

CHOOSING A GOVERNMENT

St. Paul's words: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God..." (Romans 13:11) suggest that the action of choosing a government has important moral and religious consequences. In fact, our very ability to answer the biblical call to do justice, and to care for the poor, is strongly conditioned by the policies and actions of whatever government is in power. For this reason, we, the Catholic Bishops of Ontario, want to offer some reflections to Catholics on the important matter of choosing people for political office.

The Church as such is not engaged in party politics. The Second Vatican Council indicated this when it stated: "The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system." (The Church in the Modern World, No. 76). At the same time, the Church is "at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person" (Ibid). For this reason it offers principles that need to be observed in political life, so that human dignity will be respected. This document deals primarily with those principles.

Living and acting in solidarity with others in our society is, of course, something that goes far beyond party politics, since there are many things which politics cannot do. For example, politics by itself cannot give us a sense of justice, a spirit of caring about others, nor a commitment to serving the common good. These are virtues which our faith fosters in us. In one sense, then, the most important thing each of us can do in order to make our political community better is to live our faith to the full.

This means in the first place taking personal responsibility for ourselves and for those close to us. We must live prudently and exhibit genuine care for others. We have obligations at an individual level to care for our families and to help, within the bounds of our means, our neighbours in direct ways, by giving to charity, by visiting the sick, and by following faithfully the other corporal works of mercy.

A full living of our faith will lead us to participate in the many benevolent and non-governmental organizations which meet a great number of the social needs in our society. These organizations perform such roles as raising money for research into medical problems and organizing activities for the challenged in our society. These are worthy actions which contribute very directly to the welfare of all citizens. They permit us to participate very directly in helping others and they provide a positive spirit in our society which can be both inspirational and life-giving to the provider as well as the recipient of the activity.

However, the complexity of our society is such that many of the challenges which have to be faced to meet our needs are simply too large in scale to be tackled adequately by individuals and the voluntary sector. This is generally accepted with regard to "hard services". Governments do an excellent job of providing sewers, roads and recreational facilities. In the same way, overall social policy, and much of the implementation of that policy, becomes the obligation of government.

In a very real sense, we are the government. In a democracy such as our own, our political responsibility is very serious. Politics in this sense is a vocation. Our involvement in it will reflect the degree to which we accept our responsibility and vocation to create a just society. It is on this political responsibility that we want to make a comment.

Being a Good Citizen

Our first concern is to remind all Roman Catholics of their duty to become informed, to vote and to be involved politically, at the very least in the sense of knowing the issues and the policies of the parties with regard to them. In recent years many people have expressed frustration and even indulged in cynicism when speaking of politics and politicians. Even God's People, captive in Babylon, had to be warned about such attitudes. The prophet Jeremiah reminded them: "The Lord Sabaoth, the God of Israel, says this: 'Work for the good of the country to which I have exiled you, pray to The Lord on its behalf...'" (29:4-7)

It is important that we adopt a positive attitude towards politics and that we respect the nobility of political service. Pope Pius XI spoke of "political charity" as one of the highest forms of the virtue of charity. In more recent times, the Church has told us that "a merely individualistic morality" will not suffice, and that Christians must "give an example by their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good." (The Church in the Modern World, No. 30 and 75). The good citizen works for society in many different ways to exemplify Christian values, from serving on district health councils to acting as advocates for the poor or promoting social housing.

Principles to be Observed by all Governments

What follow are several principles which apply to any government, at any time and under any circumstances. The people of Ontario must expect of any government they elect that its policies and actions respect these principles.

1. The dignity of every person is to be respected at all times. Every government must understand and realize that every human being possesses a transcendent dignity which no one has the right to violate. Consequently governments must work to ensure that discrimination is eliminated. They must ensure that all people, of whatever origin, religion, socio-economic status or culture are treated equally well. All should be treated with courtesy, compassion and respect.
2. Respect for human dignity requires a vigorous pursuit of the common good. By the common good is to be understood "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1906). This means that governments have a positive role to play, not only in providing a space for private action, but also in creating those social institutions that are required especially for the fulfilment of socio-economic rights, like the right to satisfying and dignifying employment. Contemporary efforts to "downsize" in order to reduce public deficits must not be pursued to the point where they endanger the common good. Such efforts can also become an ideological pursuit of individualism which threatens to eliminate the role of governments in the pursuit of social goals and purposes. In sharp contrast, the Church has insisted that "the complex conditions of our day make it necessary for public authority to intervene more often in social, economic and cultural matters" in order to achieve this common good (The Church in the Modern World, No. 75, emphasis added).
3. Governments must balance the rights, obligations and opportunities of various segments of society. We recognize that we live in a society which is fragmented in many ways. Interest groups are active. Government policy has to balance the needs, not desires, of existing groups as well as protect those who do not belong to organized groups. All must share fairly in the payment of taxes; all must accept their share of the sacrifices which

have to be made; all must have the freedom to pursue their legitimate interests, but government must ensure that they do so on an equitable basis. Nor should money be allowed to dominate or distort the exchange of ideas and the flow of information.

4. Governments must demonstrate a grasp of the concept of stewardship. The heritage we have been given is ours to use for a time. It also belongs to future generations, and it should be passed on to them in at least as good a state as it was received. A government must show in its policies and actions a sensitivity to fiscal responsibility which balances the needs of this generation with those of future generations. It must show responsibility to the environment and to the resource base of the province. (cf. Encyclical Letter of John Paul II On Social Concern, No. 34)
5. Governments must support the right to private property, but at the same time recognize that that right is not absolute. The world has been given by God to the whole human race. Every person, therefore, has the right to what he or she needs to live in a decent manner in society. All must share its benefits; material goods; social goods, like education and health care; and an opportunity for recreation and full self-development. Appropriate legislation, effective social programs and fair forms of taxation should ensure that these goods are truly available to all.
6. Governments must recognize that human beings derive identity and self-esteem, as well as economic survival, from the use of their God-given talents in useful work and, therefore, have the right to employment. "The obligation to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow also presumes the right to do so. A society in which this right is systematically denied, in which economic policies do not allow workers to reach satisfactory levels of employment, cannot be justified from an ethical point of view, nor can that society attain social peace." (On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, No. 43). The right to employment includes the right to conditions of work which are in keeping with workers' needs for safety, for respect, for just remuneration and for security. Human labour cannot be treated as just another commodity at the whim of the supply and demand of the market. Government must be ready to intervene with strategies and regulations which will create satisfying work for all at a level of income which will provide for the support of a family.
7. Governments must support the rights of workers to unite in order to protect the quality of their lives, their safety and their security. "Organizations of this type are an indispensable element of social life." (On Human Work, No. 20) Hence the right of labour to form unions and to bargain collectively must be guaranteed. Actions taken by all parties in labour relations must withstand the scrutiny of what is good for the parties but also what is good for society at large.
8. Governments must protect those who are marginalized in society. Through our governments we must provide economic security and an acceptable quality of life for those who are unemployed, displaced, impoverished or afflicted by a mental or physical disability. The complexity of modern society has created a situation in which voluntary efforts, though still needed, cannot begin to cope with the problems of the marginalized. Only government can do this adequately. The gospel clearly indicates that our final option must always be for the poor.
9. Governments must support life. All human beings must be nourished, supported and cherished from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death. A government worthy of support will favour life rather than abortion and euthanasia, will be supportive of families, will make palliative care a priority, will fight against child

poverty and will look for the rehabilitation of those who have become entangled in crime or drugs.

10. Governments must encourage and facilitate involvement in the process of political decision-making. A democratic government is elected with a mandate, and has every right to pursue the direction set by that mandate. There are, however, many means of reaching a goal, and citizens have the right and responsibility to make their views known on the relative value of taking one course rather than another. A government which respects its people will ensure that means are made available for the voices of citizens, singularly and in groups, to be heard and to have influence in dialogue with their government.
11. Government worthy of support must respect other governments and non-governmental bodies with respect to decision-making. While responsible for setting a tone and providing overall policy direction, governments should not take over those functions which can be carried out by other bodies at lower levels of government or by non-governmental organizations. Governments should do for people what they cannot do for themselves or cannot do as well for themselves.

Some Practical Suggestions for the Guidance of Voters

Responsible political activity requires not only good will but also good sense. We offer the following practical suggestions to assist in the process of casting votes: 1. You should vote for the candidate who best meets your expectations. Like all else in life, candidates are imperfect, and voters should support the candidate who seems the best among those available. 2. Candidates should be examined on the full range of issues involved, as well as on their personal integrity, their political philosophy, their experience, their past performance and the policies of their parties. 3. A very important area is a candidate's stand on the whole range of human life concerns: abortion, euthanasia, poverty, unemployment, violence, neglect of the old, the infirm and the marginalized. 4. Our laws must be morally acceptable, but our society is such that legislation will not cover all that is morally desirable. Human law deals in what the common good demands here and now, but is often limited by what is possible here and now. 5. Situations can arise in which prudence calls on us to vote for the less imperfect of two possible outcomes. This principle has been carefully explained by the present Pope in *The Gospel of Life*, No. 73, where he speaks of a situation in which "a legislative vote would be decisive for the passage of a more restrictive law, aimed at limiting the number of authorized abortions, in place of a more permissive law already passed or ready to be voted on... An elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well-known, could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law..." In similar vein, at the 1985 Synod of Bishops in Rome, Bishop Bernard Hubert of Canada offered some advice in this regard. He said that we must become "accustomed to actions such as endorsing the least evil solution, relying on analyses that are never definite nor complete, accepting the fact that, in spite of good will, a certain action can meet with failure, or that, in the sequel, a choice may turn out to be a mistake." Some Key Areas for Discernment An overall assessment of a candidate or a party can be based on an analysis of the position taken on some key issues. We list below some questions (there are many others) which might be put to candidates as a basis for discernment: The Criminal System · What position do you take on ensuring that every attempt is made to rehabilitate those who become involved in the criminal system? · Do you have any policy options designed to divert non-dangerous criminals from the prison system? · What steps are you prepared to take to safeguard the rights of victims of crime? The Economy · How would your party propose to create an economy which distributes wealth fairly? · Specifically, what would your party do to ensure that the vulnerable and marginalized in our society have, not only the necessities of life, but a decent quality of life? Education · How would your party ensure equal educational opportunity for all

children in the province at the elementary and secondary level? · How would you ensure that all young people are financially capable of participating in post-secondary education if they have the qualifications to do so? · What is your position on funding for schools that serve the educational needs of various faith communities? Employment · What would you do to reduce the unemployment and under-employment rates by the creation of quality jobs for the people of the province? · What is your position on providing an adequate income for those who are unemployed through no fault of their own? · What are you prepared to do in the area of retraining and assisted relocation of workers? · What would your party do to ensure employment equity and affirmative action? The Environment · What is your position on policies which seek to arrest, reverse and prevent environmental pollution and to promote sustainable development for all? · Would you be prepared to regulate and require reinvestment in support of such policies? Life Ethic · What is your position on legislation which would allow a physician to administer a lethal injection or otherwise assist a terminally ill patient to commit suicide? · What is your position on enacting a law to prohibit or limit abortion? · What is your position on governments paying for abortion on demand through medical health coverage? · What limits are you prepared to advocate with regard to the use of biotechnology in human reproduction? The Family · What policies would you propose to strengthen and enhance the family in our society? · What steps would you take to reduce child poverty in our society? · What steps would you take to address violence in the family, especially against women and children? Health Care · What is your position on user fees for health care? · What is your position on national standards being set for health care? · How would your party ensure that palliative care becomes an integral part of the delivery of health care services? · Are you and your party willing to ensure that home care is available in cases where it is needed? Human Rights · What is your position on legislation to ensure employment equity? · What steps would you take to ensure that there is no bias in our policing and judicial systems? Labour Relations · What is your position on the right of all workers to form unions in their workplace? · What is your position on the right of workers to strike in support of just demands? · What measures would you like to see in place to ensure health and safety in the workplace? · What is your position on forbidding the use of replacement workers during a legal strike? · Are you satisfied that we, as a society, are treating migrant labour fairly? Taxation · Are you prepared to work for a more progressive tax system to replace regressive taxes that put an unfair burden on people of lower income? · What changes would you like to see in the tax system and for what reasons? · Do you agree that taxes are the price we must be prepared to pay if we are to have adequate programs and services? · Do you agree that the principle of universality needs to be preserved in our social programs? · Are you prepared to put limitations on the recent tendency to resort to lotteries and other forms of gambling to increase government revenues, instead of devising a better system of taxation? In particular, do you support or oppose video lottery terminals? · What is the position of you and your party on the concept of a social audit to parallel and inform the financial audits with which we are all familiar? Conclusion We urge all Catholics in the province to take their political responsibilities with great seriousness. To encourage everyone in this matter, we close with these words from the Second Vatican Council: "Christians who take an active part in present day socio-economic development and fight for justice and charity should be convinced that they can make a great contribution to the prosperity of mankind and to the peace of the world". (The Church in the Modern World, No. 72) The Bishops of Ontario Pentecost 1998