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Bishops' election document goes high tech

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Sep. 23, 2008

WASHINGTON -- Ask Catholic teenagers if they've read a recent document by the U.S. bishops and you might get a blank look.

But ask if they've heard of the bishops' statement "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility," either through a podcast, a video quiz on YouTube or its page on the social networking site Facebook, and you might get a nod of recognition.

That's what the U.S. bishops are hoping anyway.

"Faithful Citizenship," the document that urges Catholic voters to form their consciences around a variety of social concerns based on Catholic social teaching, is not something new. The bishops initially published the document in 1975 and produce a new version of it about every four years to coincide with the national elections.

The document for the 2008 election was approved by the bishops in November 2007.

But this time the document looks a lot younger. For starters, its Web site, www.faithfulcitizenship.org, has resources for youths and those who work with them.

The site is "tech savvy," according to Jill Rauh, youth and young adult coordinator for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development.

"I think if the church is going to be effective at communicating the message of 'Faithful Citizenship,' and all its messages, it needs to do so in ways that are appealing to young people," Rauh said.

She said getting youths to go beyond just reading the text or hearing about it is key to the new push behind the "Faithful Citizenship" quizzes, an iPod contest on the site and video clips. The hope is that young people will not only get the document's message but talk about it, reflect on it and apply it to their lives.

The Web site suggests some formats for talking about "Faithful Citizenship," such as one called "Coffee Discussion," which includes a series of questions about social issues and Catholic teaching that friends could informally talk about over coffee.

And youth ministers and religious educators are not limited to just making handouts of the document. Instead they are given ideas for skits, murals, open-microphone nights and prayer services based on "Faithful Citizenship."

Rauh told Catholic News Service the outreach to younger people is a recognition that they have "an important role to play in living out faith as leaders in the Catholic community. They are both the future and the present in our church."

And even if these Catholic youths are not old enough to vote, she said, they "still have a responsibility to be

faithful citizens" -- to be active in their communities and to challenge their leaders.

Across the country, youth and diocesan leaders have taken a variety of approaches in getting out the word on "Faithful Citizenship."

Becky VanPool, parish outreach and program development director for Catholic Charities of Oklahoma City, Okla., was working with the diocesan young adult ministry program to host a "Faithful Citizenship" barbecue Sept. 28.

During the evening, participants, including Oklahoma City Archbishop Eusebius J. Beltran, were to take part in small round-table discussions about the document.

VanPool said she was convinced the format to discuss faith and political issues would be "much more valuable than a presentation," although a small presentation was planned for the beginning to give an overview of Catholic social teaching.

Students at Melbourne Central Catholic High School in Melbourne, Fla., have been taking a close look at where the church stands on a variety of political issues in preparation for a congressional candidate forum they planned to host Sept. 25.

The students created the questions based on the "Faithful Citizenship" document and were to moderate the discussion.

Deborah Stafford Shearer, director of the Office of Advocacy and Justice for the Diocese of Orlando, Fla., who helped organize the forum, said this was the first time an event like this was being coordinated by students; usually it is done on the parish level.

But she saw it as an important "educational moment" for the students who have been preparing for the forum in religion and civics classes. The students formulated questions on abortion, marriage, health care, the economy and the environment.

To do so, Stafford Shearer said they had to learn "a lot about where the church stands on issues and also the diversity of issues" it addresses, something that is often a surprise to adults, she said.

That's why she hoped the event would "get a big parent turnout," so the lessons on active Catholic citizens would reach an even broader audience.

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