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CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE

Social issues key in presidential race, church says

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By Bruce Nolan

Catholic voters considering how to cast their presidential ballots should judge candidates by their passion for building a safer and more humane world, especially for the poor and the weak, retired Washington, D.C., Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and others told an audience at Loyola University this week.

And while the Catholic church believes a candidate's stand on abortion is gravely important -- Archbishop Alfred Hughes has called it "foundational" -- it also urges its members to examine candidates' positions on other serious issues such as torture, war and contempt for the poor, McCarrick said.

With more than 60 million members, Catholics are the largest religious voting bloc in the country. But political scientists have long known there is no monolithic "Catholic vote." The church by long practice does not recommend a candidate.

Because they are so numerous and so widely distributed, Catholics collectively vote much like the country at large, preferring at various times Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and Al Gore.

A year before each presidential election, Catholic bishops publish a document that urges Catholics to educate themselves on the candidates, compare their positions to their church's traditional stands on social justice issues and then vote their consciences.

That said, the bishops caution that not all issues are "morally equivalent."

Certain "intrinsic evils," among them abortion and euthanasia, which the Catholic church regards as the intentional taking of human life, are "always wrong and not just one issue among many," according to this year's document, called "Faithful Citizenship."

McCarrick, who took part in a panel discussion at Loyola on Wednesday, called abortion "the gravest of the moral evils today" and the "most weighty thing" in the church's moral analysis of political issues.

At the same time, Catholic voters cannot use a candidate's opposition to abortion or similar evils "to justify indifference or inattentiveness" to other issues touching on human life and dignity, according to the document.

The document advises Catholics they are not aligned with their church if they vote for a candidate to show their support for "intrinsic evils" like abortion, euthanasia and embryonic stem cell research.

However, "a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may decide to vote for the candidate for other . . . truly grave moral reasons," according to the document.

Asked to elaborate, McCarrick said, "Someone may approach the whole question of abortion and weigh it with the whole question of war. Weigh it with the question of the

treatment of hostages. The treatment of captives, the treatment of prisoners. One might judge it against an unwillingness to help the poor. There's a whole series of things."

John Carr, a Loyola panelist from the U.S. bishops' national office, observed that neither major party presidential candidate embodies the full range of goals embraced by Catholic social teaching. Choosing one, he said, should amount to a balancing free of partisanship.

"We need to be political, but not partisan, to be neither chaplain to any party nor cheerleader for any candidate, but to challenge them all. We need to be principled, but not ideological," Carr said.

In fact, the names of John McCain and Barack Obama were rarely uttered in 90 minutes of conversation at Loyola involving McCarrick, Carr and two New Orleanians, Sister Jamie Phelps, a nun and theologian from Xavier University, and Loyola Law School Dean Brian Bromberger.

With the focus on issues and conscience over party and candidates, the approach was more muted than Archbishop Philip Hannan's famous public admonition to Catholics in 1996 that "no Catholic should vote for" President Clinton or U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, both supporters of abortion rights. Both won.

Hannan was retired at the time and did not represent the official voice of the church, which quickly restated its policy of not endorsing candidates.

Phelps, who acknowledged she has not yet decided on a candidate, said she is closely examining the Republican and Democratic party platforms.

In a dispiriting election that has left her "exhausted," Phelps said she is weighing the candidates, "keeping in mind my understanding of who Jesus was and what the church is supposed to be doing in terms of the continuing mission of Jesus."

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The document "Faithful Citizenship" is on the Internet at www.faithfulcitizenship.org and visit www.CatholicDemocrats.org