

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility

from the Catholic Bishops of the United States

PLANNING IDEAS FOR PARISH STAFFS AND PARISH COUNCILS

The [Faithful Citizenship Web site](#) includes a wide range of resources for parishes committees, educational programs, youth and young adult ministries, and other groups.

Parishes may want to consider the following ideas to begin developing a plan for sharing the message of Faithful Citizenship:

From Simple to Sophisticated: Parish involvement in faithful citizenship efforts can range from simple bulletin or pulpit announcements, to full voter registration campaigns and extensive distribution of voter education materials. The best efforts will be those integrated into ongoing parish activities and resources, such as Sunday worship, school and religious education programs, weekly bulletins, and meetings of parish organizations.

First Steps: Whatever level of involvement you choose, it is important to discuss this effort with the parish council and parish staff. You may want to use the *Faithful Citizenship* video to introduce the bishops' statement. Then, discuss how you might best share this message in your parish: Who should be in charge of the effort? the pastor? the parish council? the social concerns committee? a special committee? a designated member of the parish? That person or group can develop a plan for parish faithful citizenship activities, and identify how the plan fits the civic responsibility guidelines outlined below.

If developed by a designated parishioner or committee, the plan can then be brought to the pastor and the parish council for review and approval.

Diocesan social action offices and other diocesan offices can be helpful as you develop your plan and can provide local resources and advice.

You may want to consider some of these efforts:

Download and distribute the resources available on the *Faithful Citizenship* Web site, and from [USCCB Publishing \(www.usccbpublishing.org\)](http://www.usccbpublishing.org) to the appropriate parish leaders and urge them to integrate the message of *Faithful Citizenship* into parish activities.

Choose a week to distribute *The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* bulletin inserts at all Masses and parish gatherings.

Periodically include short excerpts from *Faithful Citizenship* in your **bulletin**.



Invite your diocesan social action director or other diocesan leaders to a special adult education session to give a presentation on Catholic teaching about participation in public life.

Offer a training session for catechists on how they can incorporate the message of *Faithful Citizenship* into their lesson plans.

Focus an in-service day or faculty meeting for parish school teachers on the message of *Faithful Citizenship*, and how it can be woven into school activities.

Preach on the importance of being “faithful citizens.”

Conduct non-partisan voter registration drives after Masses on one or more Sundays.

Periodically include in the **general intercessions** prayers for those elected and for all who exercise their rights and duties as citizens.

Conduct a **sign-up for a diocesan or state legislative network**, and encourage parishioners to participate in advocacy efforts.

Distribute **non-partisan candidate surveys** by your diocese or state Catholic conference.

Organize **non-partisan candidate forums**.

Political Activity Guidelines

Parishes and other Catholic organizations that are tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code are prohibited from intervening in political campaigns. As a result, certain political activities that would be appropriate for individuals should not be undertaken by Catholic organizations or their representatives.

The USCCB Office of General Counsel provides detailed guidance for Catholic organizations on what constitutes political campaign intervention under the Internal Revenue Code at www.usccb.org/ogc. Many dioceses and state Catholic conferences also provide resources for use by parishes and other Catholic organizations.

Parishes are often asked by candidates or political groups for permission to speak or distribute literature. Many parishes choose to distribute only *Faithful Citizenship*, materials distributed by their diocese, their state Catholic conference, or the USCCB. To avoid violating the political campaign intervention prohibition, you should seek the advice of your diocesan attorney or state Catholic conference before giving permission for the distribution of literature or providing the opportunity for candidates to speak.

The USCCB resources and the advice and materials provided by your diocese and your state Catholic conference can help you remain non-partisan and consistent with Catholic teaching.

Activities Allowed and Encouraged

According to the USCCB Office of General Counsel, certain activities generally are appropriate for parishes and other Catholic organizations:

Sharing the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching: Parishes and other Catholic organizations are encouraged to share the Church's teaching on the relationships between Christian faith and political life. The Church's teaching on political responsibility, human life, human rights, and justice and peace need to be shared more widely and effectively. Cards summarizing seven key themes of Catholic social teaching that can serve as guidelines for involvement in public life are available from the USCCB (English pub. no. 5-315, Spanish pub. no. 5-815; call 800-235-8722.) The *Faithful Citizenship* statement, the *Faithful Citizenship* videos, and the other resources available from USCCB, are helpful tools for developing educational programs.

Voter Participation: Parishes and other Church organizations can encourage members to participate in the electoral process: to register, to vote, to become informed on a broad range of issues, and to become active in the political life of the community. Parishes and other Church organizations can also sponsor non-partisan voter registration and "get out the vote" drives.

Ballot Measures: Supporting or opposing ballot measures, including referenda, initiatives, constitutional amendments, and similar procedures, is considered "lobbying" activity and not political campaign intervention. Parishes and other Church organizations can take positions on such measures and work to support or oppose them within the limits of permitted lobbying activity for section 501(c)(3) organizations. Any questions on these limits should be directed to your diocesan attorney or state Catholic conference.

Voter Education: Parishes and Church organizations can and should engage in non-partisan voter education. This may include distributing the results of candidate polls or surveys, so long as these materials have been approved by your diocesan attorney or state Catholic conference. Voter education materials should be consistent with Church teaching on political responsibility, cover a wide range of issues important to voters, and exhibit no bias for or against any candidate or party.

Non-Partisanship: The Church does not and will not engage in partisan politics. Pastors may wish to publish the following bulletin announcement in the weeks before the election:

We strongly urge all parishioners to register, to become informed on key issues, and to vote. The Church does not support or oppose any candidate, but seeks to focus attention on the moral and human dimensions of issues. We do not authorize the distribution of partisan political materials on parish property.

Activities to Avoid

To avoid violating the political campaign intervention prohibition, parishes, other Church organizations, and their representatives should remember and follow these guidelines:

Do not endorse or oppose candidates, political parties, or groups of candidates, or take any action that reasonably could be construed as endorsement or opposition.

Do not make available the use of Church facilities, assets, or members for partisan political purposes.

Do not authorize distribution of partisan political materials or biased voter education materials (those that support or oppose—or exhibit bias for or against—any candidate or party) on Church property, in Church publications, or at Church activities. Authorization should be given only after materials have been approved by your diocesan attorney.

Do not invite or permit only selected candidates to address your members. Before inviting candidates, make sure such events are consistent with diocesan policy. At such events, it is important all candidates be invited.

If you have any questions about what is allowed, call your diocesan attorney. Please remember the IRS rules against political campaign intervention also apply to materials posted on parish or other Church organization Web sites.

While it is important to be clear about what we can't do, the most important thing to focus on is what we can do. In a democracy, loving our neighbor and caring for the least among us means supporting leaders and policies that promote the common good, and protect society's most vulnerable members. Helping Catholics to recognize and act on this dimension of their faith is an essential task for parish leaders.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR PARISHES

DO

- address the moral and human dimensions of public issues
- share Church teaching on human life, human rights, and justice and peace
- apply Catholic values to legislation and public issues
- conduct a non-partisan voter registration drive on Church property
- distribute unbiased candidate questionnaires covering issues of human life, justice, and peace that have been reviewed and approved by your diocesan attorney
- check with your diocesan attorney if you have any questions about what is appropriate.

DON'T

- endorse or oppose candidates for political office
- distribute partisan campaign literature or biased voter guides under Church auspices
- arrange for groups to work for a candidate for public office
- invite only selected candidates to address your Church-sponsored group
- conduct voter registration slanted toward one party.