

Columnists

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Catholics and the 1988 campaign

By Father Richard P. McBrien

With the adjournment of the Republican national Convention in New Orleans last week, the 1988 presidential election campaign has entered its final phase.

Of particular importance to this campaign is a 12-page document, dated July 14, 1988, from the general counsel of the United States Catholic Conference. The memorandum was sent to all bishops, diocesan attorneys and fiscal managers, and state Catholic Conference directors, and concerns section 501 (c) 3 of the Internal Revenue Code.

The document provides some very explicit guidelines for official Catholic participation in this year's electoral contest.

Although similar directives have been circulated in the past, there is a special urgency attached to them this year. The Catholic Church's tax-exempt status is currently under legal challenge by a group known as Abortion Rights Mobilization.

ARM contends that some bishops have used their official religious position to try to defeat candidates who support abortion rights and to promote those opposed to abortion.

"During an election campaign," the general counsel's memorandum declares, "exempt organizations remain free to address issues of concern to them and to their membership, even when such issues are relevant to the campaign. However, such discourse must focus on issues and not personalities."

Tax-exempt organizations, therefore, must "avoid statements that indirectly support or oppose a particular candidate, e.g., labeling a candidate as pro-abortion or anti-peace, using plus (+) or minus (-) signs to evaluate candidates, or using biased voter education materials."

If individual Church leaders want to participate in political rallies, they can do so, but only as private citizens. If a Church leader's presence is noted at one of these events, he "should avoid being introduced in his official capacity."

A prominent cardinal and at least one other bishop violated this guideline in 1984 by lending their presence at campaign rallies for President Ronald Reagan.

Church leaders who continue to be careless about their involvement in electoral politics will jeopardize the Catholic Church's tax-exempt status, which makes possible its whole range of spiritual, charitable and educational apostolates.

Between now and November 8, therefore, we should read of no bishop appearing on stage or dais with any of the candidates for president and vice president unless it is clearly a non-partisan event open to both parties.

We should read of no bishop even implying — much less declaring — that a vote for Michael Dukakis is a vote for abortion, or that a vote for George Bush is a vote for life. Let's admit it, if there's to be a problem, it is far more likely to be that kind of a problem, rather than the other way around.

Essays in Theology

Since a diocesan newspaper is an ecclesiastical house organ and the local bishop its publisher, we should be reading no editorial that recommends, even indirectly, a vote for one candidate over another.

No congregation should hear its pastor criticizing or praising candidates or parties by name for their stands on issues that happen to be of special interest to himself, be they liberal or conservative issues.

No parishioners should be handed parish bulletins that seek to disseminate information or candidates' voting records, nor should they have sample ballots or voter-education materials stuck under their cars' windshield wipers in the church parking lot.

Individual Catholics, of course, will always have the right to decide for themselves how they will vote and on what basis. They even have the right to picket candidates at political rallies, but always within the limits of Christian charity and justice.

This is a country where free speech and the secret ballot are constitutionally guaranteed.

But Church leaders and official Church agencies are another matter entirely. If they want to be exempt from taxes, they have to play by different rules.

Therefore, the first bishop who breathes a public word against Michael Dukakis or the Democratic platform even if it is "only to clarify the teaching of the Church," should immediately be repudiated by his fellow bishops.

The first pastor who uses his pulpit or parish facilities for anti-Dukakis or anti-Democratic political activities should be reprimanded publicly by his bishop.

The first diocesan editor who recommends a vote for Bush, however indirectly or discreetly, should be fired on the spot.

If Catholics wish to continue to vote Republican in large numbers as they did during the last two national elections and if many of them wish to do so because of the abortion issue, that is their right.

But they should get no encouragement whatever from their bishops, their pastors, their diocesan newspapers or any other official Catholic agency. And they should expect none.

Now, one can only hope that the Internal Revenue Service will begin to apply these rules in an ecumenically and politically balanced way — against black Protestant churches on the left and against evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant churches on the right.

The country — not to mention the churches themselves — would be a lot better off if it did.

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Note to readers:

The column *A Word for Sunday* does not appear in this week's edition due to the illness of Father Albert Shamon.

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