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## Catholics in the Public Square

**Most Reverend Thomas J. Olmsted**

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- **How would you define a lay person?**

A lay person is any member of the faithful who has not received Holy Orders and does not belong to a religious state approved by the Church. Through Baptism, a lay person is incorporated into Christ and becomes integrated into the People of God. A lay person has an important role in the life and mission of the Church. ( *Lumen Gentium* , 31)

When Pope John Paul II wrote his major work on the life and mission of the laity he titled it *Christifideles Laici* , Christ's faithful laity. With this title he made it clear that faithful love of Christ is the key to bearing fruit in the Kingdom of God. This is true for everyone in the Church, not only the laity. Jesus says (Jn 15:5), " *I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.*"

- **What is the difference between the laity and the clergy in the Catholic Church?**

The clergy receive a special charism of the Holy Spirit through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. As such, deacons, priests and bishops " *realize a participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ that is different, not simply in degree but in essence, from the participation given to the lay faithful through Baptism and Confirmation.* " ( *Christifideles Laici* , 22)

Lay persons, meanwhile, are primarily concerned with temporal matters and as such have a sort of "secular character." The laity may also be involved in matters connected with pastoral ministry, but only in matters that do not require the grace of Holy Orders.

- **What is the role of the laity in the Catholic Church?**

The role of the laity is in a special way to " *seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God .*" ( *Lumen Gentium* , 31) As such, lay men and women are in a unique position to bring their faith into all areas of society.

It should be remembered that as the laity engage in temporal affairs, in their own way, they participate in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of the Church by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation.

- **How do Catholic lay persons fulfill their call to holiness?**

Every Catholic receives from God a call to holiness that is rooted in Baptism. In order to fulfill this call, lay men and women are required to “*follow and imitate Jesus Christ in embracing the Beatitudes; in listening and meditating on the Word of God; in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church; in personal prayer; in family or in community; in the hunger and thirst for justice; in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially in the least, the poor and the suffering .*” ( *Christifideles Laici* , 16)

- **What are the main responsibilities of Catholics to themselves?**

Catholics have the responsibility of accepting Christ's invitation, “*Come, follow me.*” They need to surrender in love as He leads them along the paths of conversion, communion and solidarity (Cf. *Ecclesia in America*). They also need to properly form themselves in the Church's teaching, to participate actively in her sacramental life, and to live their faith in God accordingly. This responsibility exists for Catholics in all states of life.

Accordingly, Catholics are to be “*ever mindful of what it means to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ, participants in her mystery of communion and in her dynamism in mission and the apostolate .*” ( *Christifideles Laici* , 64)

- **What are the main responsibilities of Catholics to their families?**

Marriage is the foundation of the family. The family, in turn, is the basic cell of society. Marriage and family responsibilities are, therefore, of tremendous importance, not only to the Church but also to all of society.

The responsibilities of Catholic men and women to their families cannot be overstated. “*It is above all the lay faithful's duty in the apostolate to make the family aware of its identity as the primary social nucleus, and its basic role in society, so that it might itself become always a more active and responsible place for proper growth and proper participation in social life.*” ( *Christifideles Laici* , 40)

- **What are the responsibilities of the Catholic laity in the public square?**

Through their Baptism, the laity is called to holiness of life (i.e. to live their faith in God day in and day out). Their responsibilities are not meant to be merely a matter of personal piety or devotion, but also directed toward evangelization in all aspects of life.

A lay person in the public square has a particular responsibility to live his or her vocation in view of its unique impact on society. Those involved with the noble art of politics, for example, often are in a position to influence societal norms on matters of real significance by passing or defeating various legislative proposals.

Similarly, there are others in the public square that while not serving as elected officials, nonetheless, are in a position to shape the society and culture. For these individuals, especially those involved with all forms of the mass media, a significant part of their responsibilities is to live their faith by promoting the common good in society.

- **How do Catholics show their own identity in public life?**

Catholics should always be respectful of the human dignity of others, including people of different faiths, or no faith at all. Having said that, however, Catholics should not be afraid to embrace their identity or to put their faith into practice in public life. In fact, each of the faithful has a call to evangelization and to share the good news of Christ with the rest of the world.

- **What difference should Catholics make in public life?**

There are multitudes of different ways in which Catholics may serve the Church through their contributions in public life. In each circumstance, however, Catholics are especially called to contribute to the common good, to defend the dignity of every human person, and to live as faithful citizens.

In this sense, the final result that takes place is ultimately in God's hands. This fact is important to remember when a Catholic is in a distinctly minority position and unable to accomplish a desired result. It is in these seemingly hopeless circumstances that Catholics who provide a faithful witness in public life can often be used by God to touch hearts and minds in ways that may not always be visible to the naked eye.

It is good to remember Pope Benedict's words ( *Deus Caritas Est* , 35), " *There are times when the burden of need and our own limitations might tempt us to become discouraged. But precisely then we are helped by the knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord's hands; and this knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world. In all humility we will do what we can, and in all humility we will entrust the rest to the Lord.*"

- **How should Catholics understand the separation between Church and state?**

The separation of Church and state all too often is used as an excuse to silence people of faith and to discourage them from legitimately participating in the public square. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution, of course, does not advocate for a separation of Church and state at all, but rather the protection of religious freedom from the state.

Our founding fathers intended all persons to have the equal right to voice their opinions, including those based on religious convictions. Even more, they understood that it was imperative that the state not infringe upon the religious beliefs of its citizens. The Constitution is aimed at allowing all people to have a voice in government, including those whose voice is distinctively religious.

In other words, there is nothing in the Constitution excluding people from bringing their faith into the public square.

- **Should Catholics bring the Church's doctrine into the public square?**

There are times when the Church's intervention in social questions is needed. As the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (510) teaches, " *The Church intervenes by making a moral judgment about economic and social matters when the fundamental rights of the person, the common good, or the salvation of souls requires it.*"

While Catholics are called to bring their faith and religious views into the public square, they are also called to respect

the religious freedom and civil liberties of all people. In fact, the Church has genuine respect for secular governments that afford these protections to people of all faiths, as well as those without faith.

In reality, the Church does not impose its doctrine on others in the public square. For example, there is no effort by the Church to compel the public to attend Mass on Sundays or receive various sacraments. Nonetheless, the Church is legitimately concerned about many matters of societal importance and brings its views to bear in proposing meaningful solutions for promoting the common good.

- **How do you respond to statements that Catholics should not impose their religious views upon others?**

Some Catholics and other believers have been frightened into silence and even confused by charges that they are imposing their morality on others. It is contended that a person's faith should have no impact on his or her public life. This leads the infamous "I am a Catholic but..." syndrome! Of course, if one's faith does not impact on one's whole life, including one's political and social responsibilities, then it is not authentic faith; it is a sham, a counterfeit.

A democratic society needs the active participation of all its citizens, people of faith included. People of faith engage issues on the basis of what they believe, just as atheists engage issues on the basis of what they hold dear; they fight for what they think is right and oppose what they consider wrong. This is not an imposition on other's morality. It is acting with integrity. Moreover, people of genuine faith strengthen the whole moral fabric of a country. The active engagement of Catholics in democratic processes is good for society and it is responsible citizenship.

- **Should Catholics take into account their own faith at the moment of voting?**

It only makes sense that if Catholics are supposed to live their faith in all of their daily activities that they should also take their faith into account while voting. As noted in the Second Vatican Council's teaching, "*every citizen ought to be mindful of his right and his duty to promote the common good by using his vote.*" ( *Gaudium et Spes* , 75)

In preparing to vote, Catholics need to understand their faith so that their consciences are properly formed. Subsequent to this formation, it is important to research all of the important issues and candidates that will appear on the ballot. Only after sufficient preparation and prayer, is a Catholic fully ready to discharge his or her responsibilities as a faithful citizen and cast a meaningful vote.

- **Can Catholics honestly disagree in matters of politics, social or cultural issues?**

In 2002, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document entitled *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding Participation of Catholics in Political Life* , that addresses the existence of political matters in which Catholics may disagree. There are, indeed, many issues upon which Catholics may legitimately differ such as the best methods to achieve welfare reform or to address illegal immigration.

Conversely, however, there are other issues that are intrinsically evil and can never legitimately be supported. For example, Catholics may never legitimately promote or vote for any law that attacks innocent human life.

- **What does it mean that Catholics should follow their conscience when making a moral decision?**

Before following our conscience, we must form it in accord with the voice of God. Our conscience is not the origin of truth. Truth lies outside us; it exists independent of us and must be discovered through constant effort of mind and heart. This is no easy task for us who suffer the effects of original sin and must contend with the constant temptations of the devil. Conscience receives the truth revealed by God and discerns how to apply that truth to concrete circumstances.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1783) teaches, " Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-informed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings ."*

As we see, to form one's own conscience well and to follow it with integrity is no small task. For a person's conscience cannot invent what is true and good. It must search it out beyond itself. When acting correctly, we discover the truth through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the help of God's word handed down to us in the Church. Then, when we submit our conscience to this objective truth, we act uprightly and grow to maturity in Christ.

- **Is it mandatory for Catholics to follow what the Pope or bishops say on political issues?**

Because they are the leaders of the Church, it is always important to respect statements from the Church's hierarchy. It is the role of the Pope and the bishops to teach clearly on matters of faith and morals, including those touching on political issues.

There are some matters, however, on which Catholics may disagree with the Church's hierarchy. In some cases, for example, a Catholic may agree with the teaching of the Church, but come to a different prudential judgment about its application.

Examples of these issues might include an instance where someone agrees with the Church's teaching on "just war" or "capital punishment," but reaches a different conclusion as to whether the facts of the situation constitute a "just war" or the "rare" circumstances where capital punishment may be used under Church teaching.

It should be emphasized, however, that despite these examples, there are other issues, such as abortion or euthanasia, that are always wrong and do not allow for the correct use of prudential judgment to justify them. It would never be proper for Catholics to be on the opposite side of these issues.

- **Are all political and social issues equal when it comes to choosing a political candidate?**

Absolutely not! The Catholic Church is actively engaged in a wide variety of important public policy issues including immigration, education, affordable housing, health and welfare, to name just a few. On each of these issues we should do our best to be informed and to support those proposed solutions that seem most likely to be effective. However, when it comes to direct attacks on innocent human life, being right on all the other issues can never justify a wrong choice on this most serious matter.

As Pope John Paul II has written, " *Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights - for*

*example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture - is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with the maximum determination ."* (Christifideles Laici , 38)

- **Are there any "non-negotiable" issues for Catholics involved in politics?**

There are several issues that are "not negotiable" for Catholics in political life, because they involve matters that are intrinsically evil. In an address to European politicians on March 30, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI stated: " *As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, the principal focus of her interventions in the public arena is the protection and promotion of the dignity of the person, and she is thereby consciously drawing particular attention to principles which are not negotiable. Among these the following emerge clearly today:*

- *Protection of life in all its stages, from the first moment of conception until natural death;*
- *Recognition and promotion of the natural structure of the family – as a union between a man and a woman based on marriage – and its defense from attempts to make it juridically equivalent to radically different forms of union which in reality harm it and contribute to its destabilization, obscuring its particular character and its irreplaceable social role;*
- *The protection of the rights of parents to educate their children."*

The issues mentioned by Pope Benedict are all "non-negotiable" and are some of the most contemporary issues in the political arena. I should note, however, that other issues, while not intrinsically evil, deserve prayerful consideration, such as questions of war and capital punishment, poverty issues and matters relating to illegal immigration.

- **What are the causes that can ban Catholics from Holy Communion?**

No one who is conscious of having committed a serious sin should receive Holy Communion. For the Eucharist is the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, our most precious gift in the Church. And St. Paul warns us (I Cor 11:27-29): " *Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself ."*

All Catholics should examine their consciences, and refrain from receiving Holy Communion if they are not living in a proper state of grace. Should some Catholic politicians who are presently pro-abortion obstinately persist in this contradiction to our faith, this becomes a source of scandal. In these and similar cases, measures beyond those of moral persuasion may need to be taken by those in leadership in the Church . As God tells us in the Book of Leviticus (19:16), " *You shall not stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake."*

If a politician is actively supporting and furthering the culture of death, he is not only causing scandal; he is sinning. Similarly, when a politician performs actions (like voting) that allow for abortions and even promote abortions, or that mandate the distribution of contraceptives by pharmacists and others, that politician is materially cooperating in grave sin. When this occurs, then the politician cannot receive Holy Communion without previously making a good confession. A good confession would require sincere sorrow for such sin and a firm purpose of making amendment.

Since the harm done would be public in nature, the amendment should also be public.

- **Why does the Church set such high standards for Catholics?**

The high standards to which Catholics (and all Christians) are called come from Christ. We find them in the Sacred Scriptures. For example, Jesus said (Jn 14:15), " *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" He also said (Mk 8:34-36), " *Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?*"

We also find in the Sacred Scriptures admonitions such as those of St. Paul to Timothy where he writes (I Tim 4:2-5), " *Proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry.*"

There are cases where Catholics in public life serve with great courage and distinction. They measure up to the high standards set by Christ. There are others, sadly, who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin where the risk of scandal is great. In the matter of abortion, for example, abortion is the killing of a completely innocent life and thus bad news for both unborn children and their mothers. It is a horrible wrong. It is intrinsically evil.

We have a serious obligation to protect human life, and especially the lives of the most innocent and vulnerable among us. Whoever fails to do this, when otherwise able to do so, commits serious sins of omission. They jeopardize their own spiritual wellbeing and they are a source of scandal for others. Should they be Catholics, they should not receive Holy Communion.

- **Can Catholics belong to or express support for different political parties?**

The Church is never partisan and does not endorse political candidates. She does, however, encourage her laity to be involved in political parties in order to devote themselves to promoting the common good.

In this regard, political and civic education is deemed necessary so that all citizens will be able to play a part in political affairs. ( *Gaudium et Spes* , 75)

- **Do bishops and priests have the right to intervene in political, social, or cultural matters?**

Bishops and priests are not to participate in the public administration of the government. Nonetheless, they do have the right, and sometimes an obligation, to speak out on political, social, or cultural matters impacting the Church or the common good.

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (28), Pope Benedict XVI states: " *It is not the Church's responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life. Rather, the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate*

*greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest."*

The Holy Father goes on to write (ibid): "*The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to awaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper."*

- **If bishops and priests can intervene in public issues, what is the difference then between the clergy and the laity in public policy issues?**

While bishops and priests can appropriately speak out on important issues, the laity can be involved to a much larger degree. Unlike members of the clergy, the laity, in fact, is called to play a role in all areas of political involvement, including partisan politics and the administration of government.

Members of the laity generally have no restrictions in holding elective office or running the affairs of the state, while members of the clergy are generally prohibited from holding such positions.

- **What can Catholics do to foster justice in society?**

There is much that Catholics can do to foster justice in society. A significant part of fostering justice is concern for the human dignity of all people – especially the poor, marginalized or vulnerable. A concern for justice must always be mindful of Christ's forgiveness and mercy.

The promotion of justice can be found in many Church agencies, including those serving the homeless, immigrants, prisoners, disabled people, and the elderly to name just a few. Catholics must always have a concern for justice and are encouraged to promote it not only in the public square, but also in volunteer efforts as well as their everyday lives.

- **How can Catholics contribute to a culture of life?**

Catholics can contribute to a "culture of life" in much the same way that they can promote justice, peace, and human dignity. There are a plethora of volunteer opportunities to assist in crisis pregnancy centers, hospices, nursing homes, and many other facilities.

Additionally, Catholics are called to advocate and to work for a "culture of life" by making it an issue of constant importance in political debate and in the public square.

Finally, prayer is a primary means of promoting and fostering a "culture of life." While personal daily prayer is always important, public prayer gatherings can provide a striking witness to the rest of society.

- **What means should Catholics employ to manifest their convictions about issues in the public square?**

There are various means that Catholics may legitimately employ to manifest their convictions about issues in the public square. Catholic elected officials, for example, are in a privileged position to make known their opposition to public policy issues that are intrinsically evil.

Because of the democracy in which we live, even those who are not in political life have an opportunity and responsibility to express their opinions on various issues and to vote in elections.

Although voting is an important way of expressing convictions about issues, Catholics need not wait for elections to express their views. Letters to the editor, organized public events, and communicating with elected officials are also good examples of expressing views and bringing about change in the public square.

- **How does one fight best against secularization in our society and the misrepresentation of faith in the public square?**

Unfortunately, discrimination against people of faith, and especially Catholics, is a real problem. A faithful Catholic in public life is almost certain to encounter forms of unjust discrimination and prejudice. There are many examples of unfavorable public misrepresentation of the Catholic faith and even outright hostility to people of any faith. While much progress has been made in protecting civil rights in our country, there remains a strong bias against people of faith in significant sectors of the media and certain segments of our society.

Nonetheless, it is our duty to engage the culture, not run from it. We must place our trust in the Lord and know that by doing His will and speaking the truth in love, God will make all things work for the good. It is also the duty of the Catholic faithful to support courageous people who do this through both our actions and prayers.

- **How would you define a "candidate who is a faithful Catholic?"**

There are a large number of candidates or politicians in our country that label themselves as Catholic. Regrettably, however, some of these are an embarrassment to the Church and a scandal to others by virtue of their support of issues that are intrinsically evil.

A candidate who is authentically Catholic is one who always defends the dignity of every human person and who puts the welfare of the common good over various partisan or self interests. His personal and public life is shaped by faith in Christ and His teachings. Such a candidate can be from any political party, but will never support matters that are intrinsically evil such as abortion, euthanasia, or "same-sex marriage."

- **What line should an elected official draw between his faith and his political commitments?**

Elected officials should bring their faith to bear on all of their activities, including public affairs. In living out their faith, they should have a proper respect for the civil liberties of all people, including those of other faiths, or with no faith at all.

It should be pointed out, however, that sometimes Catholic politicians mistakenly claim that they need to abandon their faith out of an obligation to respect those of differing opinions or to honor a political commitment inherent with

their office. These claims are perhaps most frequently made when Catholic politicians claim to be personally opposed to the killing of innocent unborn children.

Incredibly, it is somehow claimed by such people that it would be inappropriate to support legislation protecting human life because doing so would impose their faith on others or somehow violate their oath of office. These claims are ludicrous. Protecting human life is not only a religious imperative, it is a human imperative, and it is an imperative for all people.

People of faith have every right to bring their beliefs into the public square just like anyone else. In fact, Catholic elected officials should always live out their faith while promoting the welfare of all, including the protection of innocent human life.

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