



A Family Guide *to* Faithful Citizenship

In the statement *Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium*, the U.S. bishops remind us that, "In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation" (p. 8). The decisions we make as citizens about who leads us and what policies are enacted have important moral and ethical dimensions. The values of our faith should be our guide to public life.

The most important place to share and reflect on this message is in our families. While it's always a challenge to use a statement like *Faithful Citizenship*—so obviously written to an adult audience—within a family context, it's worth the challenge! Civic responsibility starts with the adults in the family.

Some Do's and Don'ts

Do show your children that you are concerned about the issues and questions raised in the statement. Express your opinions or beliefs about these issues, and share questions you have about issues or candidates. Look for opportunities to state where you stand on a certain issue or why you favor a certain candidate. Don't push your children to adopt your stance or to support your candidate. Don't preach or try to convert them.

Do ask for their opinions, questions, or concerns. Be genuine with your interest, and really listen to whatever they have to say. Don't worry if they don't agree with your position or even with the positions expressed in the statement. (Most of the issues addressed in the statement are very complex, even for adults.) The most important thing is that your children are aware and concerned and that they are thinking about the issues in moral terms.

Do show that you truly respect different points of view on the issues or candidates—that good people can disagree without rancor.

Do get involved yourself. If you believe strongly in an issue or candidate—and hopefully you do—take an active role. It's a cliché, but actions do speak much louder than words, especially to our children. Do look for activities that your children or your whole family could get involved in with you (e.g., pro-life marches, environmental cleanup projects, the design of posters for a campaign, leafleting, attendance at rallies, letter writing to elected officials). Don't coerce or shame them into involvement, but invite and encourage it, leaving them free to participate or not. Of course, promising a favorite treat to children at the end of an activity is an excellent means of encouragement! Social action and ice cream just seem to go together.

Do vote and let your children know that you see voting as a priority. Bring your children with you to the polls.

Do learn more about Catholic teaching on faithful citizenship at www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship.

Raising Family Awareness

Using *Faithful Citizenship* with your family involves thinking creatively, planning interesting family activities, and taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves. Here are some suggestions.

- **Use TV as a resource:** Look for shows that in some way address one of the issues mentioned in the statement. An example may be a news show or a documentary; it might also be a sitcom that is treating some current political or social topic. The key is to check out the show ahead of time and then to watch the show together. It's often effective if you just "wander in" and sit down while your children are viewing it. Or it may be necessary to decide ahead of time that you will watch a specific show together. However you do it, the most important thing

is to talk about the show's topic. As mentioned above, share your thoughts and listen to their thoughts without being judgmental. Sometimes the only talking you can do is at the TV, but that's okay. They'll hear it.

- **Question, question, question:** The bishops' statement and the brochure that summarizes it (*Called to Faithful Citizenship*) list "Questions for the Campaign." Rephrase these questions so that young people can relate to them. The following are examples: "I wonder how much money the person who sews the clothes we buy earns, or how much the farmer who grows the food we eat receives of the price we pay?" "Why are some people poor when so many people are rich?" "I wonder where we would go for health care if we didn't have insurance?" If the questions lead to further discussion, you or your children may need to do a little research.
- **Look at billboards and television advertisements** for various candidates, and critique the advertisements as a family. Do the candidates address any of the issues mentioned in the statement? How well?
- **Pick out a few short excerpts from the statement, rephrase them for children,** and post them on your refrigerator. Here are some possibilities: "The answer to violence is not more violence." "Every child should feel welcomed." "Make the needs of the poor our first priority." "Safe and affordable housing should be available for all." Try to find candidates or elected officials who support these positions by their policies and actions.
- As a dinner prayer in the days leading up to election day (usually the first Tuesday in November), **read one of the scriptural passages referenced in the statement.**
- **Contact your library to get good children's books that deal with the issues:** Some of the Dr. Seuss books are excellent

for this. Children's librarians are very helpful resource people.

- **Have a family night on "citizenship":** Choose one or two issues from the statement that are of particular interest to your family. For example, if you have an aging relative in a nursing home, you may want to pick health care or Medicare reform as your issue to discuss. If you know someone who has been a victim of crime, you might focus on handgun legislation. Make a list of how this issue does or could affect your family. Develop a family statement that summarizes your view on the issue. Write this statement in a letter you send to one of the candidates, inviting their comments. End the evening with "patriotic sundaes": vanilla ice cream topped with strawberry and blueberry syrup or with the berries, if available.
- **Identify some heroes**—people who have taken a stand on these issues—who your family could learn more about. César Chávez, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Gandhi are some well known examples of heroes, but you can probably find a number of local heroes as well. Again, your public library is a great resource, as is your diocesan social action office, peace and justice office, or pro-life office.

Resources

The Kid's Guide to Social Action, by Barbara Lewis (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Co., 1991). This guide contains many suggestions and resources for getting young people involved in social issues. Available by calling 800-735-7323.

Just Family Nights, edited by Susan Vogt (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1994). This resource contains sixty family night activities, including themes on justice/social action, the environment, global awareness, racism, media, and peacemaking. Available from the Institute for Peace and Justice, 314-533-4445.