

Federal Election 2008 Guide

Making your voice heard

Introduction

1. As Canadian citizens, Catholics have an obligation to be interested in politics. They should exercise this civic responsibility by becoming involved in the electoral process and especially by voting.
2. Participating in the political process is an ongoing duty that reaches far beyond election campaigns. The Commission for Social Affairs of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) encourages Catholics to become better informed about the issues, to voice their concerns with the political candidates, to promote vigorous public debate, to consider running for office and, most of all, to vote. There is also deep gratitude owed to all who are running for or serving in political office, whether they belong to a particular faith community or not. Through their commitment and service, they are making a generous contribution to the common good of our society.

Political discernment

3. The Gospel does not give a specific program for social and political action. Nor does the Church “*set forth specific political solutions to temporal questions that God has left to the free and responsible judgment of each person.*”¹ Each Catholic citizen has to exercise political discernment and prudential judgment. Within a democratic society such as Canada, a number of legitimate political approaches is possible. Even when basic Catholic moral principles have been clearly defined, there can still be a variety of ways for them to be respected and advanced in political life. There is a legitimate range of political opinions, attitudes, convictions and orientations in society, just as within the Catholic community.

Some basic principles of Catholic moral and social teaching

4. The following are some basic principles in Catholic moral and social teaching. They are not a political platform but a perspective in order to help examine and evaluate public policy and programs.

Respect for the life and dignity of the human person

5. As people of faith, Catholics believe that life comes from God, and that human life from its very beginning is a priceless gift. Each human being, created in God’s image, has inestimable worth and inherent dignity. Since life is the most precious natural gift that can be received, one of the greatest responsibilities of a Catholic is to love life, respect it and protect it. The sacredness of the human person is at the heart of the Gospel. Christ shows that each person is worthy of being loved, simply by being him or herself, and not because of what he or she can do.

6. Catholics believe in the responsible use of freedom to promote human life and dignity at all stages, from conception to death, no matter the circumstances. Choosing life means:

- Protecting the right to life for even the smallest – the human embryo and the human fetus – who are members of the human family, and also offering assistance to pregnant women who are facing difficult situations;
- Defending and caring for people in all circumstances, beginning with the most vulnerable and the poorest;

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note: On Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, 24 November 2002, no. 3.

- Supporting and being present to people with disabilities and those who are elderly, ill, poor or suffering;
- Respecting the life and dignity of those who are dying, and accompanying them even in their last moments;
- Protecting all persons from possible exploitation in the use of biomedical technologies;
- Promoting peace and ending violence as a way to resolve conflicts;
- Encouraging policies that help people balance their family and work responsibilities.

Do the political parties represented in the upcoming federal election propose policies in support of these choices for life?

Preferential option for the poor

7. For Christians, concern for the poor is not just a political choice, it is a Gospel imperative. Jesus had a special love for those who were weak and vulnerable; he identified with them and proclaimed the Good News in their midst.

8. Pope John Paul II said that the moral measure of a society is the importance it gives to human dignity.² For this reason, Catholics are called to respond to the needs of the most destitute and to act against injustice. They are to give preference to those who are most at risk, to the poor and the oppressed. Given the importance of the economic factor in all this, Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out that “*the logic of profit and that of the equal distribution of goods ... do not contradict each other if their relationship is well ordered. Catholic social doctrine has always supported that equitable distribution of goods is a priority.*”³ In other words, social priorities and public policies reflect the moral character of society.

Do the political parties promote access to safe, affordable housing for low-income families? Do they offer real solutions to the problems of child poverty and increasing food costs?

The war in Afghanistan

9. Canada has been involved in the Afghanistan conflict since 2001, collaborating with its allies in the struggle there against the insurgents. Although the situation is complex, our country has a serious responsibility to do everything possible to encourage dialogue leading to peace. War is never the best solution for people in solving a problem. The social doctrine of the Church is clear on this: “*it is hardly possible to imagine that in an atomic era, war could be used as an instrument of justice.*”⁴ Our country should be a leader in finding a way to resolve this conflict by focusing on the basic issues. For the Bishops of Canada, it is clear “*there will not be peace in Afghanistan without a true peace process which involves all the parties. This is what Canada especially needs to promote.*”⁵

Are the political parties ready to engage in a peace process for Afghanistan?

Environment

10. How to protect the environment is a fundamental debate that Canadian society can no longer ignore. The approach of industrial societies has been based on mass production and consumption, much to the detriment of the planet’s ecological balance. Too often, humans forget they are part of nature, and that only thanks to nature they

² Pope John Paul II, Message for the World Day for Peace, 1 January 2001, *Dialogue Between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace*, no. 8.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus message, 23 September 2007.

⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 497, Libreria Editrice Vaticana - CCCB Publications Service, 2006.

⁵ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Plenary Assembly 2007, report by the President.

can eat, drink and breathe. Respecting the environment means giving each person what he or she needs to live. In this way, love for God and neighbour involves love for creation, which calls for choices that go beyond short-term interests. Humanity must take responsibility for and care about its future generations so they can have a healthy environment. As our recent pastoral letter on the environment recalls, “*We hope our elected representatives will remember first of all the heritage we are leaving our children when making important decisions. Because we love our children, what environment, what society do we wish to bequeath to them?*”⁶

11. In Canada, ecological concerns often force governments to make the difficult choice between protecting the environment and saving jobs. This kind of dilemma is a symptom of a profound imbalance between economic activities and the place of the human being in nature. It is urgent to establish new and harmonious relationships between both realities. To fail to do so will mean an even more costly deadlock. While recognizing that “*profit is legitimate and, in just measure, necessary for economic development,*” Pope Benedict also goes on to stipulate that “*when the logic of sharing and solidarity prevails,*” it then becomes possible to develop an economy leading “*towards an equitable, sustainable development.*”⁷ True political wisdom means acting now to obtain long-term results. This is the opposite of pursuing only short-term political interests.

When it comes to the environment, do the political parties show concern for future generations? Do they have a specific plan for redefining the relationship between economic activities and the role of the human being in nature?

Exercising the right to vote and discernment

12. In a democracy, the right to vote is linked to freedom of expression and participation in political life. During an election campaign, the voters are invited to make choices. Catholics must consider this important responsibility as a priority for the common good of society. Exercising the right to vote involves making clear and thoughtful judgments about the political choices, and these choices can be tough. As an example, a candidate whose values agree with Church teaching may be a member of a political party whose policies are not fully in line with Church teaching. Or a party policy may reflect Church teaching better than does one of its candidates. To assist in such situations, the Church recalls that “*In this context, it must be noted also that 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.*”⁸

13. In addition, the principle of choosing “the lesser evil” may also apply. Society has a variety of schools of political thought. Voters can find themselves facing crucial choices as they weigh their personal beliefs with those of the candidates, some of whom may even disagree with values that are basic to their party’s policies. Depending on the situation, a voter may feel it necessary to choose the candidate or the party that represents the lesser evil in terms of moral or ethical values, thus exercising prudential judgment as noted at the beginning of this guide. However, tolerating something that is wrong does not make it right. In a complex world, accomplishing good with courage and determination often means taking a round-about route. Doing good sometimes involves having the patience of a martyr.⁹

⁶ Commission for Social Affairs, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Our Relationship with the Environment: The Need for Conversion*, 2008, p. 5.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus message, 23 September 2007.

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note: On Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, no. 4. See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2242.

⁹ Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, quoted by Jean-François Raimond, *L’Osservatore Romano* (French-language weekly edition), 17 June 2008, p. 10.

Conclusion

14. Political participation does not come to an end when the election results are announced. In many ways, this is just the beginning. Informed and responsible citizens engage their political representatives in ongoing public dialogue on pressing social issues. This is a sign of a healthy community, for which all its citizens should be striving and insisting.¹⁰ Canadian Catholics should settle for nothing less, if they are to be truly responsible.

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Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Archbishop Roger Ébacher, Chairman
Archbishop Bertrand Blanchet
Archbishop Brendan M. O'Brien
Archbishop Daniel Bohan

¹⁰ For examples of the social questions being raised by the Bishops of Canada, see the website of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops at www.cccb.ca.