

# **THE 2002 KUYPER LECTURE**

## **Response**

**By Joan Rosenhauer ©  
United States Catholic Conference**

**In Response to  
Paul Freston's lecture**

**Christians Organizing for Public Service  
In Global Context**

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# Christians Organizing for Political Service—In Global Context: A Response to Professor Paul Freston

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Good evening. I'm delighted to be here. I was asked to come and bring the Catholic perspective on the topic of faith and politics and the relationship between religion and politics. In particular, I was asked, in response to what was said tonight, to talk about how Catholics see the obligations we have in public life.

I'd like to summarize the basic Catholic position on this. I think it's best summarized by a statement of the bishops in this country, though it also reflects the teaching of the universal church. That statement is:

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue.  
Participation in the political process is a moral obligation.

In the Catholic tradition the term “moral obligation” is pretty strong language. Today was a Holy Day of Obligation for us and that means we were obligated to go to mass. The word obligation has very specific meaning for Catholics, and I don't think that the bishops used it lightly.

This teaching is reflected in the universal church, although in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* it is adjusted slightly to recognize that the opportunities people have to participate in public life vary from country to country. The catechism says all people have an obligation, to the extent possible, to participate in political life. It also affirms those nations that have systems that create the greatest opportunity for participation on the part of citizens.

So there's a fairly strong sense of the obligation to participate in political life in Catholic thought, although it plays out in very different ways in different parts of the world. Sometimes people look at the Catholic church and think that we are a monolith and that all of us respond to things in the same way. This is absolutely not true. The basic message that we have an obligation to participate in political life does indeed play out in very different ways within countries and across countries. This is true because of the different settings, but also because of the structure of the Catholic church. Each bishop in each diocese everywhere in the world has a great deal of flexibility to interpret those basic teachings, and they do interpret them in very different ways.

In Catholic teaching, the obligation to connect the values of our faith to our roles as citizens has important implications both for what Catholics do as individuals and what the Catholic church does as an institution. I'm going to take a couple of minutes to talk about what the implications are for the institution, because I think that will illustrate what the implications are for individual Catholics. I'm going to do that by talking about what our teaching on faithful citizenship is not. I think this will illustrate best what it is.

The first thing that our teaching on faithful citizenship is not is a new idea. Our speaker talked about the importance of the ethical challenge for the Evangelical church. The Catholic church also has an ethical framework that shapes our participation in political life. This ethical framework is rooted in the scriptures, but it has also been developed through the history of the church, through the patristic period with the theologians of that time, and then in a particular way in the last 100 years in Catholic

social teaching. There is an extensive body of Catholic doctrine about how Catholics approach a wide range of social and political and economic issues. That body of doctrine informs the specific decisions that we make about the society in which we live and about our participation in political life. It is an ethical framework that is rooted in a consistent respect for the dignity of human life and that applies this teaching to a wide range of issues.

This teaching influences the Catholic church's involvement in public life throughout the world. When you look at it globally, you could at the same time have the church in Latin America looking at questions of land distribution, while the church in the U.S. is looking at questions of agricultural subsidies and their impact on farmers in this country, while Vatican representatives are speaking at the World Trade Organization about questions of market access for developing country farmers. This is an example of how Catholic social teaching can be applied in slightly different ways all over the world at the same time.

In addition to this ethical framework, the Catholic church brings to public life important experience that informs our work in the public arena--the experience of Catholic health care, the experience of Catholic education, the experience of Catholic Charities, the experience of Catholic Relief Services. All of these experiences play an important role in shaping the approach we take to public policy issues.

This leads me to answer the question that was first posed to me when I was asked to come to this event—what ought Christians to do? Looking at this question from within the Catholic church, an important answer is that we ought to share our ethical framework more effectively. There are too many Catholics who don't understand Catholic social teaching, who don't understand the framework that helps us look at public policy issues. But I would suggest that this also applies to the rest of the Christian community. We don't share a vision of the kind of world—a just and peaceful world—to which Christianity would lead us. We don't share this vision in a clear enough way for us to effectively shape our culture. As the mother of teenagers I can tell you that our culture is not very consistent with the values of Christianity. We all know this; I don't need to tell you this. What I would like to emphasize is that one of the things we ought to be doing better is sharing the Christian vision, and in the Catholic community sharing Catholic social teaching.

I also want to highlight that structurally one of the things we need to do as churches is to become more globalized, and certainly the Catholic church has a global character that dates back quite a ways. Our speaker talked about the importance of learning from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. We had this illustrated for us recently when bishops and other Catholic leaders in this country were looking at questions of agriculture, rural life, and the survival of rural communities in the U.S. Bishops from the Midwest, their staffs, and their people were very confidently going forward thinking that subsidies that are targeted to support moderate size farms were the answer. They believed that our church should support these subsidies unequivocally. Meanwhile, our brothers and sisters in Latin America were communicating with our people from Catholic Relief Services that absolutely the most essential policy position the church in the United States ought to take is supporting the elimination of all agriculture subsidies. So we had two elements of the church going down parallel tracks but ultimately moving in opposite directions. That highlighted for us the importance of listening to our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

So Catholic teaching on participation in public life is not a new idea. It is also not an effort to get involved in partisan politics, at least in this country at this time. Clearly, the Catholic church has a history of connection to political life that I won't go through. But especially in this country at this time it is not an effort to get involved in partisan politics. That means that as an institution we don't align ourselves with a political party. This is the case for a number of reasons, the most important of which is that we really don't fit anywhere very well. We wouldn't want to attach ourselves to the positions of a political party or of a candidate and then be connected to positions with which we disagree, either those that are articulated early on by the candidate or those that might develop later. Therefore, the decision generally in our church is not to align ourselves with a political party or with a candidate. Now this doesn't always get interpreted in exactly the same way in every part of our country. You may be aware that there are some parts of the country where leaders of the Catholic church have been more direct about how people should vote and how they should not. But in general our position is that we do not tell people how to vote; we do not align ourselves with a political party.

It is important to point out that this doesn't mean individual Catholics shouldn't be partisan. I've been talking about the role of the church as an institution. Individual Catholics clearly have to and should make partisan choices because we can't make decisions in this country if we don't align ourselves with a candidate, and often a party.

Balancing our ethical framework with the realities of partisan politics is a real challenge for us. I was at a meeting not too long ago about this question. All of the participants were Catholics. Some of them were very conservative politically and some very liberal politically. There was an enormous amount of disagreement. Finally somebody said, maybe we need to be more Catholic than we are Republican or Democrat.

Although the Catholic church does not align itself with a political party, we do nonetheless take very explicit positions on issues, and we try to organize Catholics to act on those issues. The challenge that our speaker raised about Christians in the north being a lobbying force I think is something we have to take up in a very serious way, and have tried to do this. We organize legislative networks in dioceses all over the country and in parishes all over the country. Nonetheless our voice is not being heard in the way that it should be. We need to do more within our own community and to reach out in the Christian community to be an effective lobbying voice and to organize ourselves not in a partisan way, but around issues of common concern.

The final thing I want to say about Catholic teaching on participation in public life is that it is not an effort to impose our will. At this point in our history, our tradition strongly affirms pluralism and suggests that the political experience in this country will be enriched if all people of faith and all people of good will bring their values to the debate. We want to be one of the groups that brings our values and has a strong voice in the debate. We believe we should be able to unapologetically articulate our values as they relate to public policy issues and participate in the decision-making process.

I will close with one thought that affirms some of the final points made by our speaker. Mother Theresa once said that we are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful. I've always suggested, with all due respect to a great woman, that there's a slight variation on her statement that might be appropriate. I believe that we are called to be successful at being faithful. This means being very intentional about and organized in our efforts to participate in the political arena. This, I believe, is something

all Christians and other people of good will need to work on so that together we can do a better job of shaping the world in which we live.

Thank you.

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