



# Catholic Candidates for Public Office

## Position Paper No. 4

Catholic Civil Rights League (Canada)

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Catholics should enter public life if they are familiar with politics and are “firm in the faith and Christian teaching,” for by political activity they can achieve much for the common good and “prepare the way for the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup> When, for these reasons, Catholics assume the burden of public office, they are praised and esteemed by the Church.<sup>2</sup>

All Catholics, including candidates for public office, are obliged to remain “in communion”<sup>3</sup> with the Church<sup>4</sup> not only in spirit, but in outward actions and words.<sup>5</sup> This expectation of personal integrity follows from the fact that a Catholic is simultaneously a religious believer and a citizen. A Catholic political candidate has only one conscience, a Christian conscience, and this single Christian conscience guides a Catholic continually in all aspects of life, including public life.<sup>6</sup> No human activity- including politics - can be “withdrawn from God's dominion.”<sup>7</sup>

“Butt out God; this is between me and the electorate,” expresses an attitude that is unacceptable in any Catholic politician. The separation of faith from daily life was vehemently denounced in the Old Testament and by Christ Himself, and condemned by the Second Vatican Council as not only pernicious, but one of the gravest errors of our time.<sup>8</sup>

Some would say that it is not God who is being told to butt out, but the teaching hierarchy (*magisterium*) of the Catholic Church: the pope and bishops in union with him. They argue that to ignore their moral teaching is not the same as ignoring God. Yet the Second Vatican Council reminded the world that, on matters of faith and morals, the pope and bishops in union with him teach with the authority of Christ Himself;<sup>9</sup> those who listen to them listen to Christ, and those who ignore them ignore Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Still others assert that Church teaching is just one of many things to be placed on the scales in political decision-making. This is false. The bishops of Canada have stated that the teaching of the *magisterium* is not just one of many elements to be considered by Catholics, but “the definitive cornerstone upon which the whole edifice of conscientious judgement must be built.”<sup>11</sup>

It is prudent to follow the advice of the Second Vatican Council, and impose no burdens upon candidates “beyond what is indispensable” (Acts 15:28) in order to preserve communion.<sup>12</sup> However, the *magisterium*, not the candidate, determines “what is indispensable,” and the indispensable teachings that are now politically relevant in this country include those that assert and defend the sanctity of human life, the nature and dignity of the human person, the nature and importance of marriage and the natural family, and the relationship and authority of Church and State. The suggestion that a Catholic may be moved by the Holy Spirit to reject Church teaching on these subjects has been dismissed by the Canadian bishops, on the grounds that “it would be unthinkable that the Spirit, speaking in the heart of the redeemed Christian, would be in opposition to himself teaching in the authority established by Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

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A Catholic cannot justify being a candidate for a political party that has policies that directly contradict indispensable Catholic teaching, if the party requires candidates to formally accept or support such policies, or to refrain from criticizing them.

On the other hand, it may be possible to justify standing for a party if the policies contrary to indispensable Church teaching are few in number, if the candidate is allowed to explicitly reject them and to vote against legislation based on them, and if the policies of other parties are no better. The expectation here is that a successful candidate would attempt to change party policies for the better, or minimize the harm they might cause.

However, one must not neglect the possibility of beginning a new party that would incorporate the desirable policies of those already existing, adding to them policies based upon Catholic principles that would best serve the common good. There are serious practical difficulties involved in this approach, but people of faith should not be dissuaded by difficulties.

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The Catholic Civil Rights League assists in creating conditions within which Catholic teachings can be better understood, cooperates with other organizations in defending civil rights in Canada, and opposes defamation and discrimination against Catholics on the basis of their beliefs. The Catholic Civil Rights League is a Canadian non-profit organization entirely supported by the generosity of its members.

**The Catholic Civil Rights League,**  
301 – 46 St. Clair Ave. E, Toronto,  
Ontario, Canada  
M4T 1M9

Tel: 416-466-8244  
Fax: 416-466-0091  
E-mail: [ccrl@ccrl.ca](mailto:ccrl@ccrl.ca)

<http://ccrl.ca>

**Executive Director**

Joanne McGarry

[joanne.mcgarry@ccrl.ca](mailto:joanne.mcgarry@ccrl.ca)

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### **Notes**

1. Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, 18 November, 1965 (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) 14. See also CCRL Position Paper # 3: The Laity and Political Affairs.

“All Christ’s faithful have the obligation and the right to strive so that the divine message of salvation may more and more reach all people of all times and places.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983) Canon 211

“[The laity] have also, according to the condition of each, the special obligation to permeate and

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perfect the temporal order of things with the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, particularly in conducting secular business and exercising secular functions, they are to give witness to Christ.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983) Canon 225(2)

2. Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 7 December, 1965 (*Gaudium et Spes*) 75

3. “The idea of *communio* was highly valued in the early Church, as indeed it is today especially in the East. It is not to be understood as some vague sort of *goodwill*, but as *something organic* which calls for a juridical structure as well as being enkindled by charity.” Explanatory note, published as an appendix to the official Latin version of *Lumen Gentium*.

The unity and exclusiveness of being in ‘communion’ is analogous to the relationship of husband and wife. See *Gaudium et Spes*, 12, where the relationship between Adam and Eve is described as the first form of communion between persons.

4. “This is the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter’s pastoral care (Jn. 21:17), commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it (cf. Matt. 28:18, etc), and which he raised up for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him.’ *Lumen Gentium*, 8

“... the Church . . . is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk. 16:16; Jn. 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door. . . Fully incorporated into the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who- by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion- are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. *Lumen Gentium*, 14

5. “Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to *remain in it*.” (emphasis added) *Lumen Gentium*, 14. See also *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7

“Christ’s faithful are bound to preserve their communion with the Church at all times, even in

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their external actions.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983) Canon 209(1)

6. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5; Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 21 November, 1964 (*Lumen Gentium*) 36.

“For the man who had made his act of faith, the prime factor in the formation of his conscience and in his moral judgement is to be found in the existence and the role of Christ in his life (Jn. 14:6-8); 12:46). A person who wishes to have a true Christian conscience must be faithfully in communication with his Lord in all of his life, particularly through his own prayer and the prayer of the Church. Indeed, properly understood, the presence of Christ in his life is all-pervasive and all-embracing. All the other aspects of conscience formation are based on this one and stem from it. This does not make them unnecessary or superfluous, but simply puts them in their place (1 Jn. 4:1).” Canadian Catholic Conference *Statement on the Formation of Conscience* (1973) 34

7. *Lumen Gentium*, 36; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 912.

8. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

9. *Lumen Gentium*, 25; Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church*, 28 October, 1965 (*Christus Dominus*) 2; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 888-892. Canadian Catholic Conference, *Statement on the Formation of Conscience* (1973) 38.

“However, in forming their consciences the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself.” Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, 7 December, 1965 (*Dignitatis Humanae*) 14

“For a Catholic ‘to follow one’s conscience’ is not, then, simply to act as his unguided reason dictates. ‘To follow one’s conscience’ and remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the magisterium. When doubt arises due to a conflict of ‘my’ views and those of the magisterium, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the magisterium. ‘In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*.’ (*Lumen Gentium*, #25) And this must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of individual theologians or individual priests, however intelligent or persuasive.” Canadian Catholic Conference, *Statement on the Formation of*

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*Conscience* (1973) 41

“Christ’s faithful, conscious of their own responsibility, are bound to show Christian obedience to what the sacred Pastors, who represent Christ, declare as teachers of the faith and prescribe as rulers of the Church.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983) Canon 212(1)

10. *Lumen Gentium*, 20, 37; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 87, 862.

11. Canadian Catholic Conference, *Statement on the Formation of Conscience* (1973) 38.

12. Vatican Council II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, 21 November, 1964 (*Unitatis Redintegratio*)18

13. Canadian Catholic Conference, *Statement on the Formation of Conscience* (1973) 46