

Catholic conference leader urges participation

By John M. Kerry
Guest contributor

Although voting is a cherished constitutional right, a growing number of citizens are electing not to vote. Many others are so disillusioned with politicians and the political process, they have turned to violence and a rejection of all social, economic, religious, and political institutions.

Noted sociologist Robert Bellah suggests in his recent book, *The Good Society*, that this disillusionment is directly related to the breakdown of our cultural institutions, and to a dramatic diminishment in the social and ethical values that enriched and sustained our spiritual heritage for more than 200 years. The breakdown in our cultural institutions is not only contributing to the destruction of our family life in the 1990s, but it is

sowing the seeds of a more dramatic and direct attack on religious values and institutions in the next century.

The New York state bishops share the concern about the breakdown of our cultural institutions and the pervasive alienation that exists in many of our urban communities. More importantly, they are very concerned about the human suffering experienced by children, seniors, and families who are victims of poverty, violence, and discrimination in our society.

The bishops' priorities regarding the expenditure of scarce state resources contained in a deficit-driven budget are aptly described in their statement:

"In the Catholic social vision, the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. Each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality

or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status. The test of every institution or policy is whether it enhances or threatens human life and human dignity ... The poor and vulnerable have a special place in Catholic social teaching. The Scriptures tell us we will be judged by our response to the "least of these." We need to put the needs of the poor first."

Even though the bishops have provided the Catholic community with a broad vision of social justice based on Scripture and pastoral experience, it is still very difficult to translate their consistent ethic of life framework into public policy, unless one is well informed about the issues.

The bishops understand the difficulties of translating Gospel truths into everyday realities. To assist us, they have provided some guidelines and

extensive documentation about a variety of public policy issues that are important to all Catholics. These guidelines are, in part, contained in the Oct., 1991, National Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Statement on Political Responsibility*, the Sept. 24, 1992, *Statement by the Catholic bishops of New York state on Participation in the Elective Process*, and the 1993 Legislative Agenda of the New York State Catholic Conference.

The Catholic bishops of New York state have consistently supported a broad range of public policies that place children and families first; express a preferential option for the poor; and reach out to the poor and needy. Drawing upon the church's rich tradition in support of human life, the New York State Catholic Conference invites everyone to support our agenda (see Box). We urge the Catholic community to become more informed about, and involved in, the public policy process.

We know you can make a difference; together, we all can make a difference in advancing a legislative agenda that will:

- protect human lives from direct threats such as abortion and capital punishment;
- provide economic security and opportunity for those in need;
- ensure access to health care for all, especially children, the elderly, the disabled and the underinsured; and
- foster quality education for children and sound educational choices for parents.

The bishops have provided extensive information on many complex issues in order to inform and guide the Catholic community in accordance with the church's social teachings.

The bishops continue to encourage responsible and well-informed individuals to share their vision and experience with the less fortunate.

On Tuesday, November 3, exercise your right to vote for the candidate of your choice. You can make a difference.

Kerry is executive director of the New York State Catholic Conference.

State bishops issue election statement

The following is a statement by New York state's Catholic bishops on participation in the elective process:

Tuesday, November 3 is Election Day. On that day, voters in this state, and indeed, the nation, will determine the leadership and policies which will guide local, state and federal governments in the years ahead. In order to vote on November 3, citizens must be registered to vote by October 10.

Tragically, if history is any guide, a great many eligible voters will not participate in the elective process. Many people believe there is no real difference between candidates, or that their chosen candidate is either comfortable ahead or too far behind in the polls for their vote to make a difference.

Such attitudes, while understandable, are a mistake. Voting is a vitally important moral and civic responsibility. We Bishops appeal to all citizens, and to Catholics in particular, to register to vote, to become educated

on the issues, and to exercise your right to vote freely and with thoughtful conviction. All of us should become informed, active and responsible participants in the political process so that those elected in November will be truly representative of the people.

As teachers and pastors, we offer the following paramount issues and questions which we have consistently raised for reflection of Catholics and of all citizens prior to Election Day:

How do our local, state, and national policies:

- safeguard and enhance human lives from the moment of their conception to the moment of natural death?
- support public funding for parents in choosing their children's education?
- protect basic human rights which flow from human life, such as the right to shelter, clothing, food, work, health care, and education?

- defend the family and strengthen family life?

- put the needs of the poor, minorities, and children first and foremost?

- demonstrate that we are people of peace?

- promote employment opportunities for all who are able to work?

For Catholics, it is not enough for us to believe personally in the principles of justice, peace and respect for human life. We must work for those principles by participating in the democratic process. Together we can shape the future of our society by calling attention to important moral values and by collaborating with others in support of programs reflecting those values. Together we can make a difference. We urge you to vote for the candidate of your choice.

May God help us to be worthy, responsible citizens and committed brothers and sisters to our neighbors in the Empire State, the nation and the world.

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