The Minnesota political cycle will move into full swing this fall. At the General Election in November, voters will head to the ballot box to select men and women they believe will best lead our local communities, our State, and our nation. Many important political offices will be up for election this year, including one of two Minnesota seats in the United States Senate. All eight seats in the Minnesota congressional delegation will be on the ballot, as will all 134 in the Minnesota 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, otherwise known as “Catholic social teaching,” have stated that politics should uphold human dignity and serve 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 St. Paul 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.

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 seeking to advance justice 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 to natural death. In order to promote human dignity at every stage, the Minnesota 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. This issue of SPOTLIGHT seeks to address these issues in the context of the forthcoming elections and challenges readers to ask important questions of those who are 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

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 it as its own. Allowing religious institutions to operate according to their mission without interference from the government is a more accurate understanding of the often used phrase “separation of church and state.” In recent times, regrettably, the First Amendment constitutional right to religious liberty has come under attack. At both 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 as abiding by sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) laws when they receive government contracts. 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. Additionally, the right of the people in the pew to live their faith in every aspect of their life must be protected. Here in Minnesota, business owners who decline to offer facilities or services for same-sex wedding ceremonies have been threatened with legal action and, in at least one case, have already been punished with heavy fines by the State. Some Minnesota legislators have promised to introduce legislation in 2015 that mirrors the federal HHS preventive services mandate, and which requires employers to provide contraceptives and abortifacient drugs in their health plans. These troubling trends must be resisted and important rights of conscience and religious liberty must be protected and defended by elected officials. We should not have to always rely on courts to protect our most basic freedoms.

✔ 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?

✔ Where does the candidate stand on the right of individuals to live their faith in their school, their place of employment, in their chosen profession, or in their business?

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 first-hand the life of migrants. Today, many families migrate to the United States to flee religious persecution, economic depression, lack of resources and employment, unstable governments, and dire poverty. A broken American immigration system 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 protecting its borders and intercepting unauthorized migrants, believes that comprehensive immigration reform is needed. A good reform package...
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

Though Minnesota has historically been a leader in enacting pro-life legislation, those efforts have stalled in recent years. Bills that would have banned most abortions after 20 weeks; ended taxpayer funding of abortion; licensed and regulated abortion clinics; and prohibited coverage of abortion in the Minnesota health insurance exchange (MNSure) have either died in our state Senate or been vetoed by the Governor. Still, perseverance and educational efforts on these critical issues 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. Every Christian has a duty to support the unborn, the infirm, the vulnerable, and the elderly. 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 represent direct attacks on human life. Although both are currently prohibited by Minnesota law, candidate positions on these matters should be evaluated by the Catholic voter.

Where does the candidate stand on efforts to defend life from conception to natural death, such as supporting laws that seek to reduce gun violence and opposing efforts to legalize physician-assisted suicide?

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

Where does the candidate stand on giving undocumented persons greater access to healthcare and transportation options to protect their dignity and support their families?

Every Christian has a duty to support the unborn, the infirm, the vulnerable, and the elderly.

Where does the candidate stand on the need to enact legislative limits on abortion and the abortion industry, and the protection of human life from conception until natural death?
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 Minnesota has continued its gradual decline from 5.1 percent in June 2013 to 4.5 percent in June 2014. Although unemployment has decreased and the economy continues to slowly recover, most of the economic gains have not been distributed across the socioeconomic spectrum. In general, the very wealthy continue to make gains while the wages of most other workers have remained stagnant or have even declined. Many Minnesota families struggle to make ends meet. Elected officials, especially through formulation of the state budget, have considerable influence on policies and public funding for programs that serve the poorest and most vulnerable in society. The last two years have seen the passage of important legislation aimed at combating poverty and fostering economic security, such as an increase in the minimum wage, record levels of public funding to combat homelessness, and an increase in the Working Family Credit to reduce marriage penalties. Still, new and creative ways to address poverty and foster greater participation in the labor market and in the benefits generated by the economy must continue. Similarly, legislation to curtail the usurious and exploitative practice of payday lending is still in need of enactment. As the Gospels outline, Catholics are called to stand up for those most in need. One way we can do this is by heeding Pope Francis’s call to “resolve the structural causes of poverty.”⁵

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 economic participation and the creation of jobs that provide decent working conditions and just wages?

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. The Social Doctrine of the Church considers health care a basic human right, one that is 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 MNSure (Minnesota’s implementation of the federal Affordable Care Act (“ACA”)) will allow some 450,000 previously uninsured residents to qualify for a health plan. The Plan grants participants access to ten essential health benefits, including emergency services, maternity and newborn care, prescription drugs, and pediatric services. Minnesota has also taken advantage of the ACA by transitioning Minnesota Care into the creation of a basic health plan (BHP). The Minnesota Catholic Conference played a key role in the creation of Minnesota Care, and the changes to the program expand
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.

In addressing the criminal justice system, the Church has called for an approach that promotes redemption, restoration, and rehabilitation 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 that assist the person with reintegration into society, are also in need of support. These programs address the significant barriers that 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 impacted by crime and violence. Victims and their families should be supported and encouraged to participate throughout the criminal justice process as part of the healing process.

Where does the candidate stand on sentencing guidelines and parole practices that take into consideration an individual’s potential threat to society, rather than simply relying on mandatory minimum sentencing?

Where does the candidate stand on allowing religious groups, closely-held businesses, and individuals to be able to provide health care without compromising their religious convictions?

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 providing programs that include continuing education, adequate personal identification, transportation, housing, and employment assistance, as well as restoring the right to vote for ex-offenders who are now living and participating in our communities?
CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Defending the institution of marriage as a social reality is ultimately a question of justice, since it entails safeguarding the good of the entire human community and the rights of parents and children alike.9

In May 2013, the Minnesota Legislature redefined the state’s civil marriage laws to include same-sex couples. In many states around the country, federal judges are striking down marriage laws that limit marriage to the union of one man and one woman. Both are troublesome developments that favor altering the purpose and structure of the civil institution of marriage, changing it from an institution that primarily protects a child’s right to be known and cared for by his or her mother or father, to one that is instead focused on merely endorsing the romantic inclinations of adults. By contrast, the Catholic Church offers an understanding of marriage as being rooted in the unique love that a man and a woman can give to each other as husband and wife in a union that is ordered toward the good of the spouses and to the creation and flourishing of children. Though the government does not create families or the institution of marriage, it has a compelling interest in bringing men and women together in a complementary union that has both individual and community benefits. A permanent and virtuous union fostered by husband and wife is a model of solidarity and communion, and provides a dynamic that makes the family the first school of social life for children and that helps to advance the common good. The Church recognizes that because of tragedy, sin, and the brokenness that we all experience, families come in different forms and do not always reflect the ideal of “mother, father, and child.” Single-parents work each day to care for their children, often in difficult circumstances, and our communities should provide them with support and encouragement. Other families have courageously adopted children and incorporated them into their family life. Still, the natural family is the bedrock of society, and policies that support the well-being and rights of children “to be conceived, carried in the womb, brought into the world and brought up within marriage,”10 and which uphold marriage as the lifelong, fruitful union of one man and one woman, are always necessary.

✔️ Where does the candidate stand on the authentic meaning of marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman? Did he or she vote in 2013 to allow same-sex marriages?

✔️ Where does the candidate stand on policies that protect the stability of the marriage bond and the best interests of children, such as limitations on no-fault divorce and surrogacy arrangements?

EDUCATION

Broadening educational choice is a matter of justice—especially for those who do not have equal access to education opportunities.11

Providing a child with a quality education is one of the most important responsibilities of parents. In Catholic teaching, parents are the primary educators of their children. Policies are necessary that give parents the option to choose the educational setting they decide is best for each individual child. School choice programs are exploding around the country, with 18 states and the District of Columbia having enacted programs that give parents more educational options than
Agriculture and the Environment

Creation is not a property, which we can rule over at will; or, even less, is the property of only a few: Creation is a gift, it is a wonderful gift that God has given us, so that we care for it and we use it for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude.12

Americans are more conscious than ever of their responsibility to be good stewards of the environment. Years of successful public awareness campaigns and the work of tireless advocates have ensured that protecting creation is at the forefront of public discourse. Many landmark pieces of legislation have been passed in the last 50 years, including the federal Wilderness Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Air Act. Yet debates continue at the local, national, and international levels about how to address environmental challenges such as climate change, the byproducts of hydraulic fracturing, soil and water contamination, air quality, and the global competition for scarce natural resources. Similarly, in protecting creation, attention must be paid to the proper management of agricultural resources and ensuring food security for all. The Church has indicated that these discussions are decisive and that they are “about the future of God’s creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both the ‘human environment’ and the ‘natural environment.’ It is about our human stewardship of God’s creation and our responsibility to those who come after us.” The United States Catholic bishops have stated that the following considerations should guide debates about environmental policy: “stewardship and the right to economic initiative and private property”; the needs of “future generations”; “population and authentic development”; and “caring for the poor and issues of equity.”13

Underscoring the urgency of the situation, Pope Francis recently said that if we destroy creation, then creation will destroy us. Prudent attention must be given to environmental and agricultural policy debates as a proper human ecology cannot take shape unless it is fostered by a healthy natural ecology.

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

Does the candidate oppose efforts to reduce pupil funding received by students in non-public schools for busing, textbooks, and healthcare? Does he or she oppose costly and unnecessary mandates on nonpublic schools that threaten their institutional integrity, such as so-called “anti-bullying legislation?”

Where does the candidate stand on the importance of enacting policies that foster sustainable agricultural practices, and the promotion of family farms and local agriculture?

Where does the candidate stand on policies that promote the use of alternative and renewable sources of energy?
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To sign up, visit www.mncc.org and then click on the MN Catholic Advocacy Network icon.

For a full list of the Minnesota Catholic Conference’s legislative positions and the bills MCC supports at the State Legislature, visit mncc.org/legislation.

Endnotes
3. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Italian Pro-Life Movement. 11 April 2014.
8. Ibid.
12. Wednesday Audience of His Holiness Pope Francis. 22 May 2014.