

# CHURCH AND STATE

A Social Document from the  
Augustana Lutheran Church



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

## **A Series of Statements of the Augustana Lutheran Church, 1952, 1957, 1960**

1952 Minutes, p. 379

In the light of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States we continue to protest every attempt to give preference to any particular church or group of churches by our Government, such as an appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican or the use of public funds for parochial schools.

1957 Minutes, p. 199

Since the Lutheran Church throughout its history has considered the Christian office of confession as sacred and based on Scriptural foundation, the Augustana Lutheran Church supports the position of its pastors that they shall not be compelled to disclose in court information given them in the secrecy of the confessional office.

1960: Minutes, p. 255

The following memorandum has been prepared at the request of the Commission. It contains a number of reflections on the problems of religious affiliation and the presidency, and incorporates a few conclusions for possible action by the Commission.

The problem to which this memorandum is directed necessarily raises a fundamental question which should be discussed initially, namely, the basis upon which the Church should feel obliged to make general pronouncements. The reason for this question being asked here is that the subject to be discussed may appear to be a matter of practical politics and, though the Church has taken stands in reference to specific issues in social life, it has — perhaps rightly — not entered the realm of political activity. To determine whether the problem of religious affiliation and the presidency is an issue upon which the Church should speak requires, then, some general statement of the basis for its making of pronouncements.

Without attempting to be complete on this point, this memorandum notes that there are three bases upon which general pronouncements are and should be made. These are:

to protect and promote Christian conscience,

to extend the knowledge and application of right and justice, and

to warn against possible dangers, political or otherwise, to the life and mission of the Church.

Beyond these, such as entering the domain of resolving particular economic problems or making specific judgments on the merits of particular candidates for political office, the Church has not gone. Nor is it proposed to go beyond these bases in this memorandum — even though it is proposed to raise the question of religion and political office.

There is further reason for frank discussion of this question which may be briefly touched upon. It is that, in the spirit of goodwill, it is better to discuss the problems of tolerance and of religion and politics in an open and frank way, and by an appeal to principle, than by innuendo and whisper. This indeed seems to be a belief of many discussants of these issues, regardless of the differences of opinion they may have on conclusions.

The relation of political office — and especially the Presidency, for reasons to be examined below — and religious and ideological beliefs is a difficult problem for democratic theory and practice. Ideals of freedom, tolerance, and conscience come quickly into seeming conflict with demands for security, unity, and even loyalty. Agreement of Americans seems easy on the legal principle expressed in the Constitution that no religious requirement shall be made upon the office of President.

Yet the problems of tolerance are broader than mere law, and extend to the vote — and a citizen's consideration of his vote — as well as to other areas of experience. In terms of practical affairs, Americans have sought to resolve at least some of these problems through the extension of civil rights as well as by acknowledging certain principles such as self-determination (at least in some areas of conduct), individual conscience, and the neutrality of government with respect to certain issues such as religion and intellectual inquiry. "What a man does on Sunday is his private affair" is certainly part of the meaning of tolerance and political democracy; and it may be pointed out that the social pluralism which these observations summarize finds an important impetus in the Protestant principle of conscience.

Yet it remains true that the essential meaning of tolerance slips away as one attempts to generalize from these instances, or to apply them to the vote. Surely tolerance does not mean, on the one hand, that the general religious and ideological beliefs of a candidate are not to be considered at all; nor, on the other does it mean that one should judge a candidate simply and solely in terms of his ideology without reference to the man or his stands on issues. Tolerance, as far as this term applies to political considerations, lies somewhere between the extremes of a flabbiness which admits all ideologies without consideration and of a dogmatism which so catalogues candidates as to rule out consideration of them as individuals.

Not only in terms of this observation, but also because of the nature of practical politics, it is necessary to see the problem of tolerance as a complex one. Many if not most political problems are religiously and ideologically neutral; that is, there is no specific and direct relationship between the general religious convictions and the resolution of political issues. Resolutions of conflict in the allocation of funds and problems of aid such as to education are but two illustrations where concrete issues are not determined by religious positions. To put it otherwise, there is no "Catholic position" on sending a representative to the Vatican, nor a Protestant position on the control of alcohol, nor even indeed a Socialist or Communist position with reference to the amount of federal funds for highways that, say, Montana should get. This neutrality of many political issues is indeed the reason for the possibility of political cooperation among people of radically different persuasions.

But should one conclude, therefore, that ideologies have no bearing on political activity? Such a conclusion has indeed been drawn by some, but it seems overly strong. Religions and ideologies appear to have at least two relations to political activity:

they set the general framework within which political decisions are made and, sometimes, toward which they should be directed, and

they function negatively in the sense that certain possibilities of action are excluded from the area of approval.

An illustration of the first would be the socialist desire to move toward government ownership of the means of production; an illustration of the second would be the Roman Catholic condemnation of the use of public funds for the dissemination of birth control information where desired. It cannot therefore be admitted, it seems, that ideologies which individuals hold have no bearing on practical issues; and it therefore also, it seems, cannot be admitted that ideological beliefs are of no concern to the voter.

There are, however, two further considerations which still further complicate the issues here. The first concerns the institutional arrangements accepted by an individual which are designed to protect and promote ideological interests. Some arrangements are such as to permit, even encourage, individual response to belief and individual interpretation of the implications of belief, and thus, institutionally, to exercise little or no discipline to enforce conformity. Nor indeed have these institutions any special means for such enforcement. At the opposite extreme, of course, are institutions which not only desire uniformity of belief, at least on essentials, but which also possess means to promote it. To illustrate: A Quaker could suffer no more reprisals from his co-believers for participation in war than their criticisms; the Roman Catholic, however, who promoted the principle of therapeutic abortion would be subject not only to pressures of opinion but from institutional controls as well.

The second additional consideration concerns the individual's response to the institutional pressures for conformity. There is, of course, variation in individual response to such pressures even within highly institutionalized religions. This is especially the case with issues called political above: there is no predicting how individual members stand on concrete issues, and there is indeed usually a variety of opinions on them. It is less true with respect to the general ideological position of a person, for obviously, voluntary membership in a religious group can only mean an acceptance of the beliefs and principles which make the group to be what it is.

Thus, considerations which voters must make as they select among candidates seem to be many fold: their positions on the concrete issues of politics, the ideology which they acknowledge, the relation of the ideology to political issues, the possible institutional pressures for conformity to the peculiar interests of that institution, and the nature of the response by the candidate to those pressures. To consider such questions, to arrive at thoughtful conclusions about them, and to vote in the light of such considerations is not only infinitely removed from intolerance and bigotry, but indeed is the precise duty of the responsible citizen.

Democracy permits, or should permit, the broadest possible range of belief and practice; but there is no obligation on the part of the voter to sanction them. In the treatment of individuals, tolerance rather means access to government, equal treatment under law, the right to be heard and rights generally, are to be denied to no one on an arbitrary basis. But tolerance is not a principle that necessarily applied to all areas of experience: it does not apply, for example, in the realms of science, justice, and truth. For, though persons and their beliefs must always be respected, it does not follow that ignorance, injustice or error — considered in themselves — should be tolerated. Nor, in the sense of meaning no consideration of ideological belief and affiliation, does it have meaning with reference to the vote.

These brief considerations are preparatory to a consideration of a possible choice facing the nation to elect a Roman Catholic president. It is obvious from the above discussion that, as many people have observed, a Roman Catholic should not as such be legally barred from the presidency, and that the effort to do so would infringe on fundamental American principles. This indeed should be generalized: no person, Marxist or socialist, Mormon or Roman Catholic, should on the ground of belief be barred from public office. It is equally obvious, however, that citizens and groups should inquire about a candidate's beliefs and affiliations, including his religion; and that although beliefs and affiliations should not automatically disqualify anyone, they together with an estimate of pressures upon and responses of candidates are among the crucial grounds of decision which voters ought to consider.

The church to which the Roman Catholic belongs, unlike nearly all other religious institutions in Western culture, is believed by him to be the extension of the Incarnation in history, a visible body hierarchically organized which speaks with divine authority on questions of faith and morality. In his church, the divine and the historical

are identified — the basis, by the way, of the Protestant charge of "Catholic heresy," for this identification of the visible and invisible church removes the church from divine judgment. Unlike the Protestant, therefore, who appropriates any pronouncement of his church)-the visible church—in the light of his own conscience, the Roman Catholic can assert no broad right of conscientious testing except under threat of very grave sin in the eyes of his church. Obedience to church authority is sanctioned by a number of institutional means, at the extreme of which is of course excommunication. The church, viewing itself as supernatural, seeks to enclose the whole of the natural world, including the state, within its fold and to place it in hierarchical relation to the divine. The areas of its authority are faith and morals; but it defines these areas itself and thus, from an outside perspective, it has actually (though in the name of faith or morals) entered the realms of economics and politics as well. So, for example, it has condemned certain forms of socialism and it — or at least the hierarchy — has campaigned for or against a number of political issues such as, for example, its campaign against child-labor laws in the 1930's. That in the exercise of its authority in "faith and morals" the church becomes a political power hardly needs documentation: it is clear from history, it has been obvious in Latin America in the last decades, and, while the form of political pressure by the hierarchy in America has been different from that in many other countries — namely, informal arrangements through politicians and groups in the community rather than concordats or treaties — it is apparent in parts of America. At times this political power has been utilized for ends of which Americans would generally approve, as in the ousting of Peron in Argentina; at other times, however, the use of the power has been more doubtful, as in the identification of democratic forces in Spain with Communism and the subsequent snuffing out of the democratic impulse there. The reality indicated by these illustrations is the church as a political power.

Membership in the church means above all submission to this divine institution and its authority, and to the promotion of its ends and interest — of the "Catholic conscience," as it has been called. This promotion includes, it should be noted, not only the right to teach and persuade, but also the duty to extend that conscience throughout the community, even, if necessary, by the incorporation of Roman Catholic ethics in law. These facts alone make irrelevant comparisons with the stands or positions taken by other groups such as the Quakers on war or the Methodists on alcohol: such stands are taken by very fallible groups, they are not binding in conscience, they are not made by a group for whom submission to authority is the essence of religion, and they are not backed by an array of institutional sanctions. It may also be observed by way of illustration that the birth control laws in Massachusetts and Connecticut, though originally passed by non-Roman Catholic legislatures, remain as laws in these states only by a blunt reassertion of Roman Catholic power enforcing the Catholic conscience in these areas. Other parts of the world provide further illustrations of the use of political power to promote the Catholic conscience against non-Roman Catholic activity; and while it is true that American Catholicism has its unique aspects and has made its own adjustments to American society, there is little ground in institutional arrangements to relieve suspicion that the

Roman Church would use political power to prevent expression of the Protestant conscience.

Even so, however, there is still a question of the degree of submission and the nature of the response by an individual Roman Catholic even to the influence of his church. This depends on the circumstances, the man, and the power of his church among the electorate. Nothing is predictable with certainty here, but the fact remains that the Roman Church makes a claim to exercise authority over its members, even in the political sphere, and that it may choose to exercise that claim over a Roman Catholic president in the promotion of its ends.

What then are the special problems of a Roman Catholic candidate for the non-Catholic voter? They do not, first of all, lie immediately in the area of concrete political issues. No "dangers" to America, as some have supposed, could occur in this area: and indeed the religious or ideological beliefs of a president make little difference here. The important concern is not the source but the content of specific political policies. This indeed is the area in which people of all persuasions have worked together to resolve problems, and Roman Catholics have been among them in the forefront. (This participation by itself does not, however, resolve ideological conflicts; that Roman Catholics have been good citizens, have fought and died in wars, etc., does not mean that there may not be ideological limitations binding a Roman Catholic president of which many Americans could not approve.)

Yet even this line between politics and ideology must not be drawn too sharply. Not only are there relations between them as pointed out above — viz., placing limits around political choices—but the unique role of the American President complicates the issue. As this is sometimes put, the President both rules and reigns. With regard to the explicit powers by which the President rules, the above discussion has pointed out that a Roman Catholic president would make little difference to our traditional democratic society. Doctrinal obligations would be largely irrelevant to the discharge of presidential duties. In some of his other powers such as his appointment power, there is some question concerning the influence of Roman Catholicism on American life. In his capacity of reigning, however, the influence of the Roman Catholic president, both as he may desire it or as it may operate without his conscious intent, may be more pervasive. The traditional attendance at public functions, regardless of religious auspices or connections, could well be curtailed; the religious activities of a Roman Catholic president would symbolize the subservience of the chief of state to a quasi-government if not an actual government — for the President there is no private Sunday; and in his influencing of public opinion he could work for the promotion of the Catholic conscience rather than for the political conditions in which private conscience might be best protected and supported. With other political offices in the nation such as the Congress, these issues are not so difficult or intertwined — though they are not wholly absent: if one Congressman, for example, refuses to attend a chapel dedication, there is always another; but ideological beliefs and affiliations become uniquely important with reference to two federal positions, the presidency and the Supreme Court.

On specific issues as well, there are questions to be asked of Roman Catholic candidates. Among them are questions of the long-term relations between church and state, funds for private and public education, matters of conscience (of which birth control is a small, though important example,) the promotion of Roman Catholic institutional ends, and the consequent position of non-Catholic institutions. There are also a number of social practices which democracy rightfully allows, but which no voter is required to sanction. These include such practices as the curtailment of physician's activities in Roman Catholic hospitals over disagreements in conscience concerning Roman Catholic ethics, the use of the boycott to enforce a Roman Catholic stand on a community issue, and campaigning for certain tax funds for Roman Catholic purposes. It is important to repeat that democratic government recognizes the right of groups to do these things, but it also recognizes the right of the voter to disapprove of them and of the candidate who, by his membership in a voluntary group which promotes them, either accepts such practices or places himself under special pressures to approve of them. It may be noted here that, as even Roman Catholics themselves admit, it is sometimes difficult to determine an "official Catholic stand" even on some of these general issues, and it is also true that individual Catholics have sharply criticized even the highest members of hierarchy for particular opinions. Yet there are reasons for believing that, apart from such individual protests, there are "nearly official" stands behind which lies the bulk of the power of the church. (Another complicating factor, for the Roman Catholic candidate is, strangely perhaps, the lack of an anti-clerical movement among American Roman Catholics; for he would have no body of opinion among his church to which to appeal should he attempt to disagree with a clerical stand.) Among such stands would be, for example, those taken by the American bishops.

Would, it may be asked, a Roman Catholic president be free from institutional pressures, direct or indirect, to bring his reigning and ruling into conformity with these statements which have been given with reference to such issues as funds for private education, the teaching and social mission of the church, and the interpretation by the Supreme Court of the First Amendment? Of course, to say that one will defend the Constitution is hardly an answer: the Constitution is subject to change as well as interpretation. Roman Catholic arguments about the First Amendment should give pause here. To be sure, the answer to this question — like that to all questions in the realm of politics — cannot be given with certainty; yet among the factors which would tend toward a negative answer are the sanctions within the Roman Catholic Church itself, the historical facts indicating the political power of the church, and the political obligations of a Roman Catholic president who was elected with a sizable per cent of his majority made up of the Catholic vote.

This report has attempted to present within brief compass some of the issues and considerations as well as to indicate possible areas of concern for the Church with reference to a Roman Catholic presidential candidate. This concern is centered especially around the Roman Church's claims to exercise political control over its children for the sake of its own ends. There is no basis either in history or present institutional arrangements which leads in a positive way to the belief, that, at the

level of ideology, the Roman Church is not undemocratic in its political outlook nor that it would not take a variety of means to achieve the end of a Roman Catholic nation. Individual Roman Catholic writers and thinkers, to be sure, have sought to provide a rationale for their church's embrace with democracy: as yet, however, no institutional changes are apparent to indicate that these choices have been effective — if indeed such changes were possible to their church at all. For the present, it seems, judgments about the Roman Church's relation to democracy and American life in general must be based not on such individual statements but on the problem of power and institutions as they exist on the social level.

In the light of the above considerations, this report notes and recommends the following points:

That ideological beliefs and affiliations are valid grounds for judging candidates for public office, and that it is a misuse of the concept of intolerance to exclude them for consideration.

That the Roman Church, because of its unique institutional claims, poses special problems in relation to the questions of religion and public office.

That there are grounds for reasonable doubt that a Roman Catholic president would be free of institutional control and from desires to promote in special ways the ends of the Roman Church.

That in turn this doubt raises the question of a potential threat to the work of the Church, the conscience of its members, and the traditional ideals and sense of justice of American society.

That the Church take a stand cautioning its members to give special consideration to these problems and to the use of their voting privilege should a Roman Catholic candidate be nominated for President.

RESOLVED, that:

Whereas, the ideological beliefs and affiliations or the lack of them are, among other criteria~~ valid grounds for judging the fitness of candidates for public office;

And whereas, it is a misuse of the concept of tolerance to exclude such criteria from consideration;

The Church remind its members of their individual responsibilities as voting citizens and urge a conscientious and prayerful study of these factors before voting for any candidate for public office.



