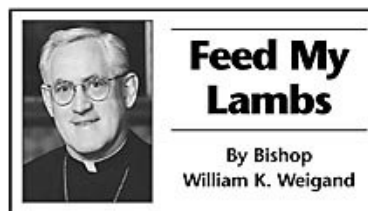


May 17, 2003

## What's a Catholic politician to do?



I continue to get questions about pro-abortion politicians who identify themselves as Catholic. People ask just what are the obligations of Catholic politicians? What are they to do? After all, they have to observe the law. Abortion, without any restrictions, is legal. This is true.

However, many Catholic politicians have gone way beyond what their duties of office require of them. They have supported legislation to expand access to abortion. They have opposed limitations of any kind on abortion, such as: legislation to ban partial birth abortions; required parental consent, or even notification, before an abortion is performed on an under age girl; informed consent for women pondering an abortion.

Recent laws passed in California, with the help of Catholic legislators and signed by the governor, include: one enshrining abortion as a legal right in California should Roe v. Wade ever be overturned; a second eliminating the requirement that only physicians perform abortions; a third requiring all hospitals to provide “emergency contraception”; and a fourth requiring that residency programs for obstetrics and gynecology provide abortion training to all their students.

Also passed was a law (sponsored by a Catholic legislator) to protect abortion clinic workers, euphemistically called “anti-reproductive rights crime legislation,” which made any crime committed by a pro-life protestor enhanced to a felony charge and classified as a “hate crime.” Some now also seem to be promoting embryonic stem cell research, which is condemned by the Church. None of these measures was required of legislators by their office. It should be noted, of course, that these Catholic politicians have also supported much good legislation and exercised responsible leadership in other matters.

I have a sincere pastoral concern for these public servants. It distressed me to have to write in my January 25 and February 8 columns: Anyone “...who thinks it is

acceptable for a Catholic to be pro-abortion is in very great error, puts his or her soul at risk, and is not in good standing with the Church. Such a person should have the integrity to acknowledge this and choose of his own volition to abstain from receiving Holy Communion until he has a change of heart.”

The *Doctrinal Note*, issued by the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* and approved by Pope John Paul II last November, sketches the correct approach for Catholic politicians: “Catholics...have the right and the duty to recall society to a deeper understanding of human life and to the responsibility of everyone in this regard. Pope John Paul II, continuing the constant teaching of the Church, has reiterated many times that those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a ‘grave and clear obligation to oppose’ any law that attacks human life. For them, as for every Catholic, it is impossible to promote such laws or to vote for them.... A well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.” ( No. 4)

The *Doctrinal Note* also indicates that a Catholic politician should do all that he or she can, under the particular legislative circumstances, to limit abortion and to work towards eliminating it.

Serving in public office is greatly encouraged by the Church. It is a high and important calling. I have deep admiration for Catholic politicians who are not only willing to serve in public office, but do so in a way in which their faith informs their decisions and positions; who find a way of not divorcing their faith from their political life. In addition, I have a deep appreciation for public servants who represent the people of the Diocese of Sacramento at all levels — local, state, and federal.

Rather than working toward limiting abortion, many Catholic politicians have done much to make California the most pro-abortion state in the country. By contrast, fidelity to their Catholic faith would require them: to oppose expanding access to abortion; try to limit abortions in incremental ways; to find ways to favor the unborn infant and the mother, such as supporting legislation to assist women and their children so women will not feel forced into having abortions because they are poor; to support restrictions on late-term abortions; to support requiring parental consent for minors, etc. Such moderate approaches reflect the “common sense” view of the majority of Californians, would hardly cost legislators their seats, and would be more

consistent with Catholic belief in the sanctity and inviolability of all human life, from conception to natural death.

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