

POLITICS

U.S. Bishops to Catholics: Inform Conscience

Washington (NC) — The U.S. Catholic Conference, with an eye toward the 1984 national election, has reiterated its quadrennial challenge to American Catholics to "take stands...become involved...inform your conscience" on political issues.

The advice came in an updated version of the USCC's statement on "Political Responsibility: Choices for the 1980s." Earlier versions of the statement were published in 1976 and in late 1979 for the 1980 campaigns.

The 1984 statement, approved by the USCC's Administrative Board March 22 and released April 3, includes new sections on energy and civil rights and expanded discussion of Central America, nuclear disarmament and other ongoing concerns.

Much of the document, however, reads like its 1979 predecessor, except for minor alterations in wording or use of papal quotes. The USCC is the public policy arm of the U.S. bishops.

As in 1979, the bishops stated that they "do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc" or "to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing candidates."

"Make candidates declare their values, so you can compare those values with your own," the new statement says. "Take stands on the candidates and the issues."

"Become involved in the campaign or party of your choice," it continues. "Finally, use the coming months to better understand the issues and inform your conscience."

Issues discussed specifically, if briefly, by the document are abortion, arms control and disarmament, capital punishment, civil rights, the economy, education, energy, family life, food and agricultural policy, health, housing, human rights, mass media, and regional conflict — including Central America, southern Africa and the Middle East.

Some language in sections carried over from 1979 seems to be stronger in the 1984 document.

For example, the 1984 statement, discussing abortion,

says the "right to life is the most basic human right and it demands the protection of law." It adds that "we do not accept the concept that anyone has the right to choose an abortion" and that "we reject the public funding of abortion."

In 1979, the document said that "the right to life is a basic human right which should have the protection of law." But it did not mention public funding or the concept of the right to an abortion.

Both the 1979 and 1984 sections on abortion call for passage of a constitutional amendment to overturn the 1973 Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion.

Capital punishment is opposed in the 1984 document in virtually the same terms as it was in 1979. "In view of our commitment to the value and dignity of human life, we oppose capital punishment," the 1984 statement says.

In the 1984 version, the USCC has set aside civil rights as a separate section. The 1979 version treated it under a discussion of human rights.

Both documents say that "discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity or age continues to exist in our nation." The documents describe this discrimination as "a grave injustice and an affront to human dignity" which "must be aggressively resisted by every individual and rooted out of every social institution and structure."

The 1984 document then adds that "racism is a particularly serious form of discrimination" and that while progress has been made in eliminating prejudice, "an urgent need for continued reconciliation in this area" remains. "Racism is not merely one sin among many" but "a radical evil dividing the human family," the 1984 statement says.

In the new section on energy, the 1984 statement urges national policies which would:

- Promote conservation and responsible stewardship of our limited energy resources;
- Commit energy development to improving safety for the work force and the community;

- Promote international cooperation in developing and distributing energy, thus reducing the tensions which may lead to international conflict;

- Provide for equitable access to energy resources and benefits, particularly for low-income people; and

- Promote the development of renewable energy sources.

Since the last political responsibility statement, conflict in Central America, especially in El Salvador and Nicaragua, has intensified. Victims of violence in the last four years include Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador and four American churchwomen, all murdered in El Salvador in 1980.

Central America has come to be the most visible focus of our attention to regional conflicts," the 1984 political responsibility statement says. "Our position concerning the indigenous roots of the conflicts, the imperative need for fundamental social change, and the futility, not to say immorality, of proposed military solutions has been stated often and is well known."

The document says that "under no reasonably foreseeable circumstances can direct intervention of military personnel in the region, on the part of the United States or any other outside power, be justified."

The 1979 statement dealt with Central America in less detail.

Likewise, the section of the 1984 document dealing with arms control and disarmament also reflects increased reflection by the bishops, in particular, through their 1983 pastoral, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response."

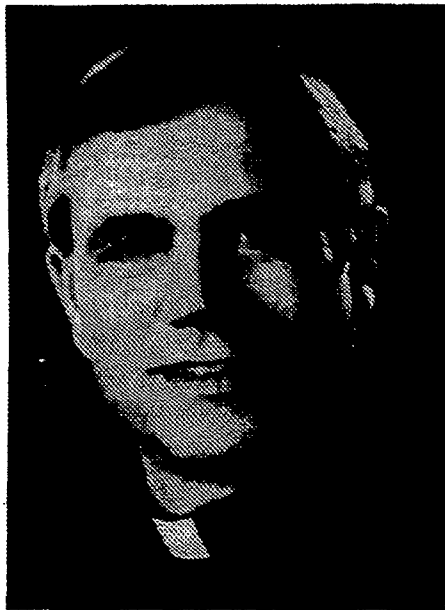
As the political responsibility statement points out, the pastoral "condemns the counter-city or counter-population use of nuclear weapons; rejects the notion of waging limited nuclear wars (because of the risk of escalation to all-out nuclear war); and questions the moral acceptability of policies that contemplate the initiation of nuclear war to repel a conventional attack, as is the case in NATO strategy."

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