

Bishops aim to shape political consciences: Voting choices "may affect the individual's salvation"

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One year before next November's national elections, U.S. Catholic bishops overwhelmingly approved new moral guidelines for Catholic voters that prioritize ending abortion and warn that political choices could affect a person's salvation.

The guidelines were approved November 14 in Baltimore by a vote of 221-4 during the semiannual assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The bishops have issued the election-year guidelines every four years since 1976, and with candidates from both parties currently making "faith outreach" to voters a top priority, the bishops took pains to stake out their own role.

"This document is a summary of Catholic teaching; it is not a voter guide," said Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of the Brooklyn Diocese. "It calls us as bishops to help form consciences for political life, not tell people how to vote or whom to vote for or against. It offers a basic moral framework on what it means to be a Catholic and an American, a believer and a voter in this coming election year."

For the first time, the document was approved by a full session of the bishops, rather than an administrative committee within the USCCB. The lack of debate, however, suggests that many differences among the bishops were hammered out behind closed doors. For instance, the bishops declined to address the issue of denying communion to politicians who support abortion rights—a practice that a handful of bishops have advocated during recent elections.

The new guidelines were aimed at Catholic voters, not politicians. The guidelines originally said that voters' choices could affect their "spiritual well-being." The bishops toughened that to say such choices "may affect the individual's salvation."

Bishop Samuel Aquila of Fargo, North Dakota, pushed for the change. “As bishops we know that we are truly called to warn our people. If we do not warn our people that choosing ‘intrinsic evils’ will have an impact on their salvation, I believe we are failing.”

Other bishops, however, said the guidelines were made “to form consciences, not judge them.” “We can’t judge with a document the state of someone’s soul,” said DiMarzio. “To give the impression that one vote could endanger a person’s salvation—I don’t think we’re ready to do that.”

The bishops highlight a range of issues—such as war, economic justice and immigration—in the 40-page document called “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.” But they make it clear that abortion, euthanasia and embryonic stem cell research should top the list.

Both front-runners in the 2008 presidential race—Democratic senator Hillary Clinton and Republican Rudy Giuliani—support abortion rights.

Will rank-and-file Catholics read and follow the bishops’ ethical prescriptions? Polls demonstrate that a majority of Catholics differ with their bishops on issues such as abortion and vote for politicians who support abortion rights.

In other business, the bishops elected Cardinal Francis George of Chicago as their next president on November 13, choosing a Vatican veteran to lead the bishops conference through deep cuts in staff and mission. As president of the bishops conference for the next three years, George, 70, will be the American church’s chief spokesperson and its primary channel to Rome.

Somewhat surprisingly, the bishops chose Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Chicago over Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis to head their committee on canonical affairs and church governance. Burke has been one of the church’s most vocal proponents of using canon law to deny communion to politicians who favor abortion rights.

George’s election comes as the conference’s influence and reach are waning, observers say. Deep cuts in budget and staff, partly as a result of a sex abuse scandal that has cost the American church about \$2 billion since 1950, may reduce its role in public life.

Moreover, the bishops have less appetite for sweeping statements on issues such as economic justice compared with the heyday of the conference in the 1970s and 1980s, said Jesuit priest Thomas Reese, a senior fellow at Washington's Woodstock Theological Center. "This is a time when the bishops want to do less and spend less money," said Reese. -*Religion News Service*