

Why doesn't the Catholic Church form its own political party?



Germany. The German party, which has Catholic and Protestant wings, is the most robust Christian Democratic Party today. Indeed, it currently leads the government. In other European countries, these parties are now rather small and some have merged with secular parties.

After World War II, Christian Democrats won the support of most Catholic voters in Europe. However, they also contributed unwittingly to the secularization of Europe. How so? Because Catholics who gravitated toward other parties came to believe incorrectly that a vote for non-Christian Democrats excluded them from the Church. As a result, much of the industrial working class, especially French and Italian men, left the Church and allied themselves with the Communists, who seemed to represent their interests. It is no accident that powerful Communist parties existed only in the most Catholic countries of Western Europe.

A second unfortunate trend emerged: the “official” Catholic parties gradually diluted their Catholic identity and, in some cases, advocated or accepted programs and policies not in conformity with Catholic teaching. This happened because Christian Democrats often governed in partnership with secular parties. The desire to acquire and keep political power often trumped devotion to Catholic principles. Moreover, when the Church and political party became too closely intertwined, the Church suffered whenever the popularity of the Christian Democrats declined.

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Dear **Father Kerper:** A big problem with politics today is that Catholics don't stick together in the voting booth. Why don't Catholics and other Christians form their own political party or at least some kind of caucus? That way we would know who espouses Catholic positions and who doesn't. The unity would be very powerful!

Your comments and question immediately reminded me of an ancient Christian text called *The Letter to Diognetus*. Writing around 125 A.D., the anonymous author declared: “Christians inhabit the world, but they are not part of it.” On one hand, Catholics operate within the established political system, following its rules and cooperating with friends and foes alike. On the other hand, Catholics must always keep their distance from any organized movement or ideology because these,

even the best, never embody the fullness of Catholic moral teaching. To put it another way, Catholics are always simultaneously “within” and “beyond” the political realm.

As to forming a Catholic party, Catholics have already tried that strategy. In the late 19th century, Catholics in Europe and later in Latin America established many parties and labor unions that called themselves “Christian Democratic.” These movements flourished, at least for a time, in Italy, Holland, Belgium, and

advance the totality of Catholic teaching, which always goes “beyond” the limits of political discourse.

We must also remember that the Church has authority to teach definitively about moral principles, not specific policy choices. Catholics must agree about the fundamentals, especially the right to life, the dignity of the human person, basic justice, religious liberty, and the sanctity of conscience.

However, Catholics may have very different views about how to apply moral principles to specific policies, such as how to reform health care and immigration in the United States. In light of the broad range of morally acceptable choices, I hope you can understand why a Catholic party or even caucus would not be a good idea.

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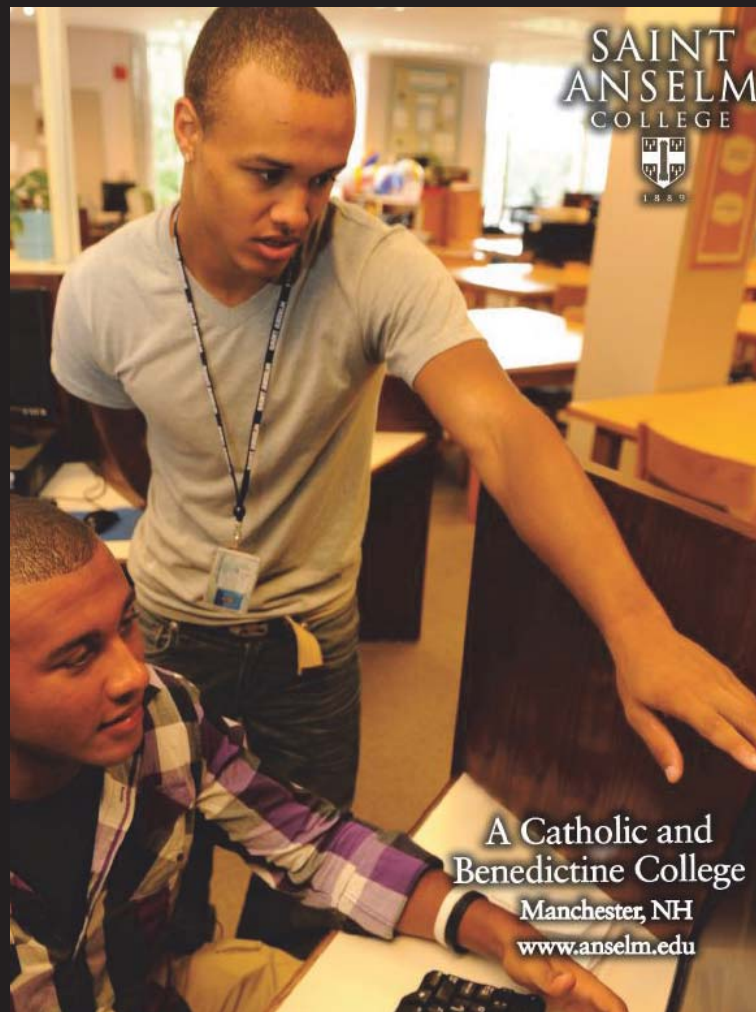
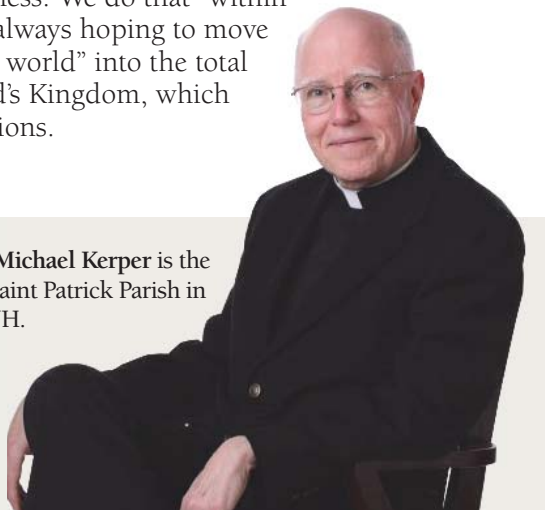
Of course, this is not to say that all political parties and platforms are compatible with Catholic belief. Clearly they are not. Today, in the United States and Europe, almost every party espouses some positions that coincide perfectly with Catholic teaching. But the opposite is true as well: every party advances something that Catholics will find objectionable.

What is one to do?

First off, we must still participate. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a surprising explanation of how baptized Catholics should exercise Christ’s “kingly office,” which means sharing in governance of the world. It urges Catholics to live “a holy life [and] overcome the reign of sin in themselves.” (CCC 908) It then quotes Saint Ambrose: “That man is rightly called a king who makes his own body an obedient subject.”

To put it another way, the only effective strategy to advance the common good is for Catholics to commit themselves to “self-government,” which means growing in holiness and moral goodness. We do that “within the world,” always hoping to move “beyond the world” into the total unity of God’s Kingdom, which has no divisions.

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