

Despite hard choices, Catholics must vote

MANCHESTER, N.H. – Catholics must not seek to avoid difficult decisions about political candidates by choosing not to vote, Bishop John B. McCormack of Manchester said in a new document on “Conscience and Your Vote.”

The bishop’s diocese covers the entire state of New Hampshire, where the first primary in the 2008 presidential campaign is to take place Jan. 8. The Iowa caucuses are to take place five days earlier.

“Some candidates advance proposals that fail to mirror the commitment of the church to the protection of all human life,” he wrote. “In many cases, these same candidates advance other policies and proposals that can be supported in light of church teaching.

“This frequent mixture of laudable and unacceptable positions causes great perplexity,” Bishop McCormack said.

But “in order to sustain a healthy democracy, all citizens have a moral obligation to vote,” he added. “Deciding not to vote therefore is an unacceptable solution, even to this difficult situation.”

The bishop’s five-page document is based largely on “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in November. Like “Faithful Citizenship,” it outlines seven key themes for voters in 2008.

The themes are: the right to life and dignity of the human person; call to family, community and participation; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor and vulnerable; dignity of work and the rights of workers; solidarity; and caring for God’s creation.

Bishop McCormack said Catholic voters are not obliged to vote the same way on all public policy matters.

“With respect to some public policy issues, faithful Catholics will adopt a variety of positions as they sincerely exercise their prudential judgment,” he said, naming health care, “strategies for fostering economic justice and ways of ending war” as examples of such issues.

But support for certain other issues – including abortion, euthanasia, human embryonic stem-cell research, murder and the intentional targeting of innocent civilians in war – is always wrong, the bishop said.

“A Catholic should never perform or support an intrinsically evil act and rely on conscience to justify it,” Bishop McCormack wrote. “In such instances, either one’s conscience is not fully informed in light of the Gospel and church teaching – and one is obliged to have an informed conscience – or one acts against what one’s conscience knows to be true.

“When candidates support or tolerate policies that include intrinsically evil acts, a Catholic must carefully assess the situation and decide which candidate will produce the least harm to innocent human life, if elected,” he added.

The Diocese of Manchester distributed more than 50,000 copies of the bishop’s document at Catholic parishes during the Dec. 15-16 weekend.

In a separate opinion piece distributed to local media, Bishop McCormack said the document “was developed to encourage people to vote and to make informed, conscientious decisions as voters – not on a voter’s self-interests or party affiliation, but rather on a well-formed conscience which will look to the advancement of the public good.”

“I know that there are some who would prefer to see the church stay out of the debate on the future course of our country,” he wrote in the opinion piece. “As Catholics – laity and clergy – we see our participation in the public forum as a moral obligation. To sit idly by is to forsake our vocation as Christians to defend the dignity of every human person and to promote the common good.”