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The Involvement of Clerics in Politics

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Abstract
The complex interplay between the Church and the state raises questions about the role of clergy in public life, particularly in societies marked by corruption, inequality, and human rights abuses. Given these challenges, it is essential to revisit the norms governing clerical involvement in politics. This study examines the involvement of Catholic clergy in politics, focusing on the permissions and restrictions under Canon law. It analyzes canons 285 §3 and 287, exploring whether clerics can hold public offices, run for elective positions, or assume legislative, juridical, and executive roles. The paper interprets the legislation, makes inferences, and draws conclusions on the discussion, aiming to clarify the conditions under which Catholic clergy can legally engage in public offices.

Keywords: Clerics, politics, Canon law, public offices, clergy involvement

Introduction

The document of the Vatican II Council, on the Church in the Modern World prescribes:

> Let those who are suited to it, or can become so, prepare themselves for the difficult but most honourable art of politics. Let them work to exercise this art without thought of personal convenience and without benefit of bribery. Prudently and honourably let them fight against injustice and oppression, the arbitrary rule of one person or one party, and lack of tolerance. Let them devote themselves to the welfare of all sincerely and fairly, indeed with charity and political courage (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 75).

Clerics by their ordination are "stewards of the mysteries of God in the service of His people" (Can. 276 §1; cf. 1Cor. 4:1). They are bound to carry out the pastoral ministry for which they are ordained.

Among the issues which came up during the preparatory periods to Second Vatican Council, was a firm recommendation that the Church give better direction to clerics in the matter of political activity. The communication of the Most Reverend P. D. Joseph Khantzian, ordinary of the Greek Armenian Church, states as follows:

> However, it is not rare to see some ecclesiastics who are not contented to carry out their civic duties as is demanded. They are not satisfied through words and discourses, to fight a political party, the enemy of the Catholic doctrine, neither are they satisfied with possessing their own political idea, but they seek to assume at times some duties in the political camp, presenting themselves as candidates in various civil elections. … Such priest, not being always able to satisfy everyone, will have against himself some men who speak evil of him and who would hate him and indirectly hate the Clergy in general, especially when these dissatisfied are enemies of the Catholic Clergy (*Acta et documenta concilio oecumenico Vatican II apparando*, p. 17).

Our society today, with a distressing gap between the affluent rich and the indigent poor, and a crippling rate of corruption in every sector, demands indispensably, a socio-political and economic transformation from its apparent depressing status. There is a call to uphold the universal, inviolable and inalienable rights of human beings in our society, trampled underfoot by nonchalant and self-seeking administrations. The situation is such that, at times, clerics on account of the high level of corruption in politics and public services in general, suppose that assuming political offices would lead to the desired transformation of the sectors.

Questions abound in this regard: In line with canons 285 §3 and 287, are clerics permitted to share in public offices or are these offices alien to their clerical status? Are they permitted to run for elective gubernatorial positions and to take up public legislative, juridical and executive offices in the society? Under what conditions can the Catholic clergy legally assume public offices? The task we set out to attempt shall simply state the existent prescriptions of Canon law; attempt an interpretation of the legislation, make inferences from the interpretation, in order to draw a conclusion on the discussion.

The Clerical Status

Various Councils of the Church had stated that in various ways, judging on the times and circumstances, it was not lawful for clerics to assume secular responsibilities. Harsh penalties were even imposed on those who breached this law; by decrees those who held certain secular offices were to resign the office or be deposed from them, or to lose their priestly functions (cf. Navarro, 2008, 111). Besides, lay persons who anointed such clerics to offices of civil responsibility were to be excommunicated. Major past ecclesiastical documents including the 1917 Code of Canon Law have numerous references to these prohibitions against all unnecessary involvement in secular offices according to the time and the circumstances. The

term “secular pursuits” covers all sorts of secular occupations, and secular and civil offices (Cf. Schroeder, 1941, p. 152-153).

Can. 285 §3 *CIC* 1983 explicitly stipulates: “Clerics are forbidden to assume public offices which entail a participation in the exercise of civil power.” The present canon has a precedent which is can. 139 §1 *CIC* 1917 which states: They (Clerics) should avoid those things that, while not indecent, are still alien to the clerical state. As such, this canon held that clerics should avoid those things which, though not unbecoming, were foreign to the state of the cleric. The term “ea” is described as whatever was unbecoming, inappropriate or foreign to the status of the cleric such as activities, pursuits or affairs which are merely temporal (cf. Soule, 1977). A pertinent question would be to ask who comprises the clerics in the text of the canon?

Can. 108 *CIC* 1917, described clerics as those who had received first tonsure. The first paragraph of this canon reads as follows: “Those who are taken into divine ministries at least by the reception of first tonsure are called clerics”, while the third paragraph of the canon of the old Code states: “By divine institution, the sacred hierarchy in respect of Orders consists of Bishops, priests, and ministers; by reason of jurisdiction, [it consists of] the supreme pontificate and the subordinate episcopate; by institution of the Church other grades can also be added”.

On the other hand, Vatican II teaches that sacred ministers in the Church are by divine institution called clerics, and they belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church. As such, the nature of the ordained state is clerical (Cf. *Lumen gentium* 21, 22, 28). Since the promulgation of the motu proprio *Ministeria quaedam* in 1972 Pope Paul VI, clerics are now defined as those ordained, that is, deacons, priests and bishops (Paul VI, 1972). Can. 266 §1 *CIC* 1983 clearly prescribes that: “By the reception of the deaconate a person becomes a cleric, and is incardinated in the particular Church or personal Prelature for whose service he is ordained.”

Proper Mission of Clerics according to the Magisterium

Gaudium et Spes underlines the fact that it is within the competence of the Church to pass moral judgements on political matters, especially when fundamental human rights and the salvation of souls are at stake. The document states that: the Church and the political community in their various fields are autonomous and independent of each other. However, both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the human person. The Church, on her own part should contribute to the promotion of justice and charity within the among the peoples and between nations. Through her preaching of the Gospel and by the light of her doctrine and of Christian witnessing, the Church respects and fosters the political freedom and responsibility of citizens. Thus, at all times and in all places, the Church is expected 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. The Church therefore should make use of those means which are in accord with the Gospel and which correspond to the

general good according to the diversity of times and circumstances to achieve this aim (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 76).

More precisely, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* on the sacerdotal ministry calls on all priests who have been endowed with the spiritual power "for the building up of the Church" and while exercising the office of Christ, the Shepherd and Head, to "gather the family of God together as a brotherhood enlivened by one spirit". (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 6).

The proper mission of the cleric is the sacred ministry. Clerics are by the power of the sacrament of Holy Orders, consecrated to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful and to celebrate divine worship, announcing the divine word to all. They exercise their sacred function especially in the Eucharistic worship or the celebration of the Mass by which they act in the person of Christ. *Lumen gentium* 31 carefully distinguished the role of the clergy from that of the laity. It states: "To be secular is the special characteristic of the laity. Although those in holy orders may sometimes be engaged in secular activities, or even practice a secular profession, yet by reason of their particular vocation they are principally and expressly ordained to the sacred ministry ... It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will." Thus, the clerical office which carries with it the full care of souls is strictly reserved only to the ordained.

In so far as the clergy are ministers of the Church, their engagement in politics could lead to ambivalence regarding the religious mission of the Church. The 1971 World Synod of Catholic Bishops on the "Ministerial Priesthood - *Ultimis temporibus*", explained as follows: "Since political options are by nature contingent and never in an entirely adequate and perennial way interpret the Gospel, the priest, who is the witness of things to come, must keep a certain distance from any political office or involvement." Whereas the values of the gospel are absolute and independent of culture, politics is rooted in the concrete circumstances of the here and now. "In order that he may remain a valid sign of unity and be able to preach the Gospel in its entirety," the priest must be careful "lest his opinion appear to Christians to be the only legitimate one or become a cause of discord among the faithful" (O'Connor, 1975, 356). The Synod further affirmed that as a general rule "the priestly ministry ought to be a full-time occupation. Sharing in men's secular activities is by no means to be considered the principal aim nor can such participation suffice to give expression to the specific responsibility of priests. In concrete circumstances it is up to the bishop with his *presbyterium* and, if necessary, in consultation with the Episcopal conference to determine whether secular activity is in accord with the priestly ministry" (O'Connor, 1975, 369).

Public Offices Forbidden to Clerics

Can. 139 *CIC* 1917 enumerated such professions as senators or *deputies*, offices which involve the exercise of lay jurisdiction or administration (for instance, judge, mayor, governor, prefect of a province, president of a republic or similar offices), etc, that, though not considered debasing, were hardly congruent with the spiritual mission of the priestly ministry. Ordinarily,

public office is understood as a position of duty, trust or authority, especially in public service. The canon forbade clerics from holding these activities not because they were, in themselves, unbecoming or unreasonable, but rather, because of the particular dignity of the clerical state, and because of the singular pursuits that might be judged to be dangerous, unsuitable or alien for good reason (Wernz-Vidal, 1943, p. 165), for the sake of protecting ecclesiastical institutions from liability and due to the complex relationship between religion and politics (cf. Bahri et al., 2024). Moreover, in the 1917 Code it was not permitted for clerics to engage in worldly affairs or cares which diverted them from the sacred ministry (Udalricus, 1956, 197). The laws of dispensation were applied in certain cases (cf. cann. 80-86 *CIC* 1917), for grave reasons and for the good of the Church and her faithful. The 1917 Code restricted power to dispense to the legislator, to his successor and to his superior, as well as to a person to whom they had given the faculty of dispensing (cf. can. 80 *CIC* 1917). The limits of competence of one given the faculty were determined by the law and by any detailed directives peculiar to an individual case, if they were given (Abbo-Hannon, 1960, p. 113). Without an apostolic indult, for example, clerics were not to practice medicine or surgery. Hence, bishops might prohibit activities according to the customs of the people (cf. Wernz-Vidal, 168).

The 1983 Code on the other hand, in paragraph two of can. 285 states a general principle without any specifics, while making some specifications in paragraphs three and four of the canon. Paragraph two notes the activities foreign to Clerics stating: "Clerics are to avoid those things which, although not unbecoming, are nevertheless foreign to the clerical state". Besides activities that are incompatible with the dignity of the clerical state, there are occupations that are foreign to it, but some are not so irreconcilable that they can never be undertaken. Again, the time, circumstances and local sensibilities must be considered in determining what activity is foreign to the clerical state as well as in judging what is wholly unbecoming. Unlike in the former Code, the present dispensation is silent about the clergy practicing medicine and surgery.

Can. 285 §3 *CIC* 1983 rules definitively that "clerics are forbidden to hold public offices that call for the exercise of civil power." The force of *officia publica assumere vetantur* in paragraph three of can. 285 is restrictive. The 1981 *Relatio* on the revision of the Code interpreted "civil power" to include legislative, administrative, and judicial authority. The canon is concerned with the exercise of *public authority*. The prohibition extends beyond serving as governor, mayor, judge, senator, and the like, to serving on zoning boards, school boards, transportation commissions, and similar bodies (Provost, 1985, p. 87). However, merely advisory positions would not be banned. The law speaks of "assuming" office, which includes both election and appointment to office. Members of religious institutes (can. 672) and of societies of apostolic life (can. 739) are also bound by this canon.

Exceptions to the Norm

The possibility of exceptions to the prohibition is not raised in can. 285 §3 *CIC* 1983. In the 1977 draft (can. 146, §2) there was a provision for the local ordinary to give permission for a

cleric to hold such office (which involve the exercise of lay jurisdiction), but this provision was ultimately eliminated. Furthermore, the prohibition was strengthened in the final version by the use of the term *vetantur* instead of the subjunctive verb *ne assumant*. Can. 1042 §2 *CIC* 1983 makes the holding of a public office an impediment to ordination until the office is relinquished and an account rendered according to the civil law.

The question arises, therefore, whether or not the diocesan bishop may dispense from the law forbidding clerics to hold public office. As restrictive as the formulation of the prohibitions in can. 285 *CIC* 1983 at first appears, the law itself provides two major possibilities allowing for public offices and for certain activities to be accessible to clerics, namely, dispensation and the judgment of the competent authority. According to canon 87 §1 the bishop may dispense from universal disciplinary laws as often as he judges it helpful for the spiritual good or purpose of the faithful in a particular case, and when the matter has not been reserved to the Apostolic See. The *motu proprio De episcoporum muneribus* of Paul VI (1966) specifically reserved to the Holy See any dispensation permitting clerics "to assume public offices which involve the exercise of lay jurisdiction or administration" (cf. Bouscaren-O'Connor, 1969, p. 398), but this reservation is not found in the present code (cf. Wrenn, 1993, 22). However, John Paul II's opposition to priests and religious serving in public office would urge a bishop to use great caution in evaluating the "just and reasonable cause" required for a dispensation (can. 90 *CIC* 1983) (John Paul II, 1980, 10).

It appears that the reason for this complexity lies in the diversity between the two roles or vocations: the spiritual and the temporal. While Clerics are well formed and prepared for the spiritual ministry, they may not be so versed in the secular politics and intricacies according to the secular mentality. For instance, can. 285 §3 *CIC* 1983 is not against running for political elections as such, like in the case of Catholic School Boards, etc, but it is against operating under the banner of one political party as distinct from others. Moreover, if the cleric wins in the political race for the public office, he may not assume that office without a dispensation from his Ordinary.

Moreover, violation of the norm in can. 285 §3 *CIC* 1983 may give rise to penal sanctions through the singular precept, and also whenever it is believed, according to can. 1399, that the specific gravity of the offence requires it and that scandals need to be prevented or repaired (De Otaduy, 2004, 380).

The church upholds the understanding that the mission of the cleric should be concerned primarily with spiritual matters and the salvation of souls. The dignity of the clerical state and the purpose of the priestly vocation should not be jeopardised on any pretext. Moreover, there could be the fear that a portion of the liberty and discipline of the church would be lost for the fact that a cleric would necessarily become dependent upon those from whom he received temporal power. In addition, the good name of the church and the ever-present possibility of liability against church property were always a consideration in this matter (Brunini, 1932, p. 5).

Sanctions for Defection from the Norm

Can. 287 §2 *CIC* 1983 reads as follows: "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".

The canon places first a positive, then a negative obligation on clerics. The first paragraph of the canon notes that clerics are habitually to foster peace among all people, and not just any kind of peace, but that which is founded on justice. That is, they are required to do everything possible in defence of the rights of the human person when it deals with the demands of natural or positive justice. However, the correct fulfillment of this obligation does not presuppose an involvement in the affairs of the earthly city," because the mission Christ gave to the church had to do with the religious order. Nevertheless, the church by virtue of the gospel has been entrusted with proclaiming the rights of the people (Bouscaren-O'Connor, 1969).

It is notable that the commitment of the cleric within the Christian community comes from his relationship to the bishop (cf. canon 273) who is the principle and foundation and the visible sign of unity in the particular Church. Therefore, the cleric should never be in the service of a certain ideology against another, but, rather, should be at the service of the body of Christ (cf. *Lumen gentium* 23; *Presbyterorum ordinis* 6; *Guadium et spes* 76). The above canon singles out as a general norm a prohibition against active participation in political parties, and, in a more specific provision, against the direction (*in regendis*) of labor unions. During the preparatory stage of the Code, it appears that at least one consultor wished this paragraph to read: *in regendis factionibus* as well as *in regendis consociationibus syndicalibus* (*Communicationes* 14, 1982, p. 83). This proposal was not accepted because it would seem that the prohibition would be limited only to leadership in political parties. This would leave open the possibility that clerics would be allowed to participate in political matters. There was strong objection to this because to take part in any way in a party could provide propaganda for a particular faction and could be a cause of division in the Christian community, while the cleric as minister of Christ should be a sign and element of unity for all the faithful.

It is clear, then that the prohibition includes more than leadership. However, it seems possible that "active participation" and "direction of labour unions" do not include affiliation or membership in a party or a union because the norm speaks expressly of taking an "active part." Generally speaking, it would seem that being a member of a group or being affiliated with a group would not necessarily require a person to be actively engaged. Provost, however, thinks that an "active role" in a political party could conceivably include membership, but that this would depend upon local political circumstances (Provost, 1985, 23).

Permanent Deacons

Can. 288 *CIC* 1983 exempts permanent deacons from the prohibition unless particular law prescribes otherwise. The 1984 Guidelines on the Deaconate of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (n. 131) stipulate: "While the Code of Canon Law permits permanent deacons to hold political office, a deacon should consult with his bishop before seeking or accepting such an office. In particular cases, the bishop may forbid such an undertaking."

Inferences from the Legislation on the Issue

Can. 285 §3 *CIC* 1983, contains an unqualified prohibition against the holding of any public office which entails the exercise of civil power. In order to assume or accept such an office, a cleric must obtain, not just permission as in can. 139 §4 *CIC* 1917, but a dispensation from the diocesan bishop according to cann. 85, 87 §1 and 90 *CIC* 1983. The offices mentioned in can. 139 §4 *CIC* 1917 are meant to be included in this norm.

Can. 287 §2 *CIC* 1983, closely related to can. 285 §3 *CIC* 1983, forbids public active support of a political party and leadership in a labour union. The law does not prevent a cleric from being active in non-partisan politics nor does it forbid a cleric to run a legislative office if he has the ordinary's permission. Navarro notes that the problem lies in finding the right balance between the prohibition and the permissible, which task is not easy (Navarro, 111). However, it must be noted that if a cleric wins in a political campaign, he must obtain a dispensation from his Ordinary and from the Ordinary of the place where he will hold the office before he can assume that office.

Generally speaking, the reasons for these prohibitions are to ensure that the spiritual ministry of the priesthood should remain always the priority of the individual priest. The prohibitions are meant to prevent a cleric from devoting an excessive amount of time to matters that are temporal and of a secular nature. It is obvious that this matter of clerical participation in public office and in the world of political activity is a contemporary issue and will remain a vital one among clerics who wish to pursue a ministry in which the influence for good appears to be greater and more widespread in the political arena.

Even though membership of a political party does not strictly imply being partisan, yet the choice of a political party distances the loyal member from the creeds of the other parties, operating under the banner of one political party as distinct from others (cf. Rincòn, 2022, pp. 236-237). The Cleric by his calling is devoted to all parties and is called to serve one and all. Jean-Baptiste Lacordaire had this to say on the identity of a Priest:

> To live in the midst of the world with no desire for its pleasures; to be a member of every family, yet belonging to none; to share all sufferings; to penetrate all secrets, to heal all wounds; to daily go from men to God to offer him their homage and petitions; to return from God to men to bring them his pardon and hope; to have a heart of fire for charity and a heart of bronze for chastity; to bless and be blest forever. O God, what a life, it is yours O Priest of Jesus Christ![1]

Since the Second Vatican Council, emphasis is placed on the difference between the ministerial roles of clerics and lay persons. Secular matters are the responsibility of the laity while the clerical role is spiritual and religious, even though all are called to holiness as part of the People of God. The teachings of the Church are clear on the issue. In his address to priests in Mexico City on January 27, 1979, Pope John Paul II, reminded them that they were

1 http://www.catholicity.com/prayer/thou-art-a-priest-forever.html. *Accessed on 13/2/2026.*

"participants in the ministry of Christ for the service of the unity of the community" and that the clergy should "observe an attitude of unity and obedience to their bishops." He reminded the priests, that they were not "social directors, political leaders or functionaries of a temporal power" and that "temporal leadership could easily become a source of division, while the priest should be a sign and factor of unity". The pontiff further notes: "the priest has neither the mission nor the charisma from above for this political involvement and activism" (John Paul II, 1979; 1993). He made it clear that "secular functions are the proper field of action of the laity, who ought to perfect temporal matters with a Christian spirit." On May 4, 1980, His Holiness told the Zairean priests to "leave political responsibilities to those who are charged with them" and to "be mediators between God and man". He told them that they have a responsibility to help the laity to fulfill their role in the temporal order.[2] In an address to religious priests in Sao Paolo on July 3, 1980, John Paul II insisted that in political matters the roles of priests, religious and lay persons were different. He reminded the clerics of their vocation to preach God's word and of their task to be agents of reconciliation, and not of division. In Manila on February 17, 1981, the Pope expresses to a group of religious men: "You are priest and religious. You are not social or political figures or officials of a temporal power … Let us not be under the illusion that we are serving the Gospel if we 'dilute' our charism through an exaggerated interest in the wide field of temporal problems." His Holiness affirmed: "The Church reminds priests, who in their generous service to the Gospel ideal feel drawn to political involvement in order to help more effectively in reforming political life and in eliminating injustices, exploitation, and every type of oppression, that on this road it is easy to be caught up in partisan strife, with the risk of helping not to bring about the more just world for which they long, but new and worse ways of exploiting poor people. In any case they must know that they have neither the mission nor the charism from above for this political involvement and activism" (1981). The Roman Pontiff exhorted the Bishops of Nicaragua that if priests really wish to serve the people, they should do this not through a political role, but through their priestly ministry, which is the reason why people want them near (1982). Besides, it cannot be over emphasized that Bishops, priests and religious must refrain from partisan politics, avoiding especially the use of the pulpit for partisan purposes, so as to avoid division among the flock.

Authorisation from Competent Ecclesiastical Authorities

The request for permission or authorization by the cleric constitutes "a basic measure of prudence, intended to avoid dangerous temptations that could easily take shape in the heat of political passion" (De Otaduy, 2004, 387). As well indicated by the Synod of Bishops of 1971, permission or authorisation should be given after due consultation with the presbyterial council of the diocese and the Episcopal Conference: "Leadership or active militancy on behalf of any political party is to be excluded by every priest unless, in concrete and exceptional circumstances, this is truly required by the good of the community, and receives

2http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1980/may/documents/hf_jp-_ii_spe_19800504_sacerdoti-zaire_it.html. *Accessed on 13/2/2026.*

the consent of the bishop after consultation with the presbyterial council and, if circumstances call for it, with the Episcopal Conference" (O'Connor, 1971).

Provost underscores the importance of the local political context in deciding and evaluating what would connote an active involvement in politics: "Whether an 'active role' in a political party would even include holding party membership probably depends on local political circumstances. For example, in certain parts of Africa the very fact of belonging to a political party is itself to take an active role in politics. The bishops there have already told the clergy not to even enrol in a political party. In the United States, however, registering according to one political party or another does not make one a party activist and constitutes only a 'passive voice' rather than an active role" (Provost, 1985, 87).

The prescripts of the universal norm, as noted above, allows room both for the intervention of the ecclesiastical authority closest to the current problem and the particular legislation on the issue. Nothing in this regard representing the situation in Nigeria is found in the Complementary Norms to the Code promulgated by English-Language Conference of Bishops. However, the West African Journal of Ecclesial Studies (*WAJES*), published "The Statement of the Association of Episcopal Conference of Anglophone West Africa (*AECAWA*) on the Involvement of Clergy and Religious in Active Politics" in 1992. The document stating the position of the Church reiterates as follows: "That the Church's law forbids the Clergy and religious to seek or accept public positions which carry with them the exercise of political power is not in question. However, the clergy and the religious, and for that matter the Church leaders in general, cannot but be involved in politics of one type or another" (*WAJES* 4, 1992, 5). Even though the document does not spell out areas of political participation, in any case, it alerts the clergy to put in greater efforts in their prophetic role. In like direction, the Synod of Bishops of Africa, 2011, reminds Priests that they must be identified as a sign of unity among the faithful and that even in political matters their choice should be tempered with pastoral ministry and zeal in order to foster unity and not division among the laity (cf. *Africae Munus*, nn. 108 and 109).

The following points are established in a pastoral letter of the Episcopal Conference of Kenya ("A Pastoral Letter to our Priests") for their priest:

- 1) It is not permitted for a Catholic priest to stand as a Member of Parliament or any public office whenever it means sharing in the exercise of civil power (c. 285, §3).
- 2) Priests are not permitted to accept positions on State or Corporation Boards (c. 285, §2). If a chaplain is considered necessary, permission must be sought in writing from the local Bishop by those inviting the priest to accept the position.
- 3) In the area of party politics, priest should not take sides, as it will divide the local community. The priest is a symbol and builder of unity. Canvassing or even urging people to vote for particular candidates or parties, leads to confusion and division. It is, however, accepted that each priest can exercise his democratic right to vote according to his conscience.

- 4) In order to avoid misunderstanding, priests should not serve in structures such as the Constituency Development Fund, without the permission of the local bishop (c. 285, §4). Each Diocese has a Justice and Peace Commission which can assist in such structures - thus affirming the laity to exercise their commitment, in the name of the gospel, to promoting justice, peace and reconciliation.
- 5) As regards commerce and trade, we remind you that 'clerics are forbidden to practice commerce or trade, either personally or through another, for their own for another's benefit, except with the permission of the lawful ecclesiastical authority' (c. 286).[3]

Speaking on the use of discretion involved in the dispensation, Navarro warns that before conceding the necessary dispensation or authorization before involvement in politics, one must carefully evaluate the fact that the clerics are not formed to become politicians or civil government experts, since they do not have the adequate training. Referencing Pope John Paul II, the author reminded that good will is not enough to undertake a public office, to be a member of a technical commission. Thus, the tasks require technical and professional formation which clerics normally do not possess (Navarro, 28). When a cleric is permitted and dispensed to be involved actively in politics which entails the possession of civil power, that priest cannot undertake any priestly activity during the period. This measure is to avoid confusion among the faithful and to preserve the distinction between politics and religion.

Challenges of the Involvement of Clerics in Partisan Politics

The involvement of Catholic clergy in political conferences or participation is age old (cf. Surabhi, 2024, 10; Williamson et al., 2023, 560). While, the Catholic Code of Canon Law, prohibits priests in participating actively in partisan politics, there have been instances of Catholic priests being actively involved in partisan politics.

In the United States of America, a Jesuit Priest, Rev. Fr. Robert F. Drinan, SJ was elected to the American congress, representing Massachusetts from 1971-1981 in the House of Representatives. Fr. Robert Drinan, SJ, had served for ten years in the United States House of Representatives He resigned from running for another term, following cautions from the Holy See. Prior to this, Rev. Fr. Gabriel Richard was elected in 1823 as the first priest in American history to congress.

In Haiti, the Salesian priest, Jean-Betrand Aristide was elected as President in 1990. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haitian politician and Roman Catholic priest of the Salesian Order, was a vocal champion of the poor and disenfranchised. He was president of the country in 1991, 1994-1996, and 2001-2004.[4] Late Archbishop Isidore D'Souza in the 1980s, headed the National Conference in Benin Republic, Africa. Monsignor Monsengwo in 1991-1992 was actively involved in partisan politics in Zaire.

3 Kenya Episcopal Conference, A Pastoral Letter to our Priests, December 15, 2006.

4 Cf. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/34400/Jean-Bertrand-Aristide] Accessed on 31/3/2026.

The Nigerian cleric, late Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu, assumed a political career, becoming the elected governor of Benue State.[5] Fr. Orshio Adasu, ordained a priest for the Diocese of Makurdi, became governor of Benue State, Nigeria on 2 January 1992, elected on the Social Democratic Party (SDP) platform.[6] Rev. Fr. Hyacinth Iormen Alia is the second Catholic Priest to become Governor of Benue State. Ordained a Catholic Priest on 7 July 1990, he entered partisan politics in 2022 and was elected Governor of Benue State, Nigeria, on 18 March 2023 on the platform of the All Progressives Congress (APC). He was sworn in as Governor on 29 May 2023, becoming the chief executive of Benue State with a four-year tenure in office.

Regrettably, any justification for Catholic clerics entering politics remains very slim, not even for their role in governance. Granted, clerics and their model of governance may attempt to shape political attitudes and electoral behaviour of the masses, yet there remains the complex relationship between religion and politics, and the role of religious leaders in partisan politics. (cf. Huizing-Lefebvre, 1982, 15; Roseamah, 2024, 205; Smith-Boas, 2023, 10).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The involvement of clerics in politics requires careful discernment, balancing their spiritual mission with societal needs. While their gifts may be valuable in addressing corruption and oppression, ecclesiastical authorities must weigh local contexts, Church interests, and individual capacity. Permission and dispensation for public office should consider the cleric's professional formation and aptitudes. Ultimately, political leadership is best suited to the laity, whom the Church encourages to assume this role with integrity and commitment, allowing clergy to focus on their spiritual mandate.

As such, Cardinal François Xavier Nguyen Van Thũan exhorts: “Blessed the Politician who well understands his role in the world. Blessed the Politician who personally exemplifies credibility. Blessed the Politician who works for the common good and not for his own interests. Blessed the Politician who is true to himself, his faith and his electoral promises. Blessed the Politician who works for unity and makes Jesus the fulcrum of its defence. Blessed the Politician who works for radical change, refusing to call good that which is evil and using the Gospel as a guide. Blessed the Politician who listens to the people before, during and after the elections, and who listens to God in prayer. Blessed the Politician who has no fear of the truth or the mass media, because at the time of judgement he will answer only to God”.[7]

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5 Cf. http://www.utexas.edu/conferences/africa/ads/418.html] Accessed on 31/3/2026.

6 Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Adasu] Accessed on 31/3/2026.

7 www. http://spirituality.ucanews.com/2013/10/05/beatitudes-for-politicians-and-teachers/ Accessed on 13/2/2026.

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