



TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR THE COMMON GOOD

“By divine favor, especially in modern times, human genius has produced from natural material astonishing inventions in the field of technology. Some of these have extraordinary bearing on the human spirit, since they open up new and highly effective avenues of communication for all kinds of information, ideas, and directives.”

—Decree on the Media of Social Communications
Second Vatican Council

Most Americans are familiar with the term “separation of church and state,” a watchdog phrase that is commonly employed in the call for the parting of religion from political matters. From a historical perspective, the term may be traced, in part, to President Thomas Jefferson, who in 1802 spoke of a “wall of separation.”¹ The United States Constitution speaks to this important issue through two clauses within the First Amendment: the Establishment Clause, which prohibits government from creating a national religion; and the Free Exercise Clause, which protects freedom of religion. The phrase “separation of church and state,” however, does not formally exist. Yet frequently lost in the “separation” rhetoric is each citizen’s moral obligation to participate in the democratic process, regardless of his or her religious belief.

The Catholic Church, which views the wedding of Church and state as a suppression of religious freedom and other inalienable human rights,² calls for the faithful to participate in the democratic process by bringing their moral and social message to the public debate. Casting ballots, contacting legislators, organizing get-out-the-vote efforts and participating in community forums are just a few examples of how one may blend their faith with politics.

In an effort to facilitate “Faithful Citizenship” in our state, the Michigan Catholic Conference has established a web-based action center that generates legislative advocacy from the grassroots level. Grassroots advocacy is a powerful communications method that involves a group of like-minded citizens expressing their position on important public policy issues to elected officials. To bring a strong Catholic grassroots voice to the State Capitol, the Michigan Catholic Conference has developed the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network*.

This simple to use web-based tool allows Catholics across the state to instantly transmit electronic messages to elected officials in support or opposition to issues of concern to the Conference. The *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network* is also intended to help Catholics understand how core Church teaching directly correlates to specific legislative issues.

The intent of this *Focus* publication is to promote the use of the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network* while at the same time encouraging Catholics to bring their voices to the public square. As stated by the United States Conference of Catholic

Bishops: “Faithful citizenship calls Catholics to see civic and political responsibilities through the eyes of faith and to bring our moral convictions to public life. People of good will and sound faith can disagree about specific applications of Catholic principles. However, Catholics in public life have a particular responsibility to bring together consistently their faith, moral principles, and public responsibilities.”³

IMPORTANCE OF GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

As a public policy organization the Michigan Catholic Conference dedicates its advocacy efforts to promoting its agenda through legislative contacts, testifying in committee hearings and working with departmental and legislative staff in Lansing. With the inception of term limits, however, grassroots advocacy has become more important to the success of advocacy organizations such as the Conference.

Within the framework of the seven principles of Catholic social teaching lies the foundation upon which lay Catholics can produce social change.

Prior to term limits elected officials had been in office long enough to understand thoroughly the legislative and budget process and could spend more time addressing issues of concern with advocacy organizations. Term limits, although well intended to consistently produce new ideas, have created a crop of “fresh-faced” legislators who may be unaware of the dozens of statewide advocacy networks and the issues for which they advocate. In order to serve the residents of his or her district, the legislator maintains an open line of communication to facilitate concerns and opinions. One powerful way for Catholics to participate as “faithful citizens” is to communicate directly with a locally elected official on issues that are of concern to the individual and the Church. Whether the issue is human life, religious freedom, education, economic justice or issues concerning marriage and the family, Catholics across the state have the ability to unite in large numbers with a powerful voice.

While the Michigan Catholic Conference for over 40 years has advocated for social, economic and human rights issues on behalf of the Church, the means for a more powerful and vocal grassroots effort from the laity is now possible with the advancements of technology and the internet. Within the framework of the seven principles of Catholic social teaching lies the foundation upon which lay Catholics can produce social change. Catholic advocacy may not always be politically correct; it will undoubtedly traverse ideological lines (conservative/liberal) and will consistently speak in defense of human life from conception until natural death.

PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The Catholic Church’s social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom that calls for building a just society and living individual lives of conscience amidst the challenges of secular society. Several of the key themes that are at the heart of Catholic social tradition may be found in these brief reflections:

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In American society, human life is being directly attacked by abortion, assisted suicide, capital punishment and disrespect for the human embryo. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society — in economics and politics, in law and policy — directly affects human dignity and the capacity for individuals to grow in their community.

The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Rights and Responsibilities

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities — to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31–46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

The Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around.

Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected — the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

Solidarity

We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, regardless of our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that “loving our neighbor” has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

Care for God's Creation

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the Earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.



MCC LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

The principles used to develop the Michigan Catholic Conference's legislative priorities flow from the basic belief in the inherent dignity of the human person and in society's responsibility to ensure that dignity, the Catholic Church's teachings and traditions as they apply to today's political environment, and the fundamental principle of justice for all people.

MCC's legislative priorities are not a catalog of the Conference's position on every important issue that may arise. Rather, they are intended to communicate a sense of what state government's top priorities should be to foster the common good.

- ***Human Life*** — In the Catholic social vision the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. From the point of conception until natural death, all human beings are sacred, deserving of respect and worthy of government protection.
- ***Religious Freedom*** — Freedom of conscience and of religion is a primary and inalienable right of every human person. Insofar as it touches the innermost sphere of the spirit, one can argue that it upholds the justification, deeply rooted in each individual, of all other liberties.
- ***Education*** — All children, by virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to quality education. Parents have the right to choose how that education is provided. Any effort to improve schools must include a commitment to educational choice.
- ***Health Care*** — Equitable, accessible and ethical health care is an essential safeguard of human life. Health care is a basic human necessity, and genuine health care reform, recognizing the dignity of persons and the unique needs of the poor, is a matter of fundamental justice.
- ***Children, Families and Economic Justice*** — Children are among the most vulnerable members of the human family. As policies are advanced to help children, they must support families, since children's lives are nurtured or neglected, enhanced or diminished, by the quality of family life. Since the family is the primary, indispensable and essential unit of society, policies must maintain and promote marriage, and strengthen the family.
- ***Fiscal and Regulatory Policies*** — The state budget must be a moral statement for the State of Michigan. Of key concern is ensuring that economic policies are advanced that are shaped by moral principles.
- ***Federal Issues*** — When addressing federal legislative issues, the Michigan Catholic Conference will work in collaboration with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Only when the USCCB has taken a position on an issue will the MCC engage with the Michigan congressional delegation and federal agencies.

HOW TO USE THE CATHOLIC LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY NETWORK

1. Log on to www.micatholicconference.org
2. Click on the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network* logo in upper right corner.

SIGN UP FOR THE NETWORK

1. Scroll down below the “Action Alert” box to the welcome note.
2. Click the red “Sign Up” link.
3. Enter personal information and click “Submit.”

SEND A MESSAGE TO ELECTED OFFICIAL

1. Select an issue of interest under the “Action Alert” box and click “Take Action” tab.
2. Take a few moments to read the brief description of the issue.
3. Under “Your Message,” either use the text provided or personalize the letter by entering new text.
4. Once the letter is complete enter contact information under “Take Action Now” and click “Send Message.”

Based on the address provided the letter will automatically be delivered to the appropriate legislator. User will then be provided with a confirmation that the message has been sent.

FIND YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

1. Enter Zip code above the “Action Alert” box.
2. If necessary, enter street address and city.
3. Click legislator’s name for further personal and contact information.

TIPS FOR LETTER WRITING

- Tell the legislator that you reside in his or her district.
- Take time to understand the legislation by reading background material.
- Keep your communication brief, to the point and interesting. Perhaps include a short story of how the legislation would affect you, your family or society in general.
- As with all communications, be respectful and courteous.
- If you are interested in meeting with the legislator personally, request a meeting at his or her convenience either in the district or at the legislator’s office in Lansing.
- Include a clear and direct request for the elected official’s support. Stay positive, keeping in mind that negative attacks tend only to receive negative responses.
- Time the arrival of your letter to ensure effectiveness. Try to write your legislator, the chairperson of the committee or the governor while a bill is in committee, is ready for debate by the full chamber, or is on its way to the governor’s office.
- Write a letter of appreciation when you feel the legislator was receptive to your concern. Thank him or her for voting the way you had requested and that you appreciate their efforts.
- Remember: the legislator was elected to serve the needs of his or her constituents. Your community has effectively hired the individual to speak on the district’s behalf. The legislator will be more effective if he or she knows constituents’ position on certain issues.

REFLECTION

“Mother Church, to be sure, recognizes that if these instruments are rightly used they bring solid nourishment to the human race. For they can contribute generously to the refreshment and refinement of the spirit and to the spread and strengthening of God’s own kingdom.”

Unbeknownst to the Council Fathers in 1963, the above language that was drafted during the Second Vatican Council in the document *Decree on the Media of Social Communications* was well ahead of its time in conveying exactly how social communication would bring human society closer together. While the World Wide Web has presented several moral and ethical questions for the human community to ponder, it has also created an instant method for communication that can positively contribute to the betterment of society.

With the development of the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network* the Conference has taken a large step forward with society in the Information Age. By providing pertinent legislative information in a timely fashion, and with the working support of the faithful across the state, the Michigan Catholic Conference eagerly looks forward to an effective Catholic grassroots movement to enhance more than four decades of advocacy for the common good.

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1. President Thomas Jefferson Letter to the Danbury Baptists, January 1, 1802.
 2. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, 6.
 3. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*. November 2003. Page 3.
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