

CAN PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS ENDORSE POLITICAL CANDIDATES

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This article attempts to provide a clear answer to the question “can priests and religious endorse and campaign for political candidates?” Canon Law’s obvious prohibition is clear, but the same Canon Law also provides for exception in circumstances when “the protection of the rights of the Church or the promotion of the common good requires it.” In the discernment of many religious and clergy, the conditions surrounding around the May 2022 election in the Philippines satisfy this condition. Beyond partisan endorsement and campaigning, I have also provided in the end several pastoral options for political participation on the ground.

INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the upcoming elections in May 2022, many priests and religious express the desire to endorse and campaign for political candidates. They feel that the next election is crucial for the country. Recently, the well-funded Marcos machinery whose intention is to “recapture” the Presidency and rehabilitate its name form a coalition with the Duterte camp whose cling to power prohibits future prosecution from the crimes of his regime. Thus, these priests and religious ask the question: can they endorse political candidates? The difficulty is found in the fact that partisan political participation has traditionally been placed in the hands of lay people. The canon law also suggests that the clergy and religious should be the “center of unity” in their communities, thus, should occupy a non-partisan position. Endorsing and campaigning for a

¹ My gratitude to the Vincentian Center for Church and Society, St. John’s University for giving me the time and space to write this article.

political candidate challenges this basic injunction. Let me address this issue in three parts: (1) what is the real question; (2) what are the reasons for the church’s prohibition on partisan politics; (3) what are the available options on the ground.

In order to answer the question whether priests and religious can endorse political candidates, let me first contextualize the issue and place it in perspective.

Separation of Church and State

The issue is not the “separation of Church and State” as usually asserted by State rulers. There is no such prohibition in the Church. Such prohibition is an inviolable Constitutional injunction to the State, not to the Church. First, it states that the State shall not pass laws establishing any religion (Art. III, Sec. 5). Second, the State shall not pass laws prohibiting the free exercise of any religion (Art III, Sec. 5). These are called the “non-establishment clause” and the “free exercise” clause.² In short, only the State can violate it, not the Church or any church personnel. When Duterte and his government criticize the Church for violating the separation of Church and State, they were barking at the wrong tree, as it were. On the contrary, it is the role of all citizens—Churches and their members included—to call out the State authorities when they favor one religious group over another or prohibit some religions the free exercise of their beliefs.

Denunciation of Injustice in Politics

The issue is not about the duty of bishops and priests to denounce State injustice in their writings and in the pulpit. Any Church leader or personnel—bishops, clergy, religious or lay—has the right and duty to participate in the discussions of how our country should be run. It is incumbent upon them as citizens. Moreover, when their religion commands them to denounce injustice, to condemn the violation of

²Raul Pangalangan, “Religion and the Secular State: National Report for the Philippines,” in <https://classic.iclrs.org/content/blurb/files/Philippines%20wide.pdf>

human rights, to protect human lives, to defend vulnerable citizens, to take responsibility for society, such duties are covered by the “free exercise” of one’s religion mentioned by the Constitution, thus, should be respected by the State. As Christians, we are enjoined to work for justice and the transformation of the world, these being intrinsic dimensions of preaching the Gospel (Synod of Bishops 1971).³ Since it is part of our religious duty, we can also do it on the pulpit. Where else? We can do it among the faithful in their communities, on the streets, but on the pulpits in our churches, too! And the Constitution should surely protect this right.

Priests Running for Political Position

The issue is not about priests running for public office. That is dealt with in the Code of Canon Law 285, §3: “Clerics are forbidden to assume public offices which entail a participation in the exercise of civil power.” Canon Law sees that running for public office is “unbecoming” of and “foreign” to the clerical state. It needs to be said that the Constitution does not prohibit a priest from running for public office. This is a canonical prohibition, not a violation of civil law. It has been a persistent issue in the Church and many pronouncements have been done on this. In practice, at least in the Philippines, priests who run for public office need to renounce their ministerial functions or are suspended from exercising them.

4

³ Synod of Bishops 1971 writes: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.” *Justice in the World*, 6 in <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf>

⁴ “Priest gets irreversible suspension for entering politics,” CBCP News, October 26, 2021, in <https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/priest-gets-irreversible-suspension-for-entering-politics/>.

THE CHURCH'S PROHIBITION ON THE CLERGY'S PARTICIPATION IN PARTISAN POLITICS

The real question is: "Can priests (and religious) endorse political candidates?" We include the religious here even if the Canon 287 on which this topic is discussed directly refers to the clergy because the same question haunts consecrated persons as well. At this historical juncture, the religious also feel the same challenge towards partisan political participation. Canon 272 states that religious are bound by the prescripts of these canons (no. 277, 285, 286, 287, and 289).⁵ So, the religious are also included in this question.

The magisterial answer to this question is "No." Beyond Canon law, a host of magisterial pronouncements assert the same classical position. This quotation from Pope John Paul II is one sample:

"You are priests and members of religious orders. You are not social directors, political leaders, or functionaries of a temporal power. So, I repeat to you: Let us not pretend to serve the gospel if we try to 'dilute' our charism through an exaggerated interest in the broad field of temporal problems. Do not forget that temporal leadership can easily become a source of division, while the priest should be a sign and factor of unity, of brotherhood. The secular functions are the proper field of action of the

⁵ Some literature on the comparison between clergy and religious' political involvement are found here. James Provost traces the history of this prohibition from the 1917 Code of Canon Law: "1. Clerics were, in general, forbidden to hold public office; they were to devote themselves full-time to religious concerns. 2. The same was true for religious, and on *an even stronger basis because of their religious commitment to concerns beyond this world.*" Both Codes contain this interdiction. Provost reports that, in the 1917 Code, by canon 592 "religious, whether clergy or not, were bound by the same prohibition" as clergy, while in the 1983 Code, it is canon 672 which performs this function, thus, including the religious in the same prohibition. Cf. James Provost, "Priests and Religious in Political Office: Canonical Comments in the American Context," *The Jurist* 44 (1984): 247-275. See also Leslie Griffin, "Women in Religious Congregations and Politics," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 417-444.

laity, who ought to perfect temporal matters with a Christian spirit.”⁶

Let me mention several reasons found in the magisterial documents:

The role of the clergy is “to foster peace and harmony based on justice.”

Canon 287 §1 writes: “Most especially, clerics are always to *foster the peace and harmony based on justice* which are to be observed among people; §2. They are not to have an active part in political parties and in governing labor unions unless, *in the judgment of competent ecclesiastical authority, the protection of the rights of the Church or the promotion of the common good requires it.*” [italics mine].⁷

The above prohibition for priests in joining political parties (or labor unions, though this appears strange to me) is based on his role as the “center of unity”. The *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* (2013)⁸ refers to the above provision and writes: “Like Jesus (Jn 6:15 ff.), the priest “ought to refrain from actively engaging himself in politics, as it often happens, in order to be a ‘central point of spiritual fraternity’. All the faithful, therefore, must always be able to approach the priest without feeling inhibited for any reason” (no. 44).

⁶ See Pope John Paul II, “A Vision of a Priests’ Role,” *Origins* 8, No. 34 (February 15, 1979), 548-549. Other studies point to the same position: Rekarus Jehaut, “Diocesan Bishops’ Intervention Towards Priests Involved in Politics,” *Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology* 2, no. 2 (August 2020): 163-176;

⁷ See John Lynch, “Commentary on Canon 287”, in *New commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, ed. John Beal - John Coriden (New York: Paulist, 2002), 380; Javier Ottaduy, “Comment on canon 287”, in *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, eds. Angel Marzoa, Jorge Miras, Rafael Rodrigues- Ocaña (Montreal: Wilson & Lafleur, 2004), 387-388.

⁸ Congregation of the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, New Edition (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), in http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2013-06/13-13/Direttorio_EN.pdf. The 1994 version is found here: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_31011994_directory_en.html

Let me forward some comments: First, this is the nearest provision that we can refer to—joining political parties. The point at issue is actually less than that: to endorse a political candidate, not even joining a political party. Second, the reason given is the role of the priest as the “center of unity”. In ordinary elections, when the parishioners come from different sides of the partisan divide, being identified with one party or candidate inhibits the faithful to come to him for an “objective” view and moral guidance. He is presumed to be biased through his endorsement.

Following the spirit of Vatican II, the value of this provision is to protect the Church’s “freedom to preach the faith, to teach her social doctrine, to exercise her role freely among men, and also to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 76). In short, to maintain the authority to pass moral judgment on the political realm, the Church leader must keep his or her neutral stance.

However, there are other comments to the contrary. First, two exceptions are also provided by the Canon Law 287: “protection of the rights of the Church” and “the promotion of common good”. What concrete contexts can we envision here? I can think of the suppression of the right to worship, for instance, as a fundamental human right. It is also the “right of the Church” and its members to be able to worship. When this right is denied by the State, the Church needs to take a partisan position in “the judgment of competent ecclesiastical authority”.

The second one, i.e., the “requirement of the common good”, is closer to our situation. When people are killed, tortured, or detained (during the Martial Law or on the War on Drugs perpetrated by State authorities, for instance); or when corruption is so blatant and obvious at the expense of people’s lives, “common good” requires that we stand up against these atrocious crimes. In the first place, the role of the priest is not just “to foster peace and harmony” but to do such “*based on justice*,” Canon 287 says.

Third, the use of Jesus’ example in the document is lopsided. John 6:15ff talks about Jesus escaping from the crowd when they wanted to make him a king after he multiplied the loaves. But what about other verses where Jesus unmasked the

hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders or whipped the money changers out of the temple? That was a non-neutral and partisan position. It is also to be “like Jesus” to fight for justice and work for the liberation of the poor (Luke 4: 16-20).

We should not tie the universal and Catholic Church to any historical contingency.

The *Directory* writes: “The priest is a servant of the Church, which by virtue of its universality and Catholicity cannot have ties with any historical contingency, and hence he will therefore remain above and beyond any political party” (no. 44). To be tied to a political party is to reduce the Church’s mission to “temporal tasks of a purely social and political nature” and a “grave loss to the evangelical fecundity of the entire Church.”

This dualistic and binary view of the Church (as against the world) is precisely what has been rejected by Vatican II: one is universal, the other contingent; one is divine, the other purely human. There is only one history—the history of the world is also the history of salvation. The Church’s salvific mission is social and political in nature. “*Extra mundum nulla salus*,” the Dutch theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx writes.⁹

On the one hand, this advice is useful to relativize the positions of political parties and platforms. No political program is absolute. They are means to an end and they are not the only means. In theology, this refers to what is called the “eschatological proviso” – a condition or provision that limits the valuation of the political realm. Any socio-political arrangement when considered from the perspective of the values of the Kingdom always falls short of its ideals, thus, always needs to be continually critiqued and revised.

On the other hand, an all-out and absolute use of “eschatological proviso” (or a permanent “allergy” of political parties and ideologies in the Church) denies our authentic human political struggle of its necessary social vision and practical processes

⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroads, 1990).

that furnish social agents with concrete ways toward human development and empowerment.¹⁰ “Faith without ideology is dead”, writes the Latin American theologian Juan Luis Segundo.¹¹ To remain in the level of abstract principles and values renders the Christian vision impractical and incapable of incarnating itself in history. It is the well-thought of vision and programs of political parties that can incarnate the Christian vision in the world.

It is the task of the lay faithful to directly intervene in political affairs.

The *Directory* quotes the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and writes: “The priest will remember that ‘it is not the role of the Pastors of the Church to intervene directly in the political structuring and organization of social life. This task is part of the vocation of the lay faithful, acting on their own initiative with their fellow citizens’ (CCC 2442).” This is also a constant refrain in the documents of the Church. Already in 1986, in his discourse against liberation theology (*Libertatis Conscientia*, No. 80), Ratzinger already

¹⁰ Schellibeeckx writes: “If we were only to take account of God’s proviso, without also considering the specific *content* of belief in God, above all Christian belief in God, oriented on Jesus of Nazareth, the eschatological proviso could have a very reactionary function, to man’s detriment. For God’s proviso lies over all our human history and over everything that man brings to fruition in it. All political options are made relative by it. But that also means that if this real aspect of the revelation of God is taken *in isolation*, without considering what has come about for us in Jesus, this eschatological proviso can relativize any secular activity in such a way that both a conservative policy and a socialist policy demanding more justice for all can be neutralized *in the same way*. In that case Christian faith would not only desacralize politics and rob it of the threat that it might become absolute—which is the special justification and significance of the eschatological proviso or the freedom of God’s divinity—but of itself it would not be able to give any inspiration, still less any orientation (pointing in one *particular* direction) in the choice of a social and economic policy to further growing humanity and a realizable state of human well-being... a merely formal use of the eschatological proviso would simply throttle the humanitarian impulse which is present in liberation movements.” Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (London: Crossroads, 1981), 777-778.

¹¹ Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2006).

wrote: “It is not for the pastors of the Church to intervene directly in the political construction and organization of social life. This task forms part of the vocation of the laity acting on their own initiative with their fellow-citizens.”¹² In short, the command is: “Priests and religious, don’t meddle in politics. Leave it to the lay faithful!”

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) writes: “Negatively put, the clergy can teach moral doctrines covering politics but cannot actively involve themselves in partisan politics. In practice, religious men and women are also included in this prohibition.”¹³ Thus, the CBCP rallied the lay faithful towards “principled partisan politics” in the document *Lay Participation in Politics and Peace* (2009): “(1) We call upon those who are competent, persons of integrity, and committed to change to get involved directly in principled partisan politics, and become candidates for political election, aware that the common good is above the good of vested interests; (2) We remind the laity that it is within their right as well as their duty to campaign for candidates they believe to be competent, honest, and public-service minded in order to reform our country.”¹⁴ But even in this same document, the CBCP also commits the Church personnel—meaning priests, religious and lay leaders— “to the indispensable task of raising social awareness and forming social consciences through political education.”

Two comments. First, I sincerely hope that competent and conscientious lay people take on the cudgels of political participation from their own professional expertise and as mature Christian faithful (PCP II, 341). But “for many people today, politics is a distasteful word, often due to the mistakes, corruption and inefficiency of some politicians” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 176). Moreover, the hierarchy has not formed the lay people toward sound and

¹² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Città del Vaticano: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1986).

¹³ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism on Church and Politics*, in <https://cbcponline.net/catechism-on-the-church-and-politics/>.

¹⁴ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, “Lay Participation in Politics and Peace,” in <https://cbcponline.net/a-cbc-pastoral-statement-on-lay-participation-in-politics-and-peace/>

mature partisan political participation. Historically, in the Philippines, the clergy have formed the lay people in the priests' own idealized image—to be a Christian is to be non-partisan—at the most encouraging people to join PPCRV and watch the ballots. This is the farthest that Christian political participation can get, thus, also reinforcing the image of partisan politics as evil and dirty.

Second, even as priests limit themselves to the teaching of moral principles alone, it must be admitted that this is “actually interpreted by some as partisan politics, because of actual circumstances” (PCP-II, 343-344). For instance, preaching against the evil of extrajudicial killings or blatant government corruption is seen as “politically partisan” because it hits certain political programs and personalities.

Third, in this curious division of political labor, the clergy passes moral judgment on political matters, and the lay people engage in “active and direct partisan politics”. But in real life, the CBCP says, this rule is not rigid. On the one hand, the lay people also need to discern and teach the morality of our political situation. On the other hand, all Christians and the whole Church—priests, religious men and women, and laypeople—“must be involved in the area of politics when Gospel values are at stake” (PCP-II, 344).¹⁵

OPTIONS ON THE GROUND

We have shown that the presumed clear-cut distinctions in Church documents and pronouncements are not rigid at all. There are two sides to the same coin; and a balanced way to understand the issue, is to consider both angles. There are no easy answers. Moreover, the magisterial injunction looks different when seen from the ground.

On the one hand, the priest should be the “center of unity”. On the other hand, the same rule tells him to promote peace and harmony “based on justice”. The rule of non-involvement falls flat when the common good and justice requires it. On the one hand, non-partisan involvement enables the Church

¹⁵ CBCP, *Catechism on Church and Politics*, 1998.

to provide a critical voice vis-à-vis the limits of any political platform. On the other hand, society does not work without concrete political programs. The Church's detachment from political agenda in the name of neutrality makes its distinct voice irrelevant and impractical to the actual workings of society.

On the one hand, the presumed division of political labor in the Church—the clergy to pronounce moral truths; and the laity to engage in actual politics—is blurred “when the Gospel values are at stake” and the common good is seriously threatened.

In the end, we are back to our initial question: Can the clergy and religious endorse political candidates? What are the options available on the ground?

Partisan Endorsement and Campaign

The clergy and religious can take partisan position when the common good demands it, when justice is grossly violated, when the good of the Church requires it or when the Gospel values are at stake. On the one hand, when a political party and its candidates neglect the common good, obviously defend blatant corruption and violate Gospel values of life and justice, it is incumbent upon all Christians—priests and religious included—to denounce them. On the other hand, when a political candidate and political party promotes the opposite values, priests and religious can also endorse them. All these answers are derived from the above-mentioned Church documents, and our interpretation of them.

Clear Criteria for Political Discernment

In the process of discerning, the clergy and religious shall unequivocally state on which Gospel/Christian principles and values such a decision is based, and how it is applied to the specific situation. At this historical juncture, for instance—graft and corruption during Martial Law (“Thou shall not steal”), the promotion of extrajudicial killings (“Thou shall not kill”) and complicity with and/or silence about them—are non-negotiable criteria for such a decision. Political parties and candidates who do not uphold these criteria as crucial to their campaign are outside

the ambit of the Christian values we uphold. There can be other criteria that they believe as important—respect for human rights, upholding the rule of law, preferential option for the poor, rejection of political dynasty, etc. The clergy and religious also need to declare them clearly as the basis for their decision.

Continual Criticism and Demand for Accountability

Having said that, it is also enjoined upon the clergy and religious to be continually discerning on the political candidates, parties and the political agenda they have endorsed. The whole Church—together with its clergy and religious—needs to critically engage the government and its programs with the values of the Gospel and the Kingdom. They should not be afraid to criticize their previously endorsed politicians and parties and ask them to be accountable to the people. We are not a “fans club” but “citizens.” No political agenda is absolute. Only the Kingdom is.

Simple Processes of Discernment

If the priest or religious decides not to take a partisan position for one reason or another, he or she still needs to do the task of guiding the people with ethical criteria and simple processes of discernment accessible to the people, especially those among the grassroots (Circles of Political Discernment, *Gabay sa Pagboto*, Voters Education, Basic Ecclesial Communities reflection, etc.) with which to discern the political sphere. Gospel values and the Social Teaching of the Church (CST)—our distinct contribution to the workings of the socio-political process—can be helpful guides. These Christian principles also need dialogue with other voices in society—other faiths, other convictions, other ideologies. These principles of discernment shall be elaborated and applied in actual and concrete contexts by the Christian communities.

Principle of Non-Neutrality

Such a “non-partisan” discernment process above already threatens abusive political power, and is in danger of being tagged

as a “partisan” activity, as has always happened in the past until today. But despite such danger, no Christian can remain neutral in front of victimization and abuse of power. The principle of preserving the “unity of the community”—which also amounts to complacency—can never be used not to take a position. Neutrality surely takes the side of the oppressor. As prophet, the Christian shall always take the side of the victim. Pope Francis’ has a helpful reminder to neutral fence-sitters: “Robbers usually find secret allies in those who ‘pass by and look the other way’. There is a certain interplay between those who manipulate and cheat society, and those who, while claiming to be detached and impartial critics, live off that system and its benefits” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 75).

Sharing of One’s Personal Discernment

The priest and religious—as an individual citizen and as a discerning Christian—may also share with the faithful the product of his own discernment process; the actual criteria that he or she uses; and the concrete conclusions he or she has reached. In the process, s/he shows to the faithful that Gospel values are not abstract and detached realities. They have real consequences in our personal decisions and political options. In doing so, s/he must also be careful not to impose himself or herself to others but to encourage them to undergo the same political discernment themselves.

Listening to the *Sensus Fidei* of the Community

It might be helpful to the whole Christian community for the pastor and religious to lead the people into the same process of communal discernment without imposing the products of one’s own reflection. The whole community can discuss their basic criteria of choice and discern together as they apply these criteria in context. In the process, the clergy and religious help to form them how to communally listen to the “*sensus fidei*” towards responsible citizenship and mature political participation. In effect, clergy and religious help to put into practice Pope Francis’ dream of a listening, dialogical and synodal Church.

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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