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Bishop

Bishop Michael Saltarelli's Statement on *Catholics in Political Life* issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

This year, our state of Delaware along with the entire nation has celebrated the 50th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. One of the heroes in that saga was Judge Collins J. Seitz of Delaware - a dedicated lay Roman Catholic - who contributed to that case and to the desegregation of schools in Delaware.

In his 1951 graduation speech at Salesianum School (recently quoted by Fr. Thomas Curran, OSFS at the 2004 Salesianum Graduation), Judge Seitz said, "On many occasions you will be called upon either to take a courageous stand or else sacrifice your principles for transitory popularity with those who believe that every change should come in the next generation. Do not be lead astray by the siren call that the people are not yet ready for any particular change you may mention. I say this to each of you bluntly. You will never be worth your salt if, at some time during your life, you don't take up a worthwhile cause and fight its fight."

Judge Seitz's inspiring example is logically extended to the life issue in contemporary American society. Legislative issues pertaining to the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death are the great civil rights issues of this generation. People of good will in the States of Delaware and Maryland who express their commitment to life to their elected officials and legislators follow in the footsteps of those who took up the worthwhile cause of civil rights in the mid-twentieth century.

History has a way of working things out in the end - sometimes sooner, sometimes later. The judiciary's mistaken judgment in the *Dred Scott* decision (1857) had a corrosive effect on public life, politics and society for decades. Even after Emancipation and the abolition of slavery, African Americans lived under dehumanizing "Jim Crow" laws. But in the end, after years of hardship and injustice, and the courageous efforts of people like Judge Seitz and many others, the civil rights and inherent dignity of African Americans were finally recognized in law.

The judiciary's mistaken judgment in *Roe vs. Wade* (1973) continues to have a comparable corrosive effect on public life, politics and society. But once again we believe that the deepest truths about human nature and human life will be victorious in the end. All people of good will - regardless of religious affiliation, ethnic background or political party - are called to be vibrant instruments in society to effect this victory in the near future.¹ Until that day comes, we must work diligently and valiantly to defend and promote the sanctity of human life at every stage of life.

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No one today would accept this statement from any public servant: "I am personally opposed to human slavery and racism but will not impose my personal conviction in the legislative arena." Likewise, none of us should accept this statement from any public servant: "I am personally opposed to abortion but will not impose my personal conviction in the legislative arena."

As you know, on Friday, June 18, 2004, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement entitled *Catholics in Political Life*. I would like to share with you the directions we bishops have chosen:

1) We need to continue to teach clearly and help other Catholic leaders to teach clearly on our unequivocal commitment to the legal protection of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. Our teaching on human life and dignity should be reflected in our parishes and our educational, health care and human service ministries.

I ask our priests, deacons, religious and lay leaders to continue to keep the respect for human life at the forefront of all diocesan and parish efforts and education. I ask our Catholic grade school and high school principals and teachers to examine how respect life principles might be more dynamically and effectively taught in all our Catholic schools. I ask all Catholics to be politically engaged and to bring our principles directly into our American political system in an authentic democratic spirit.

2) We need to do more to persuade all people that human life is precious and human dignity must be defended. This requires more effective dialogue and engagement with all public officials, especially Catholic public officials. We welcome conversation initiated by political leaders themselves. 3) Catholics need to act in support of these principles and policies in public life. It is the particular vocation of the laity to transform the world. We have to encourage this vocation and do more to bring all believers to this mission. As bishops, we do not endorse or oppose candidates. Rather, we seek to form the consciences of our people so that they can examine the positions of candidates and make choices based on Catholic moral and social teaching. 4) We commit ourselves to maintain communication with public officials who make decisions every day that touch issues of human life and dignity.

I am personally committed to a principled and respectful dialogue and engagement with all public officials. I will continue to pursue these opportunities. But this dialogue cannot simply occur between a Bishop and a Catholic politician. It must occur between the Catholic politician and his constituents. I call all people of good will in our community to step up their efforts to persuade all public servants that human life is precious and human dignity must be defended. While there are few examples over the last 31 years of Catholic public servants who have taken an anti-life position having a conversion while serving in public office, we nonetheless have to continue to try to persuade and engage them in dialogue. We commit ourselves to pray daily for them at our Masses and to invoke the intercession of St. Thomas More, Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, on their behalf.

5) The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions.

Our Catholic institutions will not honor Catholic politicians who take pro-abortion legislative positions or invite them to speak at our functions or schools. While they are to be treated civilly, respectfully and with gospel charity, they should never be put forward as a model of a Catholic in public life.

Finally, the Bishops state: "Our obligation as bishops at this time is to teach clearly. It is with pastoral solicitude for everyone involved in the political process that we will also counsel Catholic public officials that their acting consistently to support abortion on demand risks making them cooperators in evil in a public manner. We will persist in this duty to counsel, in the hope that the scandal of their cooperating in evil can be resolved by the proper formation of their consciences."

The promotion of abortion by any Catholic is a grave and serious matter. Objectively, according to the constant teaching of the Scriptures and the Church, it would be more spiritually beneficial for such a person to refrain from receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. I ask Catholics in this position to have the integrity to respect the Eucharist, Catholic teaching and the Catholic faithful.

In a spirit of pastoral charity, I strongly remind all Catholics - both highly visible public officials and the everyday parishioner -- that they must examine their consciences about their worthiness to receive communion, including with regard to "fidelity to the moral teaching of the Church in personal and public life."

It is not my expectation that individual priests, deacons and extraordinary ministers of communion will make judgments on their own as to the worthiness of individual Catholic public servants to receive communion. That is ultimately my responsibility in light of Catholic moral theology and the Code of Canon Law. At this stage, I much prefer the active engagement and dialogue called for by *Catholics in Public Life*.

¹ Cf. Cardinal William Keeler's January 21, 2003 homily "The Great Civil Rights Battle of These Times: The Right to Life" delivered at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.