

# **THE CATHOLIC VOTE**

A Guide for the Perplexed

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## CHAPTER 1

# POLITICS AND CATHOLIC TEACHING

*“Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” (Mt 22:21)*

The story is told of the proverbial “little old lady,” who when asked by a pollster whether she intended to vote in the next election, replied, “No.” Her comment, when pressed about it, was, “I never vote. It only encourages them.”

Catholic citizens share the cynicism that motivated her response. Political participation in America can be discouraging for many reasons: vast fund-raising machines operated by elected officials, offensive and insulting campaign advertisements, greed, ambition, and interest-group power.

Catholics have additional motivation to avoid politics and elections. In most races, the available candidates are out of alignment with the principles and policy positions that characterize the tradition of Catholic social teaching. How can a Catholic vote faithfully according to conscience when one candidate supports abortion rights and the other champions the death penalty? When one candidate supports continuing an unjust war, and the other wants to fund embryonic stem cell research?

How do we know what in *this* election belongs to God and what belongs to Congress? How will we know in the next election cycle?

Our purpose in this book is to address such complex questions. In this chapter, we look at why Catholics have a duty to

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participate in public life in spite of its difficulties, and we summarize the broad principles of the church's teaching that should guide such participation. In the chapters that follow, we examine how Catholics actually vote, offer a Catholic perspective on the major issues of our time, address the dilemma of deciding what candidates to support as a faithful Catholic, and conclude with thoughts on how the Catholic tradition can challenge and renew American political life.

### POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* addresses politics and political participation extensively, encouraging Catholics to take an active role in all aspects of the civic community. "Participation in community life is not only one of the greatest aspirations of the citizen, called to exercise freely and responsibly his [*sic*] civic role *with* and *for* others, but is also one of the one of the pillars of all democratic orders and one of the major guarantees of the permanence of the democratic system" (§190). This responsibility ultimately derives from our duty to God to care for one another, to live morally in our personal and social lives, and to witness to all dimensions of our faith.

Especially since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the church has taught the value of religious and civic freedom, and the contribution of democratic forms of government to the realization of human dignity and the protection of human rights. Democracy is impossible without responsible citizens who take the time to learn about the issues of the day, to inform themselves about candidates, to vote, and to hold officials accountable for how their decisions affect the common good.

Pope John XXIII stated the matter succinctly in the 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: "Once again we deem it opportune to remind our children of their duty to take an active part in public life, and to contribute towards the attainment

of the common good of the entire human family as well as to that of their own political community” (§146). Service to the world is a *duty* (§164). Duties impose demands on the conscience of believers; they are not optional.

In modern societies, the cooperation of government, families, and private associations is required to carry out Christian obligations to the “least of my brothers and sisters” (Mt 25). Food stamps and public assistance help to supply the needs of the hungry and thirsty. The sick receive care in hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and other settings funded in part by public dollars; they benefit from doctors, nurses, and paraprofessionals trained with public support, often in public facilities. Government defines crime, builds prisons and jails, and decides who will be in them and for how long. Chaplains, paid by government, minister to prisoners. Family life and the education of children follow family customs and desires, but they are assisted by public schools, government support for religious colleges and universities, and programs of financial assistance to low- and moderate-income families.

### Obstacles to Active Citizenship

Exhortations, however, are empty if they fail to recognize the considerable obstacles standing in the way of active participation in political life. Some are inherent in the variety of commitments that are part of each Catholic life. Each Catholic daily balances (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) multiple roles with their corresponding obligations. We are fathers and mothers; children and grandchildren; employees or employers; siblings and in-laws; parishioners; caregivers for sick friends and relatives; and volunteers for charitable organizations. Citizenship is one responsibility among many, and it is often overlooked both because politics can be alienating, but also because other responsibilities crowd it out.

We acknowledge the obstacle that the struggle to live a balanced life can present for political participation. (Each of us personally struggles to live the balance! Indeed, we recog-

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nize the difficulty of finding time to read this book!) Yet we cannot use the difficulties of daily life as an excuse for avoiding faithful Catholic citizenship. In different ways at different times in our lives, we need to find the time and energy to live as democratic citizens. A presidential election year brings this duty into sharp focus.

There are other obstacles to participation unrelated to the daily struggle to balance one's life. We have already referred to alienation from the major political parties. Loyalty among American citizens to the Democratic and Republican parties has been declining for decades. Americans, including Catholics, are fed up with the failure of both parties to address forthrightly the major challenges of the early twenty-first century, with their posturing over vital issues for partisan advantage, and with their indulgence in pork-barrel politics on a massive scale. "It's all just politics" is a constant refrain in the American public.

Another obstacle is sheer exhaustion from the length of American political campaigns. Other major democracies are structured quite differently from the United States. Their systems generally conduct elections in very confined cycles (usually no more than three to four months long) every four or five years. In the United States, a federal or state or local election seems to come along every fall and every spring. Once a candidate is elected, she begins immediately to raise funds in anticipation of the next election two or four or six years away. At the presidential level, the election takes place every four years, but the campaigning goes on almost constantly. The campaign season for the Republican and Democratic primaries is now eighteen months long, followed by at least six months of intense work on the general election. Put simply, this is fun for no one except for political junkies, and not even for many of them. Ordinary Catholic citizens are turned off and exhausted by the time they enter the voting booth.

The number and complexity of electoral issues—war, abortion, crime, immigration, health care, and social security, to name a few—also constitute obstacles to effective participa-

tion. Who has the time or ability to understand even one sufficiently, let alone all of them? We intend Chapter Three below to help in this regard.

Catholics have a special reason for alienation, since the core constituencies of each party are committed to policies that violate fundamental elements of Catholic social teaching (as we shall see in more detail in later chapters). For example, the national Democratic Party has a horrible record on abortion and embryonic stem cell research, while the national Republican Party has an abysmal record on the death penalty and the Iraq War.

Smaller political parties (Libertarian or Independent or Green) have no chance of victory in all but a handful of elections. And they also take basic positions at odds with important aspects of Catholic social teaching.

A final obstacle hits Catholics particularly hard. Sad to say, Catholics themselves have made political life very unpleasant! In the last thirty years, the most intense religious battles in American life have moved from *between* denominations to *within* churches. Levels of misunderstanding and acrimony between Catholics and Protestants have greatly diminished, but have greatly increased between Catholic and Catholic! (The same is true, unfortunately, for divisions within Protestant groups.) Battles over the Mass (stand or kneel; Latin or English; contemporary or traditional music), battles over the role of women in the church, strife about contraception and attitudes toward homosexuals, and many other issues produce angry exchanges between “liberal” and “conservative,” “progressive” and “orthodox” Catholics. These labels are hardly accurate, but they are employed to generate heat among the leaders of these camps and within the media. This heat spills over into politics, where some Catholics come perilously close to writing other Catholics out of the faith because of their political opinions.

Ordinary Catholics are confused and disgusted by battles in which one camp or the other claims to be most faithfully Catholic and charges others with near-heresy. Each national

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election cycle sees magazine articles, manifestos, booklets, statements by Catholic theologians and Catholic bishops that advocate, either openly or indirectly, that a faithful Catholic cannot possibly vote for *this* particular candidate or *that* particular political party.

In short, Catholic citizens are discouraged from being informed Catholic voters by claims that voting for a Democratic candidate who supports abortion rights (or a Republican candidate who fails to support national health insurance) places one's very soul in jeopardy!

We do not believe that Catholics should paint electoral choices in these stark alternatives. We believe that there are better ways to be both faithful Catholics and active citizens.

### CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: CHURCH AND DEMOCRACY

Voting and political participation, then, are Catholic moral responsibilities, but responsibilities laden with complexity and doubt. Democratic politics in most elections seems to demand that faithful Catholics compromise their principles no matter which way they vote! The temptation thus is either to abandon participation and stay home, or to select one Catholic teaching among many and make it one's only guiding political principle. For some, this means focusing all energy on the human life principle, making abortion the single issue on which to base a vote. For others, it means dedication above all to social justice, making economic policy their single issue. And so forth.

We understand these temptations. We have felt them ourselves! We are not convinced, however, that Catholic voters must succumb to them. Both as citizens and as people of faith, Catholic voters have the responsibility to face the complexities, to examine the issues and candidates, and to vote prayerfully and thoughtfully.

Abandoning political responsibility by staying home is not

an acceptable option, precisely because it neglects the fundamental moral obligation to participate in the life of one's society. The life of faith must be a life in which *all* responsibilities are given proper weight. There are accessible ways to achieve this balance.

*First*, each of us should devote at least *some* attention to politics and public policy. As followers of Christ, we bear responsibility for protecting life, advancing justice, and serving the common good.

*Second*, the degree of attention paid may vary over the course of one's life. At some times, the responsibilities of family or employment loom larger than civic life; at other times (during retirement years or at the height of election campaigns), political attention should increase.

*Third*, some Catholics are more interested in politics than others. Less-interested Catholics can take advantage of their expertise on particular issues. But we would caution Catholic voters not to attend only to one, single Catholic political action group (see below).

Following these guidelines helps one to be accountable as a Catholic citizen. As the United States bishops tell us, "Participation in politics is a worthy vocation and a public trust" (*Everyday Christianity*, 1998).

However, there is a more profound question that confronts loyal Catholics. Can one truly be a faithful citizen without either compromising one's principles or becoming a narrow, single-issue voter?<sup>1</sup> If politics demands moral compromise, then perhaps Catholics should avoid participation, because such moral concessions mean sacrificing one or more vital principles in order to pursue other principles. Moral principles,

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<sup>1</sup>Although we recognize that there may be particular elections in which there is in fact a dominant single issue that separates candidates, or in which the future of a particular political unit hangs on a single issue, we believe that this is rare in American politics. Although in these rare situations, single-issue voting is legitimate, we believe that most political situations call for balancing multiple policy issues from a Catholic perspective.

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once forfeited, become nearly impossible to retrieve! And, if made to advance a personal or political agenda, moral compromise damages one's immortal soul.

In short, perhaps the cost of full participation in electoral politics is too high. Perhaps the deepest challenge to Catholic voters is participation's threat to the very beliefs that make one Catholic!

*Political* compromise, however, need not require *moral* compromise. The most common circumstance is one in which there is no single best way toward the common good. Only limited moral progress is possible. These situations are common in family life (choosing one school among many) or business (decisions about the future of a company). This is almost always the case in politics. Democratic politics in a fallen world always occurs within limits and forced choices. Within limited possibilities, not all choices are equally good, but very rarely does one choice stand out as so far superior that it is morally obligatory. Political compromise is the choice to maximize the good that can *realistically* be achieved. In voting, political compromise is to choose among flawed candidates, who in most elections might advance some, but not all, important Catholic moral principles.

A legitimate political compromise is the decision that achieves the best possible outcome (in the judgment of the decision-maker as voter or official) for the time being, while preserving the possibility of achieving a fuller realization of justice or protection of life and human rights in the future. For example, one may believe, as we do, that the Iraq War is an unjust war that should never have been launched. Nevertheless, the war having begun, one must make the best possible choices among candidates and policy options for limiting the death and devastation and protecting justice and the common good. One must also choose the course of action that makes it most possible to avoid war in the future, thus respecting the principle of peace, even in the midst of a situation in which that moral principle has been violated. The best possible choice is not obvious to all, and faithful Catholics

who disagree about it and vote differently are not involved in moral compromise, so long as they do not reject Catholic principles regarding war and peace. The Catholic moral principle of prudence (practical moral judgment in constrained circumstances) points precisely to the compromised nature of most practical decisions in a world limited by sin. Prudence does not require perfect decisions; it requires using one's informed but fallible judgment to make responsible choices under conditions of bounded possibilities.

Political compromise, therefore, is not forbidden to Catholics. A world of limited potential for moral progress is the world of prudent political decision-making, which both the Vatican and the American bishops designate as the world of the Catholic citizen. Ecclesiastical leaders offer guidance by stating vital principles of Catholic social teaching and by engaging in reflection about political issues in the light of these principles, but it is the lay Catholic citizen who has the primary responsibility to realize the good in the restricted framework of electoral decisions. The lay Catholic government official has the corresponding duty to enact policies that can achieve the fullest partial goods under the limits of time and circumstance.

Legitimate political compromise, however, depends upon knowledge of two things: Catholic social teaching (to furnish the principles that guide decisions) and the specific situation (either a policy decision or the candidates in an election). The next section describes the principles of Catholic social teaching. Chapter Three describes how these principles bear upon public policy questions at issue today, while Chapter Four describes techniques for assessing candidates and making vote choices.

## CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: PRINCIPLES

The principles of Catholic social teaching constitute an inter-related and unified whole to inform and guide political deci-

sion-making by those attempting to live faithfully within the complexities of political life. Even though we present these principles one by one for clarity, they should not be understood as a ranked hierarchy of obligations, in which the first must be fully realized before the second and third come into play. Human life and dignity do not “outrank” justice or the common good; rather, human dignity is the aim of the common good, and protection of human life advances justice. The preferential option for the poor is not a separate principle from justice, but rather a test for the presence of justice and a realization of the principle of human dignity.

Eight headings conveniently summarize Catholic social teaching: the dignity and social nature of the person; subsidiarity and the proper role of government; the common good; stewardship and property; social justice; solidarity; religious freedom and human rights; and the preferential option for the poor.

### 1. The Dignity and Social Nature of the Human Person

Catholic social teaching flows from and points back toward the full dignity of human beings and their personal and social flourishing. The human person is the foundation of modern Catholic social teaching. Made in the “image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26-27), human beings have an exalted place in creation. With this high dignity come special duties to respect and guard that image, especially in those for whom it seems most obscure and threatened: the poor, the weak, the young, the feeble elderly, the injured, and the unborn. Christ judges humanity by its attention to the most helpless members of society, “these least brothers of mine” (Mt 25:31-46).

Catholic faith points to the *social nature of human personhood*. “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). Humans are made for community. God is three-in-one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—a community of love. Created in the image of God, humans seek solidarity with others. In order to flourish, humans need one another. This is why Christ founded a church and linked our salvation to our dealings

with one another (Mt 25). Government exists as one of the institutions that structure human association. One essential role for government is to protect and advance human life and dignity and to embody and enforce justice in human social relations.

Life and dignity are under attack on many fronts today: abortion, widespread wars and terrorism, poverty, the death penalty, lack of health care, embryonic stem cell research, just to name a few. Most of the policy issues and candidate positions during election campaigns involve the life and dignity of the human person directly or indirectly. Understanding this principle and its relationship to other principles of Catholic social teaching is therefore essential to responsible citizenship.

## **2. Subsidiarity and the Proper Role of Government**

Government does not always have the most direct responsibility for advancing human dignity or pursuing justice. The inherent responsibilities of families, churches, and other organizations signify that government is one actor among many. Moreover, because sin infects all social organizations, government itself must be limited in scope in order to avoid tyranny.

The principle of subsidiarity limits the kinds of actions permitted to government, even in its protection of life and dignity and its pursuit of the common good. Subsidiarity refers to the indispensable assistance rendered by government to help individuals and groups to reach their goals and to foster solidarity and community. Catholic teaching insists that no higher level of organization (such as the federal government) should assume a task that a lower order (such as a city) can effectively realize. Similarly, government at any level must not take on responsibility for tasks belonging naturally to other social organizations (such as parental responsibility for child-rearing).

Subsidiarity is not a principle that generates direct answers to specific policy questions. Rather, it is a reminder that each

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realm of society—family, church, business, neighborhood, voluntary associations, and government—has distinct responsibilities. Subsidiarity points to the centrality of the virtue of prudence; that is, practical political judgments about what unique circumstances demand from government. It cautions conservatives that the market is not always to be preferred over government action. It challenges liberals to appreciate the role of local governments and private associations for addressing challenging social problems.

### 3. The Common Good

In the Catholic tradition, limited goods—principally property and material goods—do not exist for themselves or for the exclusive benefit of the person or persons who own them. All goods are in trust for the benefit of the entire human community. This trust is what the Catholic tradition refers to as the “universal destination of goods” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§2402-2406). Private property has value only because it enables humans to direct God-given created goods most effectively to feeding, clothing, housing, and developing the human race.

The common good refers to the “‘sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.’ The common good concerns the life of all.” It requires that each human person be respected, that public authority care for the *entire* community, and that there be peace (*Catechism*, §§1905-1912). “Common good” refers to those conditions that ensure the flourishing of the community itself. Common good is the political expression of human solidarity and the primary goal of all government action.

### 4. Stewardship and Property

In Catholic teaching, we do not own the things we possess. We are temporary stewards with a responsibility to use them

wisely and to pass them on in good shape. Stewardship means recognizing limits and acknowledging competing beneficial uses of finite goods. For example, the financial resources and human ingenuity legitimately needed in education are also legitimately needed in health care, economic activity, and other spheres of life. Government has an obligation to balance the use of resources when not all competing needs can be satisfied. It does this through political processes of public debate, adjustment, and compromise that aim to preserve individual ownership, but also to preserve environmental resources for future generations.

## 5. Social Justice

Justice is intimately related to the common good. The idea of “social justice” points to the requirement for rough equality among citizens in the circumstances of their life. True community is not possible without the kind of equality that makes mutual reciprocity possible. Justice also points to the requirement of fairness in the distribution of important goods, services, offices, and honors. All people should have what they legitimately deserve and need to reach their fullest human potential and to realize human dignity.

Individuals, families, churches, and other autonomous associations have a responsibility for justice as they deal with members, friends, and associates. Government exists to prevent gross abuses of justice that harm persons and society itself. It aims to eliminate *sinful* inequalities that deny the fundamental dignity of each human person. Rectifying injustice is a main purpose of government. Moreover, government has a responsibility to ensure *public* justice; that is, fairness in the relations of persons and groups in public life.

## 6. Solidarity

Solidarity is the virtue of commitment to the common good. It is a fundamental quality of the Catholic citizen. Catholics

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do not enter political life to maximize the money or benefits going to them personally or to Catholic institutions. To the contrary, Catholic citizens enter politics to advance the good of their brothers and sisters. This requires actually seeing others as fellow human beings, seeing each other with the eyes of God, despite differences of class, race, political ideology, or residence. Catholics exhibit solidarity when they actively care for justice. Participation in school activities, community charitable drives, sports leagues, and political life testify to the bonds that link members of God's family. Participation in community is solidarity in action.

### 7. Religious Freedom and Human Rights

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church increasingly recognizes rights of conscience with respect to religious belief. All persons have the right and obligation to follow the authentic prompting of their conscience. Government has a responsibility to protect religious freedom from assault by private decisions and from infringement from government itself. The Catholic Church demands freedom of worship, evangelization, and service for itself, but also for other faiths. Sometimes the church may legitimately act in public life to defend its own institutions when they are vulnerable to damage. However, the church also increasingly recognizes and respects the legitimate plurality of society. It is one public actor among many.

Religious rights are one aspect of the fundamental human rights derived from the dignity of the human person. Catholic social teaching works against all violations of human rights, domestic or international. These include genocide, torture, terrorism, economic oppression, unjust imprisonment, and many others.

### 8. The Preferential Option for the Poor

“Those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a *preferential love* on the part of the Church . . .” (*Catechism*,

§2448). In truth, this principle is not separable from others; it is an application of the principles of common good and social justice. Poverty strikes at the idea of social equality embodied in justice. Material poverty prevents solidarity and impedes mutual enjoyment of the common good. Lack of material and social goods pushes the poor to invisibility on the fringes of society. Therefore, the church must pay particular attention to the needs of the poor. Their situation measures the degree to which government and society reflect justice and the common good.

### AVOIDING IDEOLOGICAL TRAPS

It should be readily apparent that these eight principles are neither essentially liberal/progressive nor conservative/libertarian. They are neither Democratic nor Republican nor Socialist nor aligned with any other ideology. They are *Catholic*.

Nonetheless, because of the challenges inherent in modern political participation, groups within and outside the church attempt to capture one or more of these principles in order to align Catholic voters with one particular ideology or one particular political party. The church, however, is never to be identified with any political organization or opinion. It is a requirement of the faith, we argue (and we believe church teaching agrees), to keep “Catholic” out of political party titles, out of political organizations, and out of ideological movements.

This is *not* to say that the church must stay out of politics and public policy matters. It should be evident that the principles of Catholic social teaching bear directly upon fundamental political issues. Rather, the church itself is not to be identified with an electoral coalition or an ideological movement or a political party’s *specific issue agenda*. Nor is it to be identified with support for or opposition to particular candidates for elective office. The role of the church is to speak the truth of its teachings both to Catholic voters and to *whichever* person or party is in office. It is the job of Catholic voters

and officials to apply these principles to election decisions, drawing upon their knowledge of the facts of public policy and the qualifications of specific candidates.

This is not to say that Catholics are forbidden to join political parties. They can be members, but their partisan loyalty (and their voting) must be limited, guided by deeper loyalty to their faith and its social teachings. Similarly, Catholic perspectives on public issues will sometimes agree with liberal or conservative or feminist or environmentalist perspectives. Political alliances can be formed based on such agreement. Yet, these alliances are always temporary and conditional, given the disagreements that Catholics have with each of these movements.

Historically, *conservatism* and *liberalism* have dominated the American political scene. Most Americans, including policymakers, are some variety of liberal or conservative, despite the periodic emergence of powerful adherents to other ideologies. Catholic social thought takes issue with each of these ideologies.

First, each is rooted in a perspective on human nature derived primarily from modern individualism and rationalism, rather than from the Catholic theology of the dignity and social nature of the human person. Thus, both liberalism and conservatism begin from isolated individuals and attribute moral autonomy to them. Catholic theology, on the other hand, begins from persons in community and attributes to them moral solidarity and mutual dependence and mutual moral responsibility.

Second, Catholic social thought differs with liberalism and conservatism in their primary commitment to freedom defined by the absence of restrictions. It is not that Catholic thought devalues freedom. Rather, the church understands freedom as directional; God endows humans with freedom in order to achieve social and personal flourishing. Freedom is not ultimate; its use is judged by whether it builds up persons, contributes to the common good, and advances justice.

Third, both liberalism and conservatism overextend mar-

ket metaphors: in the one case (liberalism) to moral decisions and in the other (conservatism) to essential human goods. These differences will become clearer in the chapters to follow.

Apart from traditional conservatism and liberalism, in recent years, new ideological viewpoints have surfaced from the two mainstream movements. *Neo-conservatives* and the *New Christian Right* compete for influence within the Republican Party. In domestic policy, neo-conservatives criticize government's regulation of business enterprise, and they are suspicious of government action to correct past injustices, such as through affirmative action. The New Christian Right, which includes evangelical religious groups such as the Christian Coalition, directs most of its attention to social issues. It opposes abortion, civil rights for homosexuals, feminism, pornography, and what it sees as government interference in religious expression.

Catholics make only limited alliances with these groups. The church shares much with evangelicals of the New Christian Right, including central Christian beliefs and opposition to abortion and a sexually permissive society, but Catholic social thought parts company with their stances on the economy and the death penalty, for example.

Movements on the Left of the spectrum are harder to define and classify, being more fragmented and less prominent than the Right in recent decades. Groups on the Left take their orientation from social justice, especially in the economic realm, stressing democratic control of the means of production through worker self-management, the importance of unions for workers' rights, and limits on corporate power. Catholics cannot agree with centralized control of the economy, but they can make common cause on the rights of workers, where the Left follows Catholic principles more closely than do conservatives.

Other perspectives often classified on the Left—feminism, environmental protection, or gay liberation—focus on particular issues. They contain within themselves more and less ex-

trreme varieties. The less extreme versions make up an important part of contemporary liberalism and of the Democratic Party politically. Each of these movements views public policy through a particular lens. *Feminists* evaluate policy according to its impact on the role of women in society. “Liberal” feminists strive to make sure that men and women are treated equally and that women have the opportunity to achieve success in all areas of life. More “radical” variants of feminism seek to challenge the traditional structures of family and society. Similarly, liberal elements of the *gay and lesbian community* seek to integrate homosexual persons into the fabric of society by guaranteeing to them the same rights and responsibilities (job access and military service, for example) as heterosexuals. Some gay liberationists, on the other hand, wish to weave a very different fabric of society by challenging definitions of marriage and sexuality. The limits of each “lens” suggest that Catholics can make common cause with these movements on particular issues, but cannot wholeheartedly endorse all of their platforms. Although *environmentalists* most often are part of the liberal coalition, there are many traditional conservatives who value, and participate in environmental groups that advocate, conservation of natural resources and respect for the physical environment. Here there is convergence with Catholic understanding of stewardship.

*Libertarians* combine a conservative economic agenda with a liberal social agenda. Although usually classified on the Right, libertarians support abortion rights, oppose restrictions on sexually explicit speech, and favor keeping government out of the bedroom as well as out of the boardroom. Many college-educated young persons take a libertarian approach to public policy. Of all the ideological movements in America, Catholics have the least in common with libertarianism.

In the last few years, *communitarianism* has garnered attention in some intellectual circles. Communitarians focus on the interconnection between rights and responsibilities. Their policy attention concentrates on revitalizing local neighbor-

hood and city institutions, on community policing, family restoration, character education, and education reform. Catholics can enthusiastically agree with many communitarian policy positions, but this movement often avoids themes central to Catholic social teaching, such as the preferential option for the poor and the protection of human life.

### BEYOND LEFT AND RIGHT, BEYOND DEMOCRAT AND REPUBLICAN

Since Catholic social teaching as a whole is at odds with the principal ideological positions and political party platforms in the United States today, it exists *beyond* the ideological or partisan spectrum, not in the middle or at any other point along it. This makes it difficult for Catholic voters easily to decide which candidate to support, but it also gives them great freedom to ignore simplistic ideological or partisan appeals.

*Catholics are called to make up their own minds, to exercise independent judgment about the most faithful way to embody the social principles of Catholic faith in the difficult and limited situation of particular election campaigns.*

Far from making the church politically irrelevant or (worse) a partisan political force, this position gives faithful Catholics a vital role to play: an independent voice challenging Americans to think and act outside the confining borders of the dominant political spectrum. As the next chapter suggests, in practice many Catholics refuse this independence, instead identifying themselves with particular political parties or political movements. There are, however, excellent ways to avoid this identification and to realize transcendent faithfulness in the middle of contentious political campaigns. These strategies are the subjects of Chapters Three, Four, and Five.