

Faith & Politics

Faith is

True faith impels action

By John G. Erb
Guest contributor

The relationship between faith and politics should be obvious, not only for Catholics, but for all Christians. The command to "love one's neighbor" mandates participation in civic affairs. The Old and New Testament exhortations remind us that this love begins *not* with those whom we know and who love us, but with the stranger, the enemy, the powerless, and the locked-out. The basic principles are really very simple and direct.

Most Catholics understand and act on these precepts. Minimally, we vote. We try to stay informed. We even may attend a meeting of a local governmental body. A few of us have even gone to a candidates' night or worked on a political campaign.

What meaning does this have for us on a local level here in Rochester, Greece, or Elmira, N.Y.? That's where things get a bit tricky. What does it mean to "love your neighbor" in a pluralistic society? How is this love reflected in the zoning laws we pass, the budgets we approve, the ordinances that we propose?

First of all, a faith perspective, at times, will put us squarely at odds with prevailing cultural norms. Our "bottom up" orientation will compel us to view public policy from the perspective of what is good for all the people, not just those especially privileged by economic status. As an elected official, therefore, my orientation is definitely affected by a value system that reflects this starting point. This does not mean a specifically Catholic or Christian agenda, but merely that as a Christian I bring a certain orientation to the decision-making process.

In a pluralistic society, I find that many others share this orientation from their own particular belief systems. Quite often they are more clear and passionate about their convictions than my Christian friends. My non-Christian friends understand the importance of acting on these convictions on a local level. They clearly understand the relationship between belief and action. They make extraordinary commitments in terms of time and money to live out their beliefs. They understand that politics and government is not a spectator sport. It demands intelligent, reflective participation.

Finally, faith helps to give me hope, a hope grounded in action. Too many here in America, and in the Christian churches, have given up on both hope and action. Cynicism and pessimism cause many not to participate at all. Still others intellectualize practical problems to such an extent that there is almost no commitment to change anything. Theorizing about problems becomes an excuse for inaction. Committees, studies, commissions, etc., litter the American political landscape. A predominance of theory and study almost guarantees that one will retreat into the safety of abstraction and inaction. The

parable of the good Samaritan focused on the action that took place, not the analysis of economic, social and psychological dynamics of the encounter.

True Christian faith demands action. It demands commitments of time and money to effect, in this instance, political change.

This hope in action is sometimes dampened by Christians who take a position of moral superiority. They are quick to criticize and point out the shortcomings of politics and politicians without making any serious commitment to helping create change. They seem to be more concerned with maintaining their own purity than creating hope through action. Whether they come to a city council meeting with their issues or present a candidate with questions around election time, one thing is for sure: It's the only time you see them.

As an elected official, I can tell you that the more a particular group berates and characterizes you, the less they will be involved in the electoral and governmental process. The most effective Christians get out and work to change things. They keep hope alive by the practical application of their ideals in the political arena.

I have been most inspired by the quiet work of many in my parents' generation, for example, who have helped in many of my campaigns for public office. Not quick to judge, they roll up their sleeves and get to work. Many are Catholics whose faith is exhibited by quiet, hard work. They, like the good Samaritan, see the need and respond.

This expression of faith by both Christians and non-Christians is critical to my energy and enthusiasm as a candidate and as a public official. My ability to get elected and to impact public policy is directly related to the commitment individuals make to my efforts.

I have deliberately chosen to speak about believers and non-believers throughout this article because the work that needs to be done in this world is being done by a small cross section of *people who care*. We are, after all, all God's children. God's spirit blows where it will: It takes hold in men and women of good will no matter what their professed belief.

Democrat John Erb has been a Rochester City Council member for eight years, and is currently waging an independent campaign to become mayor of Rochester. Previously, he served two terms as a Monroe County legislator, and was a director of diocesan Urban Social Ministry in 1976.

Ordained a deacon in 1985, Erb is assigned to St. Francis Xavier/Holy Redeemer Parish. He graduated from St. Andrew's School and St. John Fisher College, and earned a master of divinity degree from St. Bernard's Institute.

Erb was born and raised in Rochester, and owns Erb's Income Tax Service.

By Frank G. Talomie
Guest contributor

During the nine years I have been a member of the New York State Assembly, I have seen the effect of the separation of church and state.

First of all, let me express my opinion on the effect of the religious, political, ethical, and professional background of the members brought before the legislature.

I have observed a natural tendency to place legislators with common backgrounds before the legislature. As an example, we have in the Assembly the American and Puerto Rican caucus as well as the American legislative organization. The purpose of these groups is to promote their concerns before the legislature.

Other members with specialized talents and experience are placed on appropriate commission task forces to utilize their expertise.

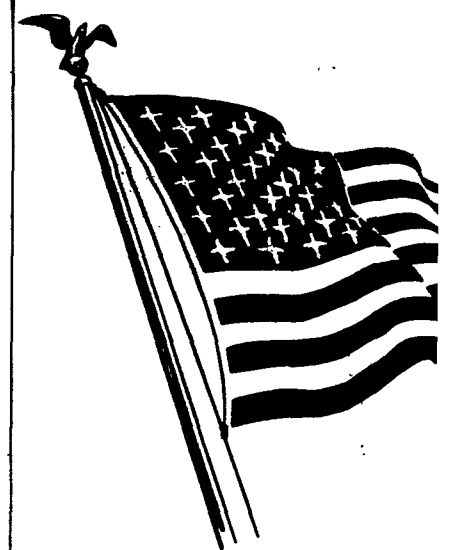
Coming from a devout Catholic family, I find that there is more and more involvement of priests, Catholic groups and advocates brought before the Assembly affecting the beliefs and interests of Catholic people.

During the eight years I was a member of the Assembly Health Committee, I was in contact with a state-wide advocate and lobbyist who had been a Monsignor. His knowledge of the health care field was useful in dealing with the leadership in form and language on bills that were brought before the committee.

In addition, there are many state and national Catholic conferences and group releases and memorandums on legislative and court decisions being considered.

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