

Bishop responds to priest advising confession for Obama voters

STOCKTON, Calif. - A Modesto pastor urged his parishioners to receive the sacrament of penance if they voted for President-elect Barack Obama, who supports legalized abortion, but Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton said the sacrament was not obligatory for Catholics who supported Obama.

“Requiring all Catholics who voted for a candidate with a pro-abortion record to go to confession is not in accord with the moral guidelines set out in ‘Faithful Citizenship,’ ” said the bishop, referring to the U.S. bishops’ 2007 document on political responsibility.

Bishop Blaire, in a statement released Dec. 1, said that “determining the moral culpability of an individual Catholic who votes for a candidate with a pro-abortion record is a very complicated matter.”

He said that if a Catholic voted for a candidate “with a pro-abortion record with the motivation of supporting that abortion stance, then that is a grave moral matter.”

The bishop’s statement came in response to a Nov. 21 letter sent to parishioners by Father Joseph Illo, pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Modesto, that urged parishioners to “go to confession before receiving Communion” if they were among “the 54 percent of Catholics who voted for a pro-abortion candidate” and had a clear understanding of the candidate’s abortion stance.

According to exit polls, 54 percent of Catholics across the country voted for President-elect Obama.

The priest said he could not say if parishioners should refrain from receiving Communion, because he didn't know what they were thinking when they voted, but he stressed that "voting for a candidate who promises 'abortion rights' ... is voting for abortion. It is a grave mistake and probably a grave sin."

The priest's letter, available on the parish Web site - www.stjmod.com - gained attention beyond the parish after it was reported in The Modesto Bee daily newspaper Nov. 29 and picked up by other media outlets.

Since then the parish has added a special link to its Web site to enable people to e-mail their comments on the letter.

The priest also clarified the meaning of the letter in a Dec. 1 homily, stating that he never meant that simply voting for Obama made it necessary to go to confession. Instead, he stressed that parishioners risked a "state of grace" if they voted for Obama while fully aware of his position on abortion.

Father Illo said the president-elect has publicly supported the Freedom of Choice Act. The latest version of the legislation, introduced in 2007, would establish federal protection of abortion as a "fundamental right" throughout the nine months of pregnancy, regardless of existing state laws to restrict it. However, it is not clear it will even be reintroduced into the new Congress.

The California newspaper reported that Father Illo had a long line of parishioners greeting him after Mass Dec. 1 offering their support. The priest told the paper that he never "condemned Barack Obama." Instead, he said, "we must condemn a policy that eliminates the rights of a whole class of people."

In his letter, the priest said he knew that many people were "confused about the issues. It is a difficult time for us all, and we are facing new social and cultural issues." But despite such confusion, he said, "one thing is clear and certain: We can

never vote for a candidate who promises to promote abortion.”