

Candidates seemingly ignore many family issues

A9

Nancy Frazier O'Brien/CNS

EDITOR'S NOTE: The U.S. bishops' Administrative Committee adopted "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility" as a blueprint on how Catholic social teaching should affect political participation by Catholics. Stories in an ongoing Catholic News Service series about how the stands of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates stack up with "Faithful Citizenship" appear on pages A9-16.

WASHINGTON — As Congress headed toward its summer recess in July, most of the marriage-related talk focused on efforts to revive the stalled Federal Marriage Amendment, which would amend the U.S. Constitution to define marriage as the union of a man and a woman.

But as the U.S. bishops made clear in their 2003 statement on "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility," marriage- and family-related issues of concern to the Catholic Church go far beyond the same-sex marriage question.

"Policies related to the definition of marriage, taxes, the workplace, divorce and welfare must be designed to help families stay together and to reward responsibility and sacrifice for children," it said. "Because financial and economic factors have such an impact on the well-being and stability of families, it is important that just wages be paid to those who work to support their families and that generous efforts be made to aid poor families."

American Catholics "must strive to make the needs and concerns of families a central national priority ... in the face of the many pressures working to undermine" them, the bishops added.

"Washington is in some ways divided, and the political parties are divided" about which marriage and family issues are most important, said Nancy Wisdo, director of the Office of Domestic Social Development of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Some say the only marriage and family issue that is important is same-sex marriage, while "some say it's only economics," she added. "We (in the Catholic Church) say it's both, and that's what makes us different."

Brian Kane, chairman of the philosophy and theology department at DeSales University in Allentown, Pa., doesn't see much difference on family issues between President Bush, the likely Republican nominee for president, and Democratic nominee Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts.



Gregory A. Shemitz/CNS

Michael and Christine DeStefano leave St. Joseph Church in Babylon, N.Y., following their May 22 wedding. As Congress headed toward its summer recess in July, most marriage-related talk focused on reviving the stalled Federal Marriage Amendment.

Both campaigns "are oriented toward a lot of issues that aren't resonating with families," said Kane, whose department offers a bachelor's degree in marriage and family studies.

If the political discourse continues to focus on topics many consider extreme, Catholic and other voters might have to "organize to try to bring some of the issues back to center," he said.

On the same-sex marriage question, Bush favors the Federal Marriage Amendment; Kerry and his running mate, Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, were the only senators not in Washington when the amendment had its first vote July 14. The measure failed on a 48-50 procedural vote.

Kerry's campaign Web site makes no specific mention of same-sex marriages but touts his opposition to the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage for federal purposes as a "legal union between one man and one woman" and bars partners in same-sex unions from receiving federal benefits that are available to spouses because of their marital status, such as spousal Social Security benefits.

The Catholic bishops have strongly backed both the Federal Marriage Amendment and the Defense of Marriage Act.

Kerry "supports same-sex civil unions so that gay couples can benefit from the health benefits, inheritance rights or Social Security survivor benefits guaranteed for heterosexual couples," the Web site says.

But what about the many other issues affecting marriage and the

American family? Both candidates have said their economic plans would help families, but they take decidedly different approaches.

One cornerstone of Bush's plan to strengthen American families is a proposal that would give \$240 million to state programs that support healthy marriages and provide another \$50 million in fiscal year 2005 to promote responsible fatherhood.

"Through this new initiative, faith-based and community organizations would receive competitive grants to support skill-based marriage and parenting education, job training, and other services that help fathers provide emotional and financial support to their children," according to a description of the program on Bush's campaign Web site.

Another key element of the Bush plan is to leave families with more of their own money by keeping taxes down. "The president's tax relief allowed families to keep more of what they earn by cutting tax rates across the board, doubling the child credit to \$1,000 and reducing the marriage penalty," the campaign Web site says.

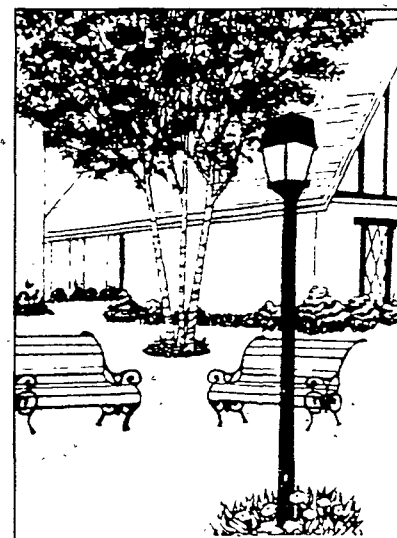
But Kerry argues that the economic health of American families has gotten progressively worse under the Bush administration.

"It is ironic that the president is talking about strengthening families when his economic policies have done so much to hurt them," said Kerry spokesman Phil Singer, citing Census Bureau figures that show a \$1,462 drop in family income between 2000 and 2002.

Kerry's plan to strengthen families includes support for a \$6 billion increase in child-care funding over five years, expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act, an increase in the minimum wage indexed to inflation, new tax credits on health care and college tuition, and protection of "increases in the child tax credit, the reduced marriage penalty and the new tax bracket that helps people save \$350 on their first level of income," according to the Kerry campaign Web site.

But Wisdo worries that lost in the campaign rhetoric are the concerns of the truly poor.

"My biggest concern is that these issues will not be part of the campaign at all," she said. "Neither party seems positioned to tackle" issues such as welfare reform, homelessness and other concerns of the poorest and most vulnerable in America, she added.



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