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Catholics do have responsibilities in political arena

By Michael A. Taylor, S.T.D.
Guest contributor

Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines politics as "the science and art of political government." The exercise of responsibility in the political sphere is a call given to each Christian, albeit to different degrees. Responding to that call is challenging, at times, difficult, and always interesting.

Historically, governments of various types have closely linked themselves with specific religions. In the West, the rise of the modern nation state was accompanied by alliances with particular Christian denominations. Conflicts ensued. In the American experiment, it was decided that the states would cease giving favored status to particular religious denominations. Yet, our Founders believed that religion and morality were essential to the success of this new form of government, even though the churches were "disestablished." The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights begins, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Catholics did not constitute a significant percentage of the U.S. population until the great waves of immigration occurred in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The election in 1960 of John Kennedy as president was perceived at large as a sign that the long-standing walls of prejudice against Catholics were starting to come down.

Around the same time, the Second Vatican Council (1961-65) initiated a new direction in church life. Dialogue and engagement in the mod-



ern world were positively affirmed as good.

In his 1988 exhortation, Pope John Paul II broadly defined public life as "the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas" that are intended to promote the common good.

Vatican II had already singled out the need for all citizens to receive education in civics and politics. The Council made a poignant appeal to young people to prepare themselves for a political vocation: "Those with a talent for the difficult yet noble art of politics, or whose talents in this matter can be developed, should prepare themselves for it and, forgetting their own convenience and material interests, they should engage in political activity."

The truth of Christ that the church conveys to us in its social teaching tradition is a living truth that enlightens our minds and enlivens our hearts. It is intended to bear fruit. The holiness to which every Christian is called should be visible in conduct in

public life.

Sometimes citizens serve in government; other times they present their concerns to the government. "Political responsibility" is a term that embraces a broad range of specific activities. Examples include serving the public through elected or appointed office or through employment with a governmental body or agency; working for policy "think tanks" or other private research or advisory entities; serving as an official or worker in a political party; working on political campaigns or supporting a candidate; becoming informed on public policy issues; registering to vote and exercising the right to vote; conducting a "Get Out the Vote" campaign; organizing a legislative advocacy group; contacting your elected officials through letters, phone calls or personal meetings.

Vatican II exhorts, "In their patriotism and in their fidelity to their civic duties Catholics ... will make the weight of their convictions so influential that as a result civil authority will be justly exercised and laws will accord with the moral precepts and the common good."

Some of the moral or religious values that the founders took for granted are today placed in question. The debate in our society is not just over specific issues or policies. It is also about the broader framework of values. Can the American experiment in government thrive, or survive unchanged, without a genuine respect for moral and religious values on the part of the government? The stakes are high. Democracy does not live by process alone. Committed citizens willing to champion critical values are vital.

Taylor is executive director of the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment in Washington, D.C.

Politics

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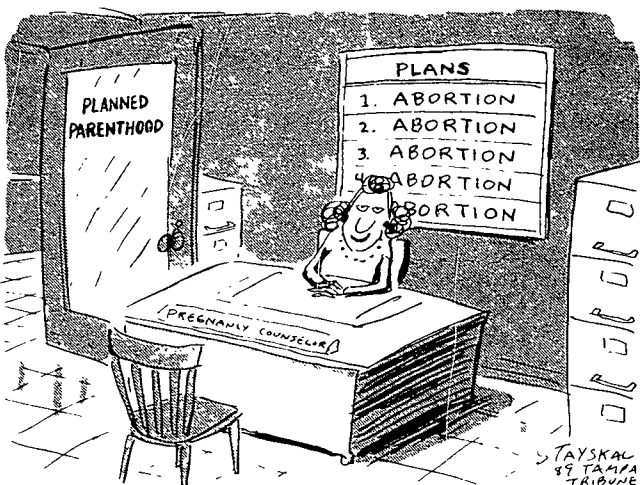
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