

# Catechism said to immunize Catholic voters against political 'spin'

NEW YORK - Catholic voters who seek objective facts, study issues carefully and consider the teachings of the church are well-equipped to weather the storms of negativity and partisan sniping associated with the upcoming elections, according to panelists at an Oct. 18 conference on "Keeping the Faith in a Season of Spin."

Speakers at the program at Jesuit-run Fordham University offered observations on the role of faith and principles for both candidates and voters.

"The core competency of Catholics in the public square is to repeat the catechism's emphasis on sinful inequalities," said John DiIulio, professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania and first director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the George W. Bush administration.

Today's candidates are not talking much about disparities between the rich and the poor, or the needs of the weak, he said, but "people who imbibe Catholic social teaching" should put it on the political agenda.

Those who follow the principles outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church are immunized from the "spin" of political rhetoric, he said.

"In the Catholic tradition, you're not allowed to be either addicted to government or allergic to it," DiIulio said, adding that government should be related to serving the common good.

Tom Perriello, a Virginia Democrat who served in Congress from 2008 to 2010, said religion and faith have a place in politics. "Motives matter. Faith is one of the things that shapes values systems," he said.

If candidates are authentic about describing the influence of faith on their life choices, they win a certain respect, even from people who disagree with them, he

said. And people with a values system are less likely to “get sucked in” by the temptations of money and power.

Jesuit Father Thomas J. Reese of the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University said Catholics “should never become captive to any single party. Every four years, we’re the swing voters who decide elections and we should treasure that.”

He said Catholic clergy should continue the tradition of not running for office and bishops should continue to speak on issues while avoiding partisan politics.

Father Reese said Catholics must realize that appeals to Catholic theology and religious authority will not be persuasive to everyone in the political arena where there is a plurality of views. “Things like excommunication and denying Communion because of votes are not only stupid, but harmful to the goals,” he said, because it gets the candidate off message and makes certain issues appear to be of interest only to the Catholic community and not the wider electorate.

DiIulio said the disciplining of Catholic candidates by Catholic clergy has backfired. “People have thought better about it. Do you really want most of the ink spilled and the lines written on this, instead of the issues?” he asked.

Father Reese said Catholics need to distinguish between specific principles and specific legislation and remember that the role of religion is to motivate people to love, inspire self-sacrifice and work for justice.

Gerald Seib, Washington bureau chief of The Wall Street Journal, said economic justice will likely be an issue in the presidential election. “It’s starting to rise to the top. Nasty things are happening,” whose effect will last beyond the end of the recession, he said. “Marriage is being ground down by economic pressures.”

Seib said the growing number of long-term unemployed is a pressing social, economic and moral issue. “People are descending into poverty and economic anxiety,” he said. “They’re moving down the economic scale.”

Perriello said the Catholic bishops missed an opportunity to provide moral leadership during the 2006 mortgage crisis, but have been “strong on immigration”

because the church is a primary structure for immigrants.

Father Reese said Catholics who want to take an active role in the immigration debate should seek out facts, talk to smart people, read what the bishops say and try to figure out “what’s good policy.”

The speakers cited “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” a document on political responsibility issued every four years by the Catholic bishops of the United States. The 2007 edition was re-released in October with a new introduction that identifies six priority issues that voters should consider. They are abortion and other threats to the vulnerable, conscience threats, the effort to redefine marriage, the economic crisis, immigration reform and serious moral questions raised by war, terror and violence.

Seib said the bishops play a unique role in the American political discussion because they have the power to make everyone uncomfortable in equal measure.

Father Reese said the bishops should continue to give clear directions about what parishes can and cannot do in an election season and the directives should be rigorously enforced. He said pastors have to train ushers to keep an eye out for political leaflets deposited in the back of the church and throw them in the trash. They should call the police and report as trespassers people who leaflet cars in the parking lot, he said.

The event was sponsored by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture and took place at Fordham’s Lincoln Center campus in Manhattan.