

Youth Ministry and Politics

by Fr. Jerome A. Magat, PSS, STL

Every January 22nd, thousands of Catholic young people gather in Washington, DC (as well as other parts of the country) for the annual March for Life. It is perhaps one of the greatest manifestations of political activism by Catholic young people in the country. The amount of teen participation is so overwhelming that the Archdiocese of Washington has to lease the Verizon Center in downtown Washington in order to accommodate the nearly 20,000 young people who attend Mass prior to the March for Life itself. It is an impressive and inspiring demonstration of Catholic witness to the dignity of the human person, especially the most vulnerable amongst us: the unborn.

Why are so many young people motivated to travel hundreds and up to thousands of miles to participate in such an event while a majority of Americans agree that abortion should receive legal protection? Moreover, the pro-life position is not exactly a popular position among the recording artists and pop stars that so many teens look up to in contemporary culture. Why do Catholic teens turn out in such great numbers to stand in defense of life when there are so many other issues like the environment or education that their non-Catholic peers find more attractive to support?

The reason is quite clear, especially for those who choose to spend an often bitterly cold day on the streets of Washington. Among the primary values that our nation's foundational documents espouse, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Catholic teaching reminds us that the right to life is the primary and fundamental right that each person must protect. If one's life cannot be protected from the first moment of their conception, their rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness quickly become secondary concerns. Catholic young people are also convinced that this concept is not a private Catholic truth – they understand that all persons of goodwill can perceive this need to guarantee the right to life, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or political affiliation.

Quite often, Catholics are portrayed as single-issue voters. In other words, Catholics will only vote for pro-life candidates and that they lack the sophistication to see that there are many other important domestic and world issues that also require our attention. This is a misrepresentation of the Catholic position; Catholics are not single-issue voters. Rather, Catholics are primary issue voters. The primary issue at stake in many elections is the fundamental right to life, without which no other rights can be discussed with integrity. While issues such as the economy, healthcare, welfare, education, the environment and national security are clearly negotiable issues, the right to life can never be negotiable. This core belief is at the heart of how Catholics ought to form their consciences when evaluating the relative merits among individuals seeking public office.

Practically speaking, how can teens take concrete steps towards public apologetics, evangelization and fully integrating their life of faith with their political outlook? The answers to these questions are well within the reach of the Directors of Youth Ministry (DYMss) and the teens themselves.

First, teens need to get educated on the issues of the day. Rather than allow themselves to be swept up in the euphoria of a politically-savvy and smooth-talking candidate who can capitalize upon the electorate's emotions, teens need to first be able to evaluate candidates according to candidates' world view and understanding of the fundamental right to life. This precedes any discussion of the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. There are excellent voter guides printed each election cycle which clearly delineate the primary issues that need consideration in making any educated and conscience-driven choice. The writings of John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI clearly articulate the Catholic position on how one should select elected officials.

Second, teens should attempt to organize themselves to get the message of the Gospel of Life out to the community. Teens can organize education campaigns at their schools and parishes. They can get other teens and even adults aware of the issues of the day and how the primary issues regarding life are paramount to any sincere evaluation of moral goods. Charitable works involving working with the poor and for the disadvantaged are another effective means of promoting the Gospel of Life. This type of work brings credibility to the idea that all life is sacred.

Third and perhaps most importantly, Catholic teens need to participate in on-going spiritual formation to ensure that their activism is grounded in a personal and ecclesial relationship with our Lord and the Church. In the end, teens should not be advocating for the Gospel as if it were just another cause to be supported. Instead, teens should be spiritually grounded and immersed in the Gospel to help move hearts, which eventually move electorates. Teens can give such a tremendous witness of faith in a parish if they commit to a monthly holy hour for life and for the needs of the nation.

Pope John Paul II was deeply convinced of the power of Catholic youth. He always remarked that the "Church is young." The Church and our Lord are depending on our youth to bring the message of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In the meantime, there is plenty to do in the vineyard of the United States, where even today, life is not held with the sacred esteem that God desires. Prayer, education and activism are three ways God's will can be done on earth as it is heaven.

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