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Bishops urge Canadians to vote with 'discernment'

Ron Csillag Religion News Service | Sep. 18, 2008

TORONTO -- Canada's Catholic bishops are urging their flock to vote with "discernment" in the country's Oct. 14 federal election.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued a four-page guide encouraging Catholics "to become better informed about the issues, to voice their concerns with the political candidates ... and, most of all, to vote."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper called the election recently in an effort to turn his minority Conservative government into a majority in the House of Commons.

The guide goes on to list some basic principles from Catholic moral and social teaching to help voters examine and evaluate public policy and programs.

These principles include respect for life and the dignity of the human person, as well as the preferential option for the poor.

The text also addresses Canada's seven-year-old involvement in the war in Afghanistan, and the four bishops who signed the document call on the political parties to engage in a peace process for Afghanistan.

"War is never the best solution for people in solving a problem," it states. "The social doctrine of the Church is clear on this ... Our country should be a leader in finding a way to resolve this conflict by focusing on the basic issues."

The guide also addresses the environment, saying that "love for God and neighbor involves love for creation, which calls for choices that go beyond short-term interests."

Choices for Catholics "can be tough," the bishops allow, especially when a party or candidate holds "values that are not fully in line with Church teaching."

In that case, "a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals."

Canadian Catholics try to balance social justice, life issues

By Michael Swan, Catholic News Service

TORONTO -- Canada's political battleground splits Catholic politicians between those formed by Catholic social justice movements and those who stake their Catholic and political identity on support of life and family issues, said a church historian.

"I've yet to see a politician make it work where these different things are wedded together," said Mark McGowan, church historian and principal at the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto.

In an effort to be balanced and avoid any hint of dictating a political position, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has only one clear command emblazoned across the top of its Federal Election 2008 Guide: "Catholics have an obligation to be interested in politics."

Canadians go to the polls Oct. 14 for federal elections.

McGowan can point to Catholic politicians on all sides of the political spectrum.

New Democratic Party member of Parliament Charlie Angus, representing Timmins-James Bay, Ontario, is a former Catholic New Times columnist and a practicing Catholic. Tony Martin of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, also a New Democratic Party member of Parliament, comes from Irish Catholic working-class roots and speaks frequently about social justice and the church.

Liberals also have captured the imaginations of social-justice-minded Catholics.

Former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, a Liberal Party member, is a churchgoing Catholic and a graduate of the University of St. Michael's College. He has based his politics on Catholic social teaching, most notably in his commitment to debt relief for the Third World, an issue Pope John Paul II spoke about frequently.

"He was probably at his finest when he was in Darfur (in Sudan) speaking for the people there," said McGowan. "But at the same time, not a pro-life stance as far as we would consider it in the last election, and certainly on same-sex marriage -- his government brought that in."

The Conservative Party's Jason Kenny is a graduate of Athol Murray College of Notre Dame in Saskatchewan and attended the St. Ignatius Institute at the Jesuit University of San Francisco. While Kenny has been a vociferous opponent of same-sex marriage, he also backed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq opposed by Pope John Paul and Catholic bishops worldwide.

James Roche, policy analyst for the Catholic Health Association of Canada, said that increasingly "Catholic positions tend to place us in a kind of minority view on some social issues and some moral issues -- that's for sure."

"That being said, it doesn't mean that there's not a place for that viewpoint to be put out there and shared and discussed," Roche said.

He said getting Catholic Health Association issues on politicians' agendas is getting harder. Writing to parties to ask for their positions on specific issues usually results in a response one or two days before votes are cast -- too late to make their answers widely known, he said.

As for actually influencing the outcome of an election, that would presume that Catholics all agree on a single position and political party and that they could muster a majority in a significant number of jurisdictions.

Even the mostly conservative Opus Dei movement cannot claim political uniformity for its members -- nor does it wish to, said the director of the Opus Dei information office in Montreal, Isabelle Saint-Maurice.

"Opus Dei doesn't have a specific orientation. It can be as diverse as the people who see possible solutions in society," she said.

For Saint-Maurice the ideal Catholic politician is St. Thomas More, beheaded on orders from King Henry VIII in 1535.

"St. Thomas More had a role; he was in politics, but he had his conscience," she said. "He was a Catholic who knew where was the good."

For the Catholic Worker members who live at Toronto's Zacchaeus House, knowing what is good is not the same thing as a political consensus. Among the six houses that make up Toronto's Catholic Worker movement there are Liberals, New Democratic Party supporters and others, said Catholic Worker Clayton Johnson.

"We vary. It's not the kind of thing where we all have exactly the same point of view," Johnson said.

The peace movement is important to the Toronto Catholic Worker Movement but so are life issues, including supporting the mentally challenged and opposing the death penalty.

"There's also a North American Catholic history. We came here from Ireland and Italy with immigrant backgrounds and were then second-class citizens for a long time," said Johnson. "Just looking at our own history, sometimes our mentality is that the best we can hope for is that the Tories don't get a majority. It sounds slightly defeatist, even if it's trying to be realistic. It is because of Liberal governments that there is still a strong middle class and opportunities for us."

The Campaign Life Coalition has been lobbying against abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia since the late 1970s. It also runs LifeSiteNews, a pro-life news service on the Internet. The coalition works to gather information about every candidate and grade their pro-life credentials.

Jim Hughes, president of the coalition, discussed the local nature of Canadian elections.

"You can only vote for Stephen Harper if you happen to live in his riding (jurisdiction). (If you want Harper elected) you can vote for the party he represents, but you may be voting for some total scumbag," said Hughes. "We're trying to have the people understand that they are responsible for trying to find out who the individual candidate is and vote accordingly."

Jesuit Father William Ryan, acting director of the Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice, said politics is not about trying to find the perfect marriage between social concern and personal morality; it is about the "art of the possible."

"The fact is you have to decide what can be done," Father Ryan said. "If we ask for society to be perfect, then we're outside politics. So we have to live with the imperfect and try to make it better."

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