

# Political Life and Christian Responsibility

By FR. KEVIN O'ROURKE, OP

Though there was no presidential election this year, election fever ran high in the United States. Issues such as peace, the war in Vietnam, and the high cost of living were discussed excitedly by candidates and voters. National, state, and local elections attracted intense attention.

Sincere Christians realize their responsibilities to vote in important elections. They acknowledge that they must contribute to good government by choosing, conscientiously, candidates who will be honest and sincere office holders.

But when the ballots have been cast, does the political responsibility of the Christian cease for the next two or four years? Our recent history, and our present political problems indicate that even when "the better man" has been elected there is a continuing political responsibility for the Christian. Christians must not only vote conscientiously, they also have the responsibility to work for the reform of existing political institutions.

"The Political Community exists," the Second Vatican Council states, "for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and signifi-

ficance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy. Indeed, the common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately, and readily may attain their own perfection." (Church in Modern World, n. 74).

If a government, then, exists for the perpetuation of a particular political party, or for the betterment of a particular segment of the people, and not for the betterment of all the people, then the political institution in question is corrupt.

To say a political institution is corrupt does not necessarily imply that the people who control the political institution are corrupt. On the contrary, they very often lack vision. In one large American city, the main political leader is an exemplary Christian. His political, personal and family life shows forth his Christian commitment. Yet the political party which this man controls is corrupt. The practical goal of this political party is to continue in power. Loyalty to the party, not service to the people, is the slogan. Policies and programs in this city are judged by the criterion, "will it help the party."

The Christian principle of good government, "will it help the people, especially those who

cannot help themselves," is seldom invoked. No matter how much lip service is given to honesty and good government by politicians in this city, an unbiased evaluation of the activity of the political party in power suggests one conclusion: the party first, the people second. This city government has everything, save Christian Vision. The duty of Christians then, is to make sure that political institutions have the proper vision of what they are about. Christians should forcefully remind political leaders, political parties, and office holders that their first responsibility is to the needs of the people.

"In the conscience of many," states the Council, "there arises an increasing concern that the rights of minorities be recognized, without neglect for their duties toward the political community." (Ibid. n. 73).

This desire to help minorities is present in the minds and hearts of many American Catholics; there is a growing concern about the black, the poor, and other people in our society who cannot help themselves. And yet, the Kerner Report, when discussing the causes of racial violence, states that one of the basic causes is that the United States is a "racist society." Thus, the very political institutions which are supposed to help the black, the poor, and other underprivileged people, are governed by attitudes and goals which are primarily designed to help the educated, the white and the comfortable.

Christians cannot stand idle in the face of this situation, and maintain that they are



Getting involved in politics is a Christian response to the needs and despair of most of our planet's inhabitants. (CRS Photo)

trying to help their fellowman.

We live in an era when political institutions are subject to great criticism and even revolution. The answer to this series of problems lies not in the destruction of our government or political parties, but in their renewal. Many men of good will serve in our present political structures. Yet many of them serve with a vision that is out of date for the problems that beset our time. As a result,

many political institutions are corrupt and dying; they bring misery and despair, rather than life and service, to the people.

Christians can help bring about the necessary renewal of vision. We have the principles, do we have the courage? When the Conciliar Fathers advocated a more active participation by Catholics in political life, they were calling us to give our political institutions a Christian Vision.

## KNOW YOUR FAITH

### Q. and A.

by FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

**Q.** You indicated recently how bishops are selected in the United States. Is this the only method of choosing bishops? Are there better systems available?

**A.** There are several different ways of selecting men for the hierarchy of the Church.

A good example for purposes of comparison with our own system is offered by the Canadian experience. Until last year the Canadian system and ours were identical. Both countries had adopted the procedures established by the Consistorial Congregation in 1916. However, at their plenary assembly of April 18, 1969, the Canadian hierarchy modified its methods.

First, the Canadian bishops further specified the qualifications required for the episcopal office in accordance with the description contained in the second chapter of the Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church. The Canadian Church requires that the prospective bishop must have "an ability for teamwork . . . a modern mentality, a good knowledge of pastoral needs, ability to express himself and communicate with others, courage and dynamism, ability to decide and direct, respect for laity, a real sense of the Church today."

Some of the new procedures are as follows:

1. At the beginning of the year, the diocesan bishops, "with proper discretion, will ask the bishops, priests, Religious and lay people of the diocese to propose names . . ."

2. Bishops of provinces meet every year and all coadjutors and auxiliaries are invited to participate.

3. Upon the vacancy of a diocese, an ad hoc committee of the Bishops Conference consults with the Vicar Capitular, the presbyteral council (diocesan priests' senate), and the diocesan pastoral council. These latter councils discuss the needs of the diocese and the qualities required for local Church leadership. Then each member submits a confidential memo to the ad hoc committee stating whom he or she judges to be most qualified. Each member must give reasons for the choice and is free to consult discreetly.

4. The ad hoc committee and the Apostolic Delegate jointly, "keeping in mind both the consultation with the . . . presbyteral and pastoral councils, will choose the names of those whom they feel they should recommend." These names are forwarded to the bishops of the province and, following consultation with the ad hoc committee and the Apostolic Delegate, these bishops jointly select three names which are sent to the Holy See.

In the case of an appointment of an auxiliary bishop, the general procedure is the same. However, the diocesan bishop has the following rights:

1. to sit with the ad hoc committee and the Apostolic Delegate;

2. to approve the list of three names sent to the Holy See; and

3. to indicate his own preference.

The major change in the Canadian plan is its official incorporation of the advice of the priests' senates and of the diocesan councils, even to the point of urging the ad hoc committee of the Bishops' Conference and Apostolic Delegate to keep in mind the nominees of the priests and laity.

## How Conscience Formation Deals with Political Life

BY FR. CARL F. PFEIFER, SJ

Some parents are disturbed when they find that the religious education of their youngsters includes discussions of political issues like Vietnam, and readings about men like Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. The parents question why the children are not spending more time learning the Ten Commandments. Greater parental concern is evidenced when the young actually become involved in political movements or causes.

Like most recent developments in the Church, a change of emphasis usually brings into sharper perspective traditional teachings that, for one or other reason, had not been sufficiently stressed in the recent past. An overly legalistic moral formation during the past several centuries of Church history cast a shadow over the traditional, biblical understanding of conscience as openness to God's commands that may be recognized in human experience, as well as through law and authority.

Likewise overshadowed, but never fully forgotten, was the social dimension of Christian responsibility. For several centuries too much emphasis was placed on an individualistic understanding of conscience. I was taught to obey the commandments in order to save my soul and be happy with God forever. Social responsibility was never denied, but tended to be placed by individual preoccupations.

Vatican Council II attempts to officially restore the balance to a more soundly traditional perspective, one more vital to our times. "Profound and rapid changes make it particularly urgent that no one, ignoring the trends of events or drugged by laziness, content himself with a merely individualistic morality."

"It grows increasingly true that the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the

common goal, according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life." (The Church in the Modern World, 30).

A significant part of Christian moral living is enabling love to become effective through social and political structures and strategies.

According to the Council an important part of the moral formation of the young is education to social awareness, social skills "For a true education aims at the formation of the human person with respect to his ultimate goal, and simultaneously with respect to the good of those societies of which, as a man, he is a member, and in whose responsibilities, as an adult, he will share" (Declaration on Christian Education, 1).

Training in social skills is part of Christian conscience formation. That is why new texts and other religious education media direct attention to social problems and issues, to outstanding leaders in combating social ills, and to effective methods of improving human society.

Surprising to some and a scandal to others is the important place given to politics in the development of social conscience. For many Catholic adults politics carries with it connotations of graft, corruption, and expediency. In their religious education, little attention may have been given to the political realm beyond the individual's obligation to obey the laws of the country, state and city.

Aware that in the complexity of contemporary life, Christian love cannot be fully effective without skillful political action, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council encourage reflection on the political aspects of Christian responsibility.

Christians more than others have a special role in political involvement. "Let all Christians appreciate their special and personal vocation in the political community."

"This vocation requires that they give conspicuous example of devotion to the sense of duty and of service to the advancement of the common good." (The Church in the Modern World, 75). Not all are called to full time political dedication, but all Christians are called to responsible involvement in political life. The Church considers those dedicated to political service and bearing the burdens of political office as worthy of praise and consideration.

Political education is an important part of the work of helping the young develop mature Christian consciences. This implies that our children and youth be exposed — according to their age and maturity — to the values and risks of political life. They need to appreciate that genuine love requires translation into political action if it is to adequately benefit the poor, the hungry, and the victims of injustice. As John F. Kennedy once stated, "Politics is the art of the possible." Charity that is not rendered possible, realistic, effective — that is, social, political, organizational, economic — may well be little more than wishful thinking in the face of the vastness and complexity of today's social problems.

For this reason the Council affirms unambiguously that "civic and political education is today supremely necessary for people, especially young people. Such education should be painstakingly provided, so that all citizens can make their contribution to the political community. Let those who are suited for it, and can become so, prepare themselves for the difficult but most honorable art of politics" (The Church in the Modern World, 75).