

ELECTION 2008: Voting the Common Good

**No problem
can be solved
from the same
consciousness
that created it.
We must learn
to see the world
anew.**
(Albert Einstein)

As Catholic Christians approaching a crucially important set of national elections, we believe that we are being called in faith to assume an important leadership role. We must be citizens who are, before all else, **disciples**. Our religious faith and commitment demand that:

- we involve ourselves actively in the political process to address the nation's problems,
- we work to turn the country toward greater justice for all, and
- we engage in that process precisely as disciples, guided primarily by the values of Jesus and his vision of the human community in the Reign of God.

Political campaigning for Election 2008 is already in high gear. The primary campaign debates have begun to address many of the painful issues experienced by the American people: the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and, more widely, concern with terrorism and security; the rapidly rising costs of healthcare, the 47 million Americans without insurance, and the tens of millions who are under-insured; poverty in the wealthiest nation in the world and the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor at home and around the globe; job insecurity, violations of workers' rights and outsourcing; large immigration flows; climate change, the human impact on the ecology and global warming; abortion, and more.

What is **not** receiving enough attention at this stage, however, is **what all these issue have in common** and how approaching them as **citizens and disciples** will make a real difference.

What They Have in Common.

Each of the major 2008 campaign issues is a new and more complicated problem than it was a few years ago precisely because of **globalization**. The new context shaping each one is a global economy bound together by a variety of interwoven transnational networks of communication, production and transportation. This context affects the nature of each problem and the type of the solution required. None of these problems will be solved unless we re-imagine them and refocus our approaches to them.

We must step outside our normal frames of reference to look at these problems afresh in their real present-day context. All of the problems claiming attention in our debates are arising from the fact that our institutions and policies are no longer adequate to the globalizing reality. The networks of global interdependence defining our current age are now strong and well-established. Merely national solutions to security, health, poverty, employment, migration, the ecology and life itself cannot provide more than short-term fixes.

Our social problems as a nation are revealing to us the areas of our lives in which we need to rethink our assumptions, values, ways of doing things, expectations and hopes in order to adjust our policies, and transform our institutions. All of these are inadequate. Like the I-35 bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis-St. Paul, our institutions and even our expectations were not built to stand up to the stresses of today's patterns of life. They need to be re-imagined and rebuilt to respond to our new contexts of **global belonging** and **interconnectedness**.

With some of the campaign issues, this is obvious. Consider a few of them.



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Climate Change.

There is no way to diminish the threat of global warming in the U.S. without working cooperatively with other nations and addressing the problem for the planet as a whole. No one nation or small group of nations can do enough to reduce greenhouse gas emissions without collaboration from all the rest. Our common good requires that our local and national efforts to address climate change be conceived from a global perspective and reached through global cooperation.

Healthcare.

A steadily growing number of Americans – now more than 47 million – lack health insurance, and the President and his supporters in Congress recently refused to extend the S-CHIP program to millions of low income children. The rapidly rising costs of our high-tech approach to healthcare are putting it out of reach for more individuals and businesses every day. Simply debating how to make healthcare affordable and accessible for all Americans, though, will not secure for us a healthy nation in which to live.

The Surgeon General's 2006 report insists that the “...health of an individual, community, or nation is GLOBAL by nature.” Diseases anywhere travel everywhere by passenger jet, cargo ship, and migration flow. No sustainable solution to the U.S. healthcare crisis can be hoped for without a long-term commitment to global public health as well. Our common good requires a vision that addresses the U.S. problems of cost and access within a broader collaborative global approach to good health.

Poverty.

By some estimates, 37 million people in the U.S. live in poverty. The gap between the wealthy and the poor within our country and around the world has continued to grow over the last 4 decades. The free-trade, small-government policies dominating the national and international scenes during that time have promoted capital flight and job-outsourcing, eroding the middle class and increasing economic insecurity and poverty. Corporations are free to move around the world, but workers are not. Educated populations in countries with lower cost of living need the jobs and welcome the corporations. These problems faced by U.S. workers cannot be solved at the national level. Our common good requires addressing poverty in the U.S. as part of a cooperative global strategy to guarantee decent work and a living wage for everyone on the planet.

Immigration.

Many factors are contributing to the historic flows of migration in the world today – wars, climate change, ethnic cleansing, hunger, government policies, and economic insecurity to name a few. U.S. international trade agreements, for example, have driven small farmers off their land and contributed to business failures in many poorer nations, resulting in increased migration flows into the U.S. for economic survival. People in those migration streams have become essential to the survival of important U.S. industries. Too often their basic human rights are violated and their work exploited. Border fences and stricter penalties cannot address this reality adequately. Our common good requires solutions that recognize our common humanity with the migrants worldwide, acknowledge the role of our own economic and political policies in forced migration and our interdependence and mutual responsibility, and enable us to live and work together in ways that promote healthy and secure communities for all of us.

Security and Terrorism.

The U.S. has invested trillions of dollars and sacrificed thousands of lives over the last five years proving that the projection of military force, even overwhelming military force, cannot suppress terrorism or guarantee security. Our common good requires policies and institutions that strengthen global bonds of friendship, dialogue and diplomacy, mutual support and collaboration.

Abortion.

The experiences of the last two U.S. administrations have shown that abortions are reduced more by employment and secure incomes than by threats of criminalization and punishment. Unless we address poverty effectively, we have no realistic hope of ending abortion. And we have already seen that poverty and economic security are issues that must be addressed in a global context. **Our common good requires** that we devise approaches to eliminating abortion that address its many contributing social factors and truly protect human dignity.

All of the issues of serious concern to American voters today are local issues deeply enmeshed in global **networks of inter-dependence**. In fact, they are all interrelated with each other in complex ways. They are all parts of an emerging global system. Caring about one or more of these issues requires caring about them all and about how they are interrelated.

In the individual issue papers that will follow in the weeks ahead, we will explore these interrelationships more closely. As we do, it will become clearer that our approaches to solving them must be more carefully integrated, more structural and systemic.

Call to Leadership.

At this time in history, we need visionary leadership in all segments of society, leadership that understands and can explain this globalizing process and deal with the complex interrelationships of the issues it is raising for us. We need leaders who can help us as a nation understand that we cannot solve our own most important social problems without addressing the fact that they are integral elements in newly emerging global relationships and institutions. We need leaders who can help us imagine a new role of leadership in the family of nations, one that moves us toward participation in global community and beyond the current outdated notions of national sovereignty, U.S. preeminence and dominance, military preemption, competition and control.

We need leaders, in other words, who can help us reevaluate our assumptions about our place in the world and rethink the attitudes, policies, and institutions that are essential if we are to find long-term solutions to the pressing social problems facing us. We need leaders who can help us create the new social context within which all people can pursue and achieve their well-being and their dreams. And we need leaders from all segments of society to bring us together as a community to discern the best political candidates, programs and strategies to help us to move in this essential new direction and create this critically important new future.

The Common Good.

Over the centuries, Catholic traditions of social reflection have come to understand the particular combination of social, economic, political and cultural institutions and patterns of life in a society as an important "good" of that specific society, its **common good**. That practically indefinable complex – a complex that includes cultural assumptions, attitudes, values, social expectations, policies, social institutions and support systems,

legal and political structures, systems for producing and distributing resources, and more – defines a society's character.

There are many complex and interrelated dimensions of common good at any level of a society. But, taken as a whole, it is the "good" available to everyone "in common," the "good" that is the very quality of our lives in community, "the good" that enables us to pursue meaningful and fulfilling lives within the community. Every person has the right and opportunity to benefit from these conditions in his or her work of personal development; each has the responsibility to contribute to supporting and improving the common context we share.

The new challenge we face is coming to terms with the fact that our real common context of interdependence, belonging and development has changed significantly. In many dimensions of our lives, it is now international, even global. As we confront our national problems of healthcare and jobs, climate change and security, we must begin to see them anew in their context as symptoms of globalization, its destructive edges, or perhaps its growing pains. We need to construct national responses that take into account our transnational interdependence, that recognize that the community of our "common good" is now regional or global.

During this campaign season, then, we must ask new questions of the candidates, their platforms and their programs, questions such as:

- Which of the candidates grasps the global context of our problems and concerns and addresses it realistically?
- Which platforms are more than hollow rhetorical promises of a return to "America First" or "America #1 again in this cutthroat competitive world"?
- Which policy and program proposals will help to build the global common good, to devise elements of the cultural, social, political and economic infrastructure needed to support authentic human development for all in our transnational community of interdependence and belonging?
- Which of our cultural assumptions and expectations need to be re-examined or adjusted?

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- What social organizations and institutions are important for functioning well in this new set of interdependent relationships?
- What are the important resources needed for people to participate in this new form of community, thrive and develop as healthy and contributing members?
- What new structures of power and processes for negotiating and deciding important issues will foster participation and ownership by all involved, not just Americans?

Our Contribution.

During the important, formative few months ahead, the Catholic community has a great deal to offer to the national political debate. The Catholic community has

- a centuries-long, constantly-developing tradition of social vision, principles and values,
- deep engagement with each and all of the issues facing the American people and its future leadership,
- strong national and international networks of organizations committed to working for justice for each and every person, to nurturing and strengthening the common good of the whole society, and
- a well-articulated faith vision that supports and invites social engagement with these issues.

Drawing upon the resources of the Catholic social justice tradition for analyzing, understanding and improving the common good, we at the Center of Concern and our colleagues will offer our analyses of the major issues to you, citizens and disciples, people of faith. We will also share educational tools to help you deepen your own analysis, make your own evaluation of the programs and candidates, and engage your local communities in those same efforts.

Our goal is that from a faith-inspired and guided reflective process, our nation may discern wisely which candidates share our vision and values and offer the most hopeful future for the whole human family.

Tools for Voting the Common Good.

The educational tools included with this package include:

- A Vision for Engaging
- a press release,
- questions for candidates to address in candidate fora, media debates, etc.,
- educational resources for use with students, parish groups, small communities, families,
- a church bulletin insert,
- a simple group process for using the materials
- a set of talking points or sound bites, and
- a blog entry/op ed piece for adaptation and dissemination.

The second set of materials is scheduled to be released November 15, 2007 and will focus on immigration. All resources are available for download at www.coc.org/Election2008.