops cannot do this alone; we have to do more to bring all believers to our cause.
- The Catholic community and the institutions which are a part of our family of faith should **not honor** those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not receive awards, special honors or prestigious platforms which would suggest support for their actions. However, we cannot cut off dialogue with public officials since they make decisions every day that touch issues of human life and dignity. We must remember that we will rarely persuade if we have no dialogue or cannot make our case.
- We should **not tell people how to vote** or sanction voters. This is contrary to our teaching, may be a violation of the civil law, and is often counter-productive.

On the question of calls for denying Communion or public calls for refraining from Communion, our conference is not united, with several bishops sincerely convinced this is necessary and many others who do not support such actions. Our consultations with moral theologians and canonists warned us that such steps could raise serious questions about Catholic teaching and the application of Canon Law. State Catholic conference directors warned about a negative impact on faithful legislators, the Catholic community, and the role of the Church in public life.

In our ad limina visits, many of us raised these questions. As many of you know, Vatican officials offered both principles and advised caution and pastoral prudence in the use of sanctions. In recent days, I have once again been in contact with Cardinal Ratzinger both by letter and telephone calls. He has offered some observations for our work which he specifically asked not be published, but which I wish to share with you. The first is a recognition that it is up to us as bishops in the United States to discern and act on our responsibilities as teachers, pastors and leaders in our nation. He expresses his respect for the role of our conference and the bishops in the United States in carrying out these responsibilities.

Having said this, Cardinal Ratzinger speaks about **WHAT** constitutes "manifest grave sin" and "obstinate persistence" in public life, stating that consistently campaigning for and voting for permissive laws on abortion and euthanasia could meet these criteria.

Cardinal Ratzinger outlines **HOW** a bishop might deal with these matters, including a series of precautionary measures involving a process of meeting, instruction and warning. This process involves meeting with the person and providing instruction on Catholic moral teaching. Cardinal Ratzinger suggests informing such persons that if they

reject Catholic moral teaching in their public actions, they should not present themselves for Holy Communion until their situation has ended. Using the precedent of our teaching and practice in the case of a person in an invalid marriage, the Cardinal recognizes that there are circumstances in which Holy Communion may be denied. He also indicates that in these cases a warning must be provided before the Eucharist can be denied.

I would emphasize that Cardinal Ratzinger clearly leaves to us as teachers, pastors and leaders **WHETHER** to pursue this path. The Holy See has repeatedly expressed its confidence in our roles as bishops and pastors. The question for us is not simply whether denial of Communion is possible, but whether it is pastorally wise and prudent. It is not surprising that difficult and differing circumstances on these matters can lead to different practices. Every bishop is acting in accord with his own understanding of his duties and the law.

It is important to note that Cardinal Ratzinger makes a clear distinction between public officials and voters, explaining that a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil *only* if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate *precisely* because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion. However, when a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted if there are proportionate reasons.

Therefore, based on the traditional practice of the Church and our consultation with members of our conference, other episcopal conferences, distinguished canonists and theologians, our Task Force does not advocate the denial of Communion for Catholic politicians or Catholic voters in these circumstances.

No one should mistake our task force's reservations about refusing Communion or public calls to refrain from Communion as ignoring or excusing those who clearly contradict Catholic teaching in their public roles. Those who take positions or act in ways that are contrary to fundamental moral principles should not underestimate the seriousness of this situation. We insist that they must study Catholic teaching, recognize their grave responsibility to protect human life from conception to natural death, and adopt positions consistent with these principles. However, in our view the battles for human life and dignity and for the weak and vulnerable should be fought not at the Communion rail, but in the public square, in hearts and minds, in our pulpits and public advocacy, in our consciences and communities.

Based on our consultation process, there is significant concern about the perception that the sacred nature of the Eucharist could be trivialized and might be turned into a partisan political battleground. Expecting a minister of Holy Communion to make these judgments would create great pastoral difficulties. We do not want to encourage confrontations at the altar rail with the Sacred Body of the Lord Jesus in our hands. This could create unmanageable burdens for our priests and those who assist them and could turn the Eucharist into a perceived source of political combat.

Other questions were raised about where the process might lead—who would be impacted and what other issues might lead to denial of Holy Communion. We fear that it could further divide our Church and that it could have serious unintended consequences. For example, it could be more difficult for faithful Catholics to serve in public life because they might be seen not as standing up for principle, but as under pressure from the hierarchy. We could turn weak leaders who bend to the political winds into people who are perceived as courageous resisters of episcopal authority. In the past such actions

have often been counter-productive. We also fear it could push many people farther away from the Church and its teaching, rather than bringing them closer.

In light of these and other concerns, the task force urges for the most part renewed efforts and persuasion, not penalties. We urge new efforts to teach clearly, advocate effectively, organize and mobilize Catholic laity and to engage, persuade, and challenge Catholic politicians to act on the moral teaching of our Church.

Disciplinary actions are permitted. Indeed, in the guidance I just shared with you, they are discussed. But they should be applied when efforts at dialogue, persuasion and conversion have been fully exhausted. There is a wide range of affirmative approaches used by members of our conference. These need to be practiced more widely, more strategically and more effectively.

Many bishops are engaged in ongoing personal dialogue and discussion with Catholic politicians – either one on one or in groups. We must expand these efforts. As a part of this, bishops can continue and expand efforts to share the Doctrinal Note, our statements on *Faithful Citizenship* and *Living the Gospel of Life* as a basis for reflection and discussion. Regular meetings with Catholic politicians and other politicians can create the context and ongoing relationships that can strengthen efforts to teach, challenge and persuade on human life and dignity.

State Catholic conferences and many dioceses are organizing and utilizing legislative networks. Increased support for these networks can create opportunities to provide education and advocacy on Catholic teaching, to mobilize more of the Catholic community, and to shape the decisions of public officials.

We must intensify our catechetical and other educational efforts to convince Catholics of the importance of understanding and acting on Catholic teaching on human life and dignity, justice and peace. In homilies and presentations, through pastoral letters, columns in diocesan newspapers, and “op-ed” pieces in newspapers, we can try to do more to share fundamental moral values and their implications for public life.

In this election year and beyond, our statements on *Faithful Citizenship* and *Living the Gospel of Life* provide us with a guide and directions. They clearly outline our moral principles and decisively reject partisanship. This is a time to find more effective ways to act on them and the resources which come with them. This is a time to teach.

This session today will not be the end of our dialogue and discussion. We continue to welcome your advice and your suggestions. We will continue to dialogue with the Holy See as we share the concerns raised at this meeting and the guidance they have offered us. All of this will contribute to our final report to you.

As I said, this is not about one election or one campaign; it is about how we exercise our duties as teachers, pastors and leaders. At this important moment, we face significant opportunities and dangers. As our statement, *Faithful Citizenship*, suggests:

- We need to be *political, but not partisan*. Politics is about moral questions of life and death, war and peace, who moves ahead and who is left behind. But we cannot be chaplain to any party, cheerleader for any candidate. We leave particular choices to the informed consciences of the Catholic faithful.
- We must be *principled but not ideological*. We clearly cannot abandon the unborn, who have first claim on our consciences, and the poor and immigrants. But we must be open to a variety of ways to protect life, empower the poor and welcome immigrants.

- We should be *civil, but not soft*. A Church that preaches justice and charity in public life must practice it. No cause is advanced by calling names or impugning motives. However, we will not stand by silently as politicians distort or dismiss Catholic teaching.
- We should be *engaged, but not used*. Political photo-ops are not a substitute for policies which protect human life and dignity and serve the least of these.

There is a lot of talk about the road ahead for us. This Task Force believes we should follow the example of our Holy Father. John Paul II is clear that abortion and euthanasia represent preeminent threats to human life, and he stands up for human life whenever it is threatened. His actions and teaching make it impossible to conclude that we are a single-issue Church. We remember him on the Mall insisting our treatment of the unborn was the measure of our nation, in Yankee Stadium calling us to care for the world's poor and in St. Louis asking us to join him in ending the use of the death penalty. Just recently, he met with our President and welcomed his support for human life and the family, but also challenged him on peace and human rights in Iraq and the Holy Land. No one has any doubt where the Holy Father stands on abortion or euthanasia, on the war in Iraq or peace in the Middle East, but he reaches out to all to persuade and convince, to challenge and encourage. Our Task Force believes this is the way forward.

Finally, there are two aspects of this discussion that we should welcome and seize. The first is a renewed the focus on religion and politics, Catholic faith and public action. We believe public life is enriched, not threatened by citizens who bring their deepest convictions and values into the choices about what values and which leaders will guide our nation. Without apology, we ask Catholics whether your faith shape your politics or is it the other way around? We welcome this discussion and hope it contributes to a renewed sense of faithful citizenship among our Catholic people.

The second is about worthiness to receive Communion. It is not just politicians, but all of us who should ask are we worthy to receive the Eucharist. Are we free of serious sin? Do we live according to the Gospel? Do we “choose life,” serve “the least of these,” hunger and thirst for justice and peace? All of us are called to reflect on our worthiness, confess our sins and renew our lives. What a wonderful opportunity we have to speak clearly to our people on this important teaching. When did we last preach on the proper disposition to receive Communion? The present situation gives us a graced moment and opportunity.

If this moment can renew a sense of faithful citizenship and the call for all of us to examine our conscience before we approach the altar, this controversy can strengthen our Church and nation. As I said at the beginning, we are in this together. This is a time for mutual respect for our duties and differences as bishops, for our exercise of pastoral prudence in our common responsibilities, and for our unity as a body of bishops, recognizing how our individual actions affect other bishops and our entire community of faith. All of us share an unequivocal commitment to protect human life and dignity and to preach the Gospel in difficult times.

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