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THE ISSUES, THE CANDIDATES & YOUR VOTE

“Politics, according to the Social Doctrine of the Church, is one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good.”

—Pope Francis, Daily Homily of September 16, 2013

The Michigan political cycle will move into full swing this summer. At the Primary Election in August and the General Election in November, voters will head to the ballot box to select men and women they believe will best lead their communities. Many important political offices will be up for election this year, including one of two Michigan seats in the United States Senate. All fourteen seats in the Michigan congressional delegation will be on the ballot, as will all 38 state Senate seats and 110 in the House of Representatives. State level officers including Governor, Attorney General and Secretary of State will also be on the ballot, along with several judicial positions.

Both Pope Francis and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church have stated that politics serves the common good. It is due to this pursuit of the common good that Catholics have a responsibility to participate in the democratic process, as the outcome of this year's political races will shape policy decisions for years to come. The deliberations that take place in Lansing and Washington, D.C., and the laws that result from those debates, can either hinder or elevate the moral fiber of a community, the state and the nation. Thus, it is important for Catholics and all people of faith and good will to exercise their right as Americans and to participate in the act of voting according to their conscience.

American history is blessed with social movements that were guided by conscientious citizens acting according to their beliefs. The significant contributions made by

religious persons in the public square are a testament to the pluralism and diversity of the state and the nation. The founding of the United States, the abolitionist movement, the drive for women's suffrage and the civil rights movement were all aided by religious persons and communities looking to advance equality and the common good.

Offering its contribution to conversations about what may be best for society, the Catholic Church promotes and defends the dignity of all persons, from conception until natural death. In order to promote human dignity in all of its stages, Michigan Catholic Conference and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops address policy matters pertaining to religious liberty, immigration, education, human life, economic justice, marriage, and health care, among others. **focus** seeks to address these issues in the context of the forthcoming elections and challenges readers to ask important questions of those running for office.

This publication strongly encourages Catholics to evaluate their political candidates through the lens of Catholic social teaching, and to vote for candidates based upon a well-formed conscience. Doing so requires each person to consult that law inscribed in their heart by God “ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1776). The following pages are intended to highlight important policy issues and to aid Catholics in their effort to promote the common good and to improve their communities by participating in the 2014 elections. ■

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

It is therefore fitting that when the Bill of Rights was ratified, religious freedom had the distinction of being the First Amendment. Religious liberty is indeed the first liberty.¹

It can be said that political partisanship often turns the average citizen away from participating in the political process. Too frequently, issues are only seen as Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative. Religious liberty is not a partisan issue, nor is it ideological. The United States of America was founded on the principle of religious freedom, and no political party can claim that as its own. Allowing religious institutions to operate according to their mission without interference from the government is a more accurate understanding of “the separation of church and state.” In recent times, regrettably, the First Amendment constitutional right to religious liberty has come under attack. At both the state and federal levels adversarial organizations and policies have sought to exert greater state authority over religious organizations and the manner by which they operate. Such intrusion poses significant concern for religious organizations and their freedom to serve the poor and vulnerable in accord with human dignity and the Church’s teaching. The right to serve the public according to a religious organization’s mission and conscience is a hallmark attribute of religious liberty. These rights must be protected and defended by elected officials.

★ **Where does the candidate stand** on the right for religious institutions to operate and serve the general public in a manner that is consistent with the organization’s faith-based mission?

IMMIGRATION

The migrant is a human person who possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.²

In his 2014 message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees Pope Francis offers a reminder that Jesus, Mary and Joseph—the Holy Family—experienced firsthand life as migrants. Today, many families migrating to the United States see religious persecution, economic depression, lack of resources and employment, scandalous governments, and dire poverty as root causes for their movement. A flawed American immigration policy has also contributed to a national problem. In response, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, while accepting the legitimate role of the government in intercepting unauthorized migrants, believes that by increasing lawful means for migrants to enter, live and

work in the U.S., law enforcement will be better able to focus on those who truly threaten public safety. Comprehensive immigration reform should also be family-based, meaning the number of years it currently takes for family members to be reunited after separation must be reduced. Immigration will continue to be a national concern until the government reforms its laws in a manner that upholds the dignity all human persons—made in His image and likeness—deserve.

★ **Where does the candidate stand** on comprehensive immigration reform and the need for expedited family reunification?

HUMAN LIFE

We know that human life is sacred and inviolable. Every civil right rests on the recognition of the first and fundamental right, that of life, which is not subordinate to any condition.³

Michigan has taken tremendous strides toward protecting human life in the past two years. Legislation that prevents taxpayer funded abortion through the state health care exchange and a measure that ensures abortion facilities are inspected by state authorities have both been signed into law. These critical successes must continue in order to defeat ongoing threats to life, primarily those that come under the erroneous and misleading guise of “reproductive health care” or “reproductive freedom.” In several other states, pro-abortion rights advocates have sought to diminish if not totally eliminate laws that have contributed to the protection and defense of unborn human life. To support the unborn, the infirm, the vulnerable and the elderly is the duty of every Christian. This respect for life should compel our communities to reject violence of any kind, including gun violence, which has caused overwhelming loss and agony for so many families and communities. A society free from abortion and other forms of violence is a goal toward which elected officials can work to better protect its citizens and uphold the dignity of every person. Assisted suicide and capital punishment equally represent direct attacks on human life. While both are currently prohibited by Michigan law, candidate positions on these matters should be evaluated by the Catholic voter.

★ **Where does the candidate stand** on abortion, and the protection of human life from conception until natural death?

1. *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty.* U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, March 2012 2. Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the 96th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2010 3. Address of Pope Francis to the Italian Pro-Life Movement, 11 April 2014

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

“Among our tasks as witnesses to the love of Christ is that of giving a voice to the cry of the poor.”⁴

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment in the State of Michigan has continued its gradual decline from 8.8 percent in April 2013 to 7.4 percent in April 2014. While this rate has improved greatly in a year, it still remains above the national unemployment rate of 6.3 percent and continues to have an impact on Michigan families who struggle to make ends meet. Elected officials, especially through formulation of the state budget, have considerable influence on public funding for programs that serve the poorest and most vulnerable in society. As the Gospels outline, Catholics are called to stand up for those most in need, including when lawmakers are making important decisions. People of the faith community should encourage constant evaluation of economic decisions and institutions based on their ability to protect and respect human dignity.

- ★ **Where does the candidate stand** on promoting policies that protect the state’s most vulnerable citizens?
- ★ **Where does the candidate stand** on social and economic policies that foster the creation of jobs, with decent working conditions and just wages?

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

“We are all sinners, and our response to sin and failure should not be abandonment and despair, but rather justice, contrition, reparation, and return or re-integration of all into the community.”⁵

Recent crime statistics from the FBI show that Michigan is home to several of America’s most violent cities, and sadly, there are countless examples of violence all across the state. In addressing the criminal justice system, the Church has called for a system based on restoration, rather than simply a mechanism of punishment. Offenders should be held accountable for their crimes, but also given the opportunity to grow, take responsibility, and demonstrate remorse for what they have done. Greater support needs to be given to programs that prevent crime, engage at-risk youth, and treat substance abuse. Additionally, programs that prepare an individual for probation or parole and assist that person with reintegration into society are also in need of support. These programs address significant barriers that can often keep parolees from becoming healthy and productive members of society. At the same time, Catholics must be sensitive and responsive to the needs of victims and

their families, who have been strongly impacted by crime and violence. Victims and their families should be supported and encouraged to participate throughout the criminal justice process as part of their healing.

- ★ **Where does the candidate stand** on sentencing guidelines and parole practices that reflect an individual’s potential threat to society, rather than mandatory minimum sentencing?
- ★ **Where does the candidate stand** on prisoner rehabilitation and re-entry programs that include continuing education, adequate personal identification, transportation, housing, and employment assistance?

HEALTH CARE

“Health care policy must protect human life and dignity, not threaten them, especially for the most voiceless and vulnerable.”⁶

The Catholic Church has spoken in favor of health care access for nearly 100 years, first becoming active on the issue as far back as 1919. Over the decades, the social doctrine of the Church has referred to health care as a basic human right, necessary for the proper development of life and important for full human dignity. Significant reform and expansion of the state Medicaid program in 2013 has given a greater number of low-income citizens health care access that may have otherwise been unattainable. The creation of the Healthy Michigan Plan will allow some 450,000 previously uninsured residents to qualify for a health plan, which includes those who earn up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level. The Plan grants participants access to 10 essential health benefits, including emergency services, maternity and newborn care, prescription drugs and pediatric services. The creation of the Affordable Care Act at the federal level has also increased access to health care for many; yet, the Act has also created significant concerns for religious liberty with the HHS Mandate and still does not provide health care to undocumented persons. Going forward, it is important to ensure that health care access is affordable to all, that health care does not violate the sanctity of life, and that religious groups maintain their right to offer health benefits that are consistent with their mission and principles.

- ★ **Where does the candidate stand** on promoting policies that increase access to affordable health care for low and moderate income individuals and families?
- ★ **Where does the candidate stand** on allowing religious groups and individuals to be able to provide health care without compromising their religious convictions?

FAMILIES

“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”

In March 2014 a federal judge in Michigan found unconstitutional the 2004 Michigan Marriage Amendment, which defines marriage as between one man and one woman. The ruling is under appeal, and Michigan Catholic Conference has filed a legal brief in support of the State’s defense of the law. Similar marriage amendments across the country have been found unconstitutional by the courts, a troublesome trend that is favoring marriage redefinition over natural marriage. It is necessary to state that persons with same-sex attraction should not be judged, but rather accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. The Catholic Church teaches that marriage is a unique love that a man and a woman, each created in God’s image, can give to each other as husband and wife. By opening their lives to children, parents teach life’s lessons and what it means to be a girl or a boy, a man or a woman. Every child has the right to both a mother and a father. The permanence and solidarity fostered by husband and wife is a model of communion, a dynamic that makes the family the first school of social life that helps advance the common good. Single-parents who work each day to care for their children, oftentimes in difficult circumstances, deserve constant support and encouragement. The family is the bedrock of society, and policies that support children and recognize one man and one woman in marriage are necessary.

★ **Where does the candidate stand** on the traditional meaning of one man and one woman in marriage?

★ **Where does the candidate stand** on policies that protect the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of the family?

EDUCATION

“Broadening educational choice is a matter of justice—especially for those who do not have equal access to education opportunities.”

Providing a child with a quality education is perhaps the most important work of a parent. Parents are the primary educators of their children, and policies are necessary that give parents the option to choose whichever educational setting they decide is best for each individual child. The recent expansion in Michigan of successful policies such as shared time and dual enrollment has provided students with access to subjects that were previously unavailable. Michigan is moving closer to full school choice, yet obstacles remain. Every state that borders Michigan includes expanded school choice options. The fact that Michigan, with fewer options, especially for non-public students, tests at the bottom in the Midwest is saddening but not surprising. Opportunity scholarships, vouchers for low-income families and tuition tax credits would open new doors for families wanting proven options. Every child in Michigan, enrolled in a public or non-public school, deserves a quality education. State laws that guide education policy must be fair and treat all students equally.

★ **Where does the candidate stand** on expanding school choice options such as tuition tax credits, opportunity programs or vouchers?

4. Address of Holy Father Francis to His Grace Justin Welby Archbishop of Canterbury, 14 June 2013
5. *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. November 2000
6. *Access to Health Care*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Office of Justice, Peace and Human Development. February 2013
7. Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1601
8. *A Just Beginning for All: A Series of Messages on Education from the Bishops of Michigan*, October 2000

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