



DECREE OF PROMULGATION

of Norms for Participation of Catholic Institutions in the Political Sphere

In October of 1993, my predecessor, the Most Reverend Donald W. Trautman, promulgated norms for the Diocese of Erie regulating participation of Catholic Institutions in the political sphere. In summary, that policy stated that no facility or organization under the umbrella of the Catholic Church may be used for partisan or political activity, or to support or oppose any candidate for public office. That policy has been revised and reissued throughout the past 22 years.

With this decree I now promulgate anew the *Norms for Participation of Catholic Institutions in the Political Sphere*. These norms are largely the same as those issued in the past, except for a few minor modifications in response to the changing political and cultural atmosphere. This document is meant to help guide our institutions in appropriate and legal participation in the political life of our nation.

Over the past two decades these norms have been revised with significant contributions from the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as through discussions with pastoral, educational, and religious leaders throughout the diocese.

Following many of the norms in this document are notes in italics. These notes are intended to help explain the norm and give examples of its practical application.

These *Norms for the Participation of Catholic Institutions in the Political Sphere* take effect immediately and have the force of particular law for the Diocese of Erie.

Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.



The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie


The Rev. Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 12th day of September, 2016

NORMS FOR PARTICIPATION OF CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

The following norms are binding in the Diocese of Erie for Catholic institutions and those who represent them when those representatives are acting in an official capacity and not as private individuals. These norms are to be applied to specific situations as they arise. In additions to the norms themselves, explanatory notes are printed in italics.

1. FREEDOM FOR INDIVIDUALS

- 1.1 Catholics have both the right and the duty to participate actively in the political process as faithful and responsible citizens.
- 1.2 Employees and administrators of Catholic institutions, when acting as individuals, enjoy the full and free exercise of rights as guaranteed by the US and Pennsylvania constitutions and federal, state, and local laws.
- 1.3 When actively participating in the political process, employees and administrators of Catholic institutions, and especially members of the clergy and those in the consecrated life, are to take all reasonable steps to indicate clearly and unambiguously that they are acting on their own behalf and not as representatives of any Catholic organization.

2. GENERAL NORMS

- 2.1 Catholic institutions and those representing them may freely participate in the public actions of government.

This applies equally to institutions as well as to those who administer them. For example, it is permissible to serve on jury duty, to say the opening prayer before a legislative session, to use the school building as a polling place on election day, etc., as these are all actions of government.

- 2.2 Catholic institutions and those representing them, when acting in an official capacity, may not participate in partisan events of any type.

It is not permissible, for example, to rent out a Catholic facility for a dinner for a political party or for a candidate for office. Likewise, while it would be permissible to conduct a general voter-registration drive, it would not be permissible to conduct a Democratic or Republican voter-registration drive, since by their nature these would be partisan events.

- 2.3 The participation of Catholic institutions must be issue-oriented, intending to bring the light of the Gospel to bear on the complex social and moral issues of our day.

For example, Catholic institutions may educate the faithful concerning the Gospel's moral and social teachings about abortion, immigration, war and peace, the death penalty, the right to a just wage, access to health care for the poor, etc.

- 2.4 Catholic institutions and those representing them may at times need to critique proposed legislation in light of the Gospel.

Proposing legislation is a function of government and not a partisan activity, and the Church has a right to educate the faithful in how to assess such proposals in the light of the Gospel. While it is clear that the Gospel's teachings will at times be more closely aligned with the platform of one political party as opposed to another, we can never align ourselves with political parties, or even appear to do so. Rather, we must align ourselves with the Gospel, and our educational efforts must reflect this through an issue-oriented approach.

- 2.5 Catholic institutions and those representing them, when acting in an official capacity, are never permitted to endorse or even to appear to endorse any partisan activities or persons.

Catholic institutions and those representing them are not to:

- *accept political advertisements of any kind*
- *allow campaign signs or placards on Church property (except at polling places on election day, when the presence of candidates and their supporters is universally understood as part of the electoral process and not as an endorsement)*
- *rent their facilities for partisan events or gatherings*
- *distribute partisan materials*
- *issue statements for or against party platforms or candidates*
- *provide a forum for any candidate for office*

- 2.6 No voters' guides or other voter education information which focuses on the platforms of political parties or of candidates running for office may be distributed or made available in parishes or other Catholic institutions, except those approved for distribution by the Diocese of Erie. Approved materials are: voters' guides prepared by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, or the Diocese of Erie which have been specifically approved for distribution in the Diocese of Erie.

In educating the faithful, Catholic institutions may critique various approaches to particular pressing social or moral questions in the light of the Gospel, but are to stop short of issuing voter-guides or other similar items, except for those approved by the diocese.

- 2.7 Church parking lots are private property, and therefore it is inappropriate for public groups or individuals to "leaflet" or distribute materials on cars parked in church parking lots. Churches must avoid complicity in the dissemination of

material endorsing or opposing political candidates or positions. Thus, churches may neither favor nor disfavor any particular group that seeks to distribute materials on its property. However, the law does not impose any obligation on a church to actively monitor and prevent the leafleting of cars parked in its lots.

3. WHO MAY USE FACILITIES OF CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS?

3.1 Whenever possible, pastors and parochial administrators and administrators of other Catholic facilities should permit the use of Catholic facilities for charitable purposes which are consistent with Catholic teaching and practice, as well as for ecumenical activities.

3.2 Catholic facilities may be used for actions of government.

This includes using buildings as polling places, as venues to discuss proposed legislation, as emergency shelters, etc. See no. 2.1 above.

3.3 Catholic facilities may not be used for partisan gatherings or activities.

See no. 2.2, above.

3.4 In no case may Catholic facilities be knowingly permitted to be used by any group for the purpose of breaking the law.

4. CANDIDATES AND OTHER PUBLIC OFFICIALS

4.1 The Church has the right and duty to preserve the integrity of our religious witness, to avoid scandal, and to avoid confusion among Catholics about the teaching of the Church.

The official teaching function (Magisterium) of the Church exercises a pastoral duty aimed at guiding Catholics and all people in the truth that liberates. All people have the right to be instructed in the truth (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 890, 2032-2040).

4.2 Before inviting experts to address specific issues, Catholic institutions should have some reasonable assurance that the presence of these experts will not cause scandal.

For example, a parish may invite an expert to speak on environmental issues and recycling as an adult-education opportunity. It is reasonable to presume that such an expert will not cause scandal, especially if their views in that area of expertise are not contrary to Church teaching. On the other hand, if individuals are publicly known to oppose Catholic moral or social teaching, it is reasonable to presume that inviting them is likely to produce scandal and should be avoided.

- 4.3 No candidate or other public official whose conduct or voting record or public expression fails to give due respect to the teachings of the Church may receive any award, honor, or endorsement of any kind.

Catholics are obliged to show respect for Catholic teaching according to the norms found in the Code of Canon Law (canons 750, 752-754) which acknowledge that different levels or degrees of Catholic teaching demand different levels of respect.

All people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, on the other hand, are obliged to show respect for teachings based on the natural law. The natural law, knowable through a sound application of reason, is universal in its precepts, and its authority extends to all persons. It imposes on all peoples common unchanging principles which transcend the inevitable differences which arise from time, circumstance, culture, and place.

Thus, Catholics and non-Catholics may receive awards, honors, or recognition of some kind in a Catholic institution, provided that they observe the proper level of respect for the teachings of the Church and for the natural law which is demanded of them, as indicated above.

Furthermore, we must respect the tradition that gives to heads of state (i.e., the Governor of the Commonwealth and the President of the Nation) and to other civic officials access to Catholic institutions in their official capacity, including at religious or liturgical celebrations such as funerals or the dedication of buildings. Respecting this tradition, however, does not obligate us to present such individuals with any awards or honors. However, such access to Catholic institutions during a re-election campaign should be avoided or undertaken only after consultation with the Diocesan Bishop.

- 4.4 Nor is such a person to be given a platform of any kind at a Catholic event or in a Catholic institution, lest such a platform be used even indirectly to advocate for public policies or values which are contrary to the Gospel.

See note above, no. 4.3.

5. VIGILANCE OF THE BISHOP

- 5.1 For a just cause and in individual cases, the Bishop may dispense a Catholic institution from any of the norms listed above. In such a case, the Bishop for his part will exercise due vigilance that the values of the Gospel and the Catholic nature of the institution be protected.
- 5.2 Dispensations by their very nature are always exceptional and are never to be presumed.