

Church and State

As the fall mid-term election approaches, the need to consider how we as Catholics live our faith as we participate in civic life arises. There are varied opinions about this, but the recent petition signing opportunity in our parish might serve to illustrate an approach that would work for most people.

The commonly expressed American principle is “separation of Church and state.” But even this principle means different things to different people. “Freedom of Religion” is used in more than one way and can mean two or more almost completely different things.

Fr. Fabio has made it his pastoral policy that “our parish politics are the Lord’s Prayer, no more than that.” As his pastoral associate, I wholeheartedly support this position.

This is how this works for Catholics in civic life: our faith informs our decision-making, our ethics, our morality, and our political choices. Catholic Social Teaching includes seven major themes, the first of which is the sanctity of every human life. The remaining six are rooted in the first: addressing poverty, the value of work, care for the environment, and related issues are all treated as various aspects of the Church’s insistence on respect for the dignity of every human person.

The Church may not, by law or by its own teachings, support an individual candidate or party, but may focus on issues as they relate to Catholic teachings and practices. Catholic Social Teaching is not the only teaching that relates to civic life, but it is a very good synopsis of all of them.

No candidate, nor any party, fulfills all seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching. Catholics must evaluate which candidate or platform might be most effective at achieving the overall goals of Catholic teachings, with the sanctity of human life always at the core. This means that not all Catholics will vote the same way.

(By the way, the goal here is not simply to impose Catholic beliefs on everyone else; it’s to follow the Gospel faithfully ourselves and thus contribute to the formation of a society that provides justice for all as Jesus teaches it in the Gospel.)

All of this relates to the formation of one’s conscience (See Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1776 and the section following.) We are to consult the Bible, the teaching of the Church, the input of credible experts, reflection on our own experience, and prayer. Then we are to make our best choice for action. No one may form another’s conscience, and once formed, the conscience must be followed.

In the case of the petitions last weekend, people were free to sign or to refrain from signing, and could sign elsewhere if they wished. The parish office signing location was separated from the main flow of people in and out of the church, so that each individual could freely make the decision as to whether to sign or to refrain with any sense of peer pressure or coercion.

The Grateful Heart can find joy in the freedom to make such a choice, both in the context of civic life and that of a life of Catholic Christian faith. How blest are we to enjoy free will and thus to be free to choose to discern and follow God’s will.

As Catholics, we are expected to participate in civic life, and to help shape a society that respects every human person, equity in access to basic human necessities, care for the earth and its resources, and justice for all. We are not expected to think exactly alike as to how this might be accomplished. But we have an excellent road map in the Gospel, in the Tradition of the Church, and in Catholic Social Teaching.

Our official parish politics, says Fr. Fabio, are the Lord’s Prayer: God’s Kingdom come; God’s will be done; expect forgiveness and forgive others; avoid temptation with God’s help; seek God’s deliverance from evil. Amen!