

Faithful Citizenship

Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good

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A Prophetic Challenge to Both Parties, and to the Church Itself

Response to O'Brien

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[1] David O'Brien provides an overview of Catholic engagement in politics with an emphasis on the ways in which Catholics have engaged in three models of translating their faith into political action (republican, evangelical, and interest group). He discusses these different styles of political engagement of Catholics in a pluralistic democracy and offers a rich discussion of the personalities and politics in recent years. His historical analysis raises two key themes: 1) the shift from a broader, more republican style engagement in the 1980's to a narrower, more evangelical style of engagement in recent years; and 2) the negative connotation sometimes given to Catholic integration into American life and the potential for this integration to be instead a positive force for Catholics through a renewal of Catholic Americanism. While O'Brien situates these two themes in the longer Catholic story, this response examines them in the broader U.S. political context.

[2] O'Brien documents a shift from a broad focus on life issues to a narrower focus on abortion and gay marriage in recent years and asks why it has been so difficult to mobilize a broader political focus. In all fairness, it is difficult to sustain mobilization of large numbers

of people for any political agenda for very long. The challenges of mobilization become tougher with multi-issue agendas. Multi-issue agendas that do not neatly fit within either of the two major parties in the United States, like the Faithful Citizenship agenda, pose additional challenges.

[3] A cross-party agenda, like that outlined in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, though, offers an advantage for those seeking to translate religious values into political action through issue activism. A religious group that actively pursues a cross-party agenda maintains a prophetic voice to both parties. In such a case, the religious voice can be all the more meaningful because it offers a distinct perspective, rather than just a partisan perspective cloaked in religious language. Issue activism includes activities such as contacting elected officials to influence the content of bills or votes on bills, monitoring implementation of policies, issue referendum mobilization, and community involvement to address specific problems. So few citizens engage in this kind of activity that those who do have even more influence, particularly at the state and local levels. A swing constituency like American Catholics has additional influence for issue activism since both parties sense that they could potentially win or lose support in the next election based on their responsiveness to issue advocacy.

[4] The Faithful Citizenship web site (<http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org>) provides resources for issue activism and encourages Catholics to consider engagement along these lines as an important part of citizenship. The U.S. Bishops also commonly engage in issue-oriented advocacy like this on a broad range of issues highlighted in the Faithful Citizenship document. However, the timing and context of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (hereafter, *Faithful Citizenship*) associates it more narrowly with voting, and even more narrowly with voting in presidential elections. A stronger emphasis on the use of *Faithful Citizenship* to encourage lay issue activism *between* elections could strengthen attention to the broader spectrum of issues in the document for those in the pews. It could also strengthen the public image of Catholics, and Catholic leadership, as concerned about a fuller spectrum of political issues.

[5] The cross-party agenda of *Faithful Citizenship* becomes tougher to translate into action when it comes to electoral activism, particularly voting in national general elections. Catholic voters generally can only pick one of the options provided by the two parties. Voters cannot express support for some parts of the Democrat candidate's agenda and some parts of the Republican candidate's agenda. Likewise, Catholic candidates generally must compete as candidates for one of the two parties to be viable. Given current campaign financing realities it can be tough for Catholic candidates to stray from established party lines on key issues.

[6] O'Brien argues that recent Catholic leadership on electoral politics boils down to a more evangelical-style focus on abortion and gay marriage as the tests of true "Catholic faithful citizenship" despite language in *Faithful Citizenship* that clearly stresses a broader agenda. Why this narrower focus? The U.S. Bishops' stress on abortion aligns with a Vatican focus on eliminating legal abortion as a non-negotiable priority. While the document states that Catholics are not to be single-issue voters, it clearly establishes support for legal abortion as a single issue that eliminates a candidate from consideration. The full version of the document clarifies that a pro-choice stance does not necessarily always eliminate the candidate from

consideration, but the shorter document (a double-sided single-sheet summary called *The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*), which is more likely to be read, stresses a single-issue elimination argument on abortion. This language, in itself, stresses evangelical-style litmus-test politics, despite language in other parts of the document that argue that Catholics are to take a more multi-issue perspective.

[7] William D'Antonio and colleagues note that this focus on abortion and gay marriage also makes sense in light of heavy Republican party investment in courting Catholic leaders and laity in recent years (125-26). The fact that abortion and heterosexual marriage have been successfully framed as dichotomous issues further feeds into the use of these issues as tools for evangelical-style litmus test leadership, regardless of official statements to the contrary. While *Faithful Citizenship* lists many other issues and stresses that positive action towards these issues are also important, abortion and gay marriage also pull more weight because it is simpler to determine whether a candidate meets the criteria for those two issues than many of the other issues. What positions do you need to take to sufficiently show support for improving access to health care? What do you have to say to sufficiently show that you do not support torture or that you support peace?

[8] Whether the dichotomous nature of abortion and gay marriage is inherent in these two issues or whether it is really more about how the issues have been framed is a fair question. If a Catholic candidate argues that she is personally opposed to abortion and wants to work to reduce the number of abortions, but that she does not support a government policy that opposes abortion, she is criticized as supporting abortion and just trying to straddle the fence for political purposes. If a Catholic candidate argues that he cares for the poor, but that he does not support government policy to help the poor because the poor can best be helped through other means, he is not criticized as an anti-poor fence-straddler in the same way.

[9] *Faithful Citizenship* argues that abortion is different because it is an intrinsically evil act and that a legal system that allows it is fundamentally flawed. Thus, the document provides a justification for treating abortion differently than other issues (but not a similarly strong justification for treating gay marriage differently). According to this logic, the woman candidate with a pro-choice government position profiled above is different than the male candidate who does not act politically in solidarity with those in need. This, then, provides a justification for an evangelical-style translation for abortion (but not so clearly for gay marriage). However, from a politically pragmatic viewpoint, the emphasis on stated pro-life positions by candidates for many elected offices may well be misplaced given that the core "fundamental flaw" in our legal system that causes it to fail to protect the unborn is a judicial issue rather than a legislative one. Congress and state legislators cannot reverse *Roe v. Wade* to eliminate this fundamental flaw. States have limited access to abortions and Congress has limited funding for abortions, but these political actions do not reverse the fundamental flaw. One could restrict use of abortion similarly by increasing social services, however, this has not been considered as acceptable by Catholic leaders as legal limitations on access (D'Antonio: 131). While protection of the unborn may be viewed as the most fundamental protection of life in a legal system, if the elected official doesn't have jurisdiction over the legality of abortion, should that position be one that is considered as fundamental when electing people to that position? Senators and Presidents have a role in selecting Supreme

Court justices, so there is a rationale for considering abortion positions for those positions as they relate to campaign promises concerning selecting justices.

[10] One option for broader mobilization of a fuller Faithful Citizenship agenda would be to stress the performance of politicians more. Obviously this is tougher for new candidates, but many candidates are incumbents or have previously held another political office. Project Vote Smart (<http://www.votesmart.org>) provides summaries of key votes at the national and state levels and records each representative's votes on these key votes. A lay group with a commitment to Faithful Citizenship could summarize candidates' performance on multiple Faithful Citizenship issues to help Catholics hold politicians accountable for their actions in office. Individual Catholics could use this resource to check on the voting performance of candidates for office before voting. Bishops in their pastoral role toward Catholic politicians could affirm and acknowledge performance on a broader set of issues. The summary document (USCCB 2007b) quotes Pope John Paul II stating, "the fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment" (no. 52, cited in USCCB 2007b, side 2). D'Antonio and colleagues report that one-third of Catholic Democrats in Congress vote distinctively differently than their Democratic colleagues on issues tied to church teachings (they also note that there is no such agenda-driven deviation for Catholic Republicans in Congress) (130). Attention to vote performance would allow Catholic leaders and laity to affirm and support politicians who are willing to support Catholic social teaching despite party pressure to vote otherwise rather than focusing narrowly on abortion and gay marriage positions.

[11] The second emphasis of O'Brien's piece is the Americanization of Catholics. O'Brien notes that Catholics have successfully integrated and that there may be powerful positive resources to be mobilized based on this integration legacy. He raises concerns that the Americanization of Catholics tends to be criticized and challenges us to consider how this Americanization could instead be a positive resource for Catholic citizenship.

[12] Politically, Catholics have clearly integrated, whether one sees this as positive or negative. Catholics now act more like Democrats and Republicans than like a distinctive political group (D'Antonio: 123-40). Analysis of 2004 American National Election Study data reveals that Catholics do not significantly differ from non-Catholics in their positions on abortion, gay marriage, immigration, or support for funding for welfare (see Table 1). Similarly, no statistically significant differences exist between Catholics and non-Catholics on levels of contacting public officials and working on community issues (ANES 2004 data, results not shown).

Table 1 Comparison of Catholics and Non-Catholics

	Catholics	Non-Catholics
By law, abortion should never be permitted	14%	13%
Abortion should be allowed as matter of personal choice	34%	38%

Gay marriage should be allowed	58%	63%
Spending on welfare should be increased	32%	31%
Favors the Death Penalty	65%	67%
Spending on border security should be increased	62%	66%
Immigration should be increased	9%	11%
Average warmth towards illegal immigrants (on scale of 1-100)	43	41

Source: American National Election Survey 2004.

Note: None of the differences are statistically significant at the .05 level.

[13] The similarities in Table 1 highlight Catholic integration and may raise questions as to the effectiveness of Faithful Citizenship as a political socialization tool. However, the shift in death penalty attitudes that Dr. Fleming discusses later in this volume suggests that the similarity of Catholics and non-Catholics could in some cases be due to Catholics shaping others' attitudes rather than evidence of an absence of Catholic influence. Moreover, Green (2007) analyzes issue attitudes of various Catholic constituencies that tend to support the different parties and his tables consistently show evidence that Catholics pull more moderate than their fellow partisans on most issues. So, while Catholics do not look different overall, their distinctiveness within parties could have political impact. Green's analysis also portends a stronger shift to more liberal Catholic support in the pews as more Hispanics join the American church since Latino Catholics tend to be more Democratic and more liberal on many issues now.

[14] Clearly, waves of immigration are a fundamental part of the American Catholic experience. Building on this experience and developing a theology of citizenship that recognizes the callings and gifts of the Church based on these experiences seems particularly urgent and powerful now as the American Catholic church experiences another tremendous wave of immigrants. One additional legacy of the Catholic immigration experience has been the development of a rich array of Catholic social service institutions. These institutions still involve Catholics and Catholic leaders daily in the work of providing education, health care, and various social services in American communities. In addition to the direct impact of these services, these institutions also provide valuable policy educational experiences for Catholic leaders. So, Catholics entering the public square can do so not only with an informed theology of the common good, but also with a grounded sense of the dynamics of implementing programs designed to improve health, education, and individual welfare.

[15] Building on the integration of Catholics can take advantage of the positive dynamics outlined above as well as the Americanist dynamics that O'Brien discusses. Hopefully it will also take advantage of the transnational nature of Catholicism to bring a global perspective to the public square. Building support for more global and grounded political perspectives

could well be core strengths of a well-developed American Catholic legacy in addition to those Americanist strengths that O'Brien discusses.

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