

**Pennsylvania Catholic Conference**  
**Interview with U.S. Senate Candidate Joe Sestak- July 26, 2010**

**How will your personal religious beliefs influence your public leadership?**

I agree with what President John F. Kennedy said when he was a candidate for U.S. President: "I don't intend to be a Catholic president, I intend to be a president who is Catholic" and that is my overall approach. Do I think it influences me in my values? Absolutely. I tell everybody the best school I ever went to was Cardinal O'Hara; I loved it and my faith, Catholicism, means community. But I also go to a church or a mosque or a synagogue or a Sikh temple other than my own Catholic mass every week, and sometimes more than one, in order to appreciate the faith and service of others. So I have been to over 500 congregations, in addition to my own Catholic mass, during my 3 ½ years in office.

At the congregations, I speak about the beauty of all faiths and how I find that the work of congregation leaders is similar to that of good military leaders or good public servants in that they are dealers of hope. But while church leaders deal with hope eternally, they also have to deal with the reality of challenges here. Congregations do charity work, supporting education, health care, and social justice. So I made a serious effort when I was elected to work with them. For example, I brought many congregations together and we did an anti-violence summit.

I believe these are opportunities for a good partnership. We must work together in our communities to take care of families, whether for concerns about violence or about having the economic opportunity to put food on the table. Part of what I have gotten out of my faith, including my time at Cardinal O'Hara, is the equality of humanity and how you have to make social justice work for the entire community. The Catholic faith taught me so much, particularly about justice.

**How should Pennsylvania address the needs of the poor and the elderly?**

Let's take the elderly first. We are the second oldest state in the nation and it is not because we have fewer youth; it's because the youth aren't staying. Our population grew just 4.7% over the last 30 years, while the rest of the nation averaged 34%. The issue is that job growth has been half of what the national average has been. We have had a 30% increase, 1% a year, for 30 years, while the national average is 58%, nearly twice as much, because our small businesses have only grown half as much. Half the job growth means the youth go elsewhere, which means you have a higher percentage of seniors. They are increasingly being relied upon as the state's tax base, and they are on a fixed income.

First, here are two important examples of what needs to be done for seniors. One, I think we can have a better opportunity to take advantage of them in a positive way. I worked for 2 ½ years on legislation that is now signed by President Obama to do this. It was called the Silver Scholars Amendment. Seniors who go into a school and mentor for at least 300 hours a year receive a \$1,000.00 scholarship. It's not a lot, but it is something to defray costs, or they can pass it on to their grandchildren for education. So in a sense this enables seniors to remain active members of society, because many of them are living longer and want to both learn more and contribute. We can give them better opportunities. This amendment gives them some positive reinforcement, and studies have shown that if we recognize their contributions with something they value, even if it's a modest reward, it encourages this sort of mutually beneficial activity.

On the other hand we have to protect seniors more. Pennsylvanians had an increase of 35% in elder abuse -- financial, physical, and mental abuse -- between 2006 and 2007. In my first year in Congress, I had a senior in my District with Alzheimer's who was beaten with belt buckles six times. I had another senior with dementia who was defrauded of \$40,000 four months before he

died. In fact, separately, I had to bring an amicus curiae, a friend of the court brief, to appeal against Wachovia Bank because internal records showed that they knew fraud was occurring, and refused to return \$21 million directly to seniors who had been defrauded. We were able to get a court to rule that they had to send the money back without seniors requesting it.

I authored and introduced the Elder Abuse Bill that has passed the House of Representatives twice, and unfortunately sits in the deep freeze of the Senate. I am working with a Republican Senator to help get it through, hopefully by the end of this year. The bill, for the first time, sets a standard for what senior abuse is. Second, it authorizes grants that go into the training for law enforcement and health care providers to better identify elder abuse and determine what the appropriate punishment is, because it is a closet problem.

There is a lot we can do to take better advantage of this generation that has given so much and can even give more. Another example is the SCORE Program, which I have worked on to increase a program that supports retired business leaders for mentoring young small business owners.

Of course there's a lot more to do. For instance, even before the recession, 44% of all seniors would live in poverty without Social Security. So we have to defend Social Security. We need to improve Medicare, like how we closed the Medicare Part D Donut Hole and we gave \$250 back to seniors in 2010. My opponent and I disagree on this; he opposed that rebate in our health care bill and even opposed closing the donut hole completely over the next eight years.

So there is a great number of things to do, but we also have the challenge that seniors, unfortunately, are increasingly becoming the tax base for Pennsylvania. Out of 67 counties, there is only one that does not have a population over the age of 65, as a percentage, that is higher than the national average. And that is Centre County where Penn State is. The best thing we can do for the long term for everyone's economic benefit is to create jobs here in Pennsylvania, so that there are opportunities for families to provide for themselves and the youth don't leave.

In addition to going to a congregation other than my own every weekend, I have gone to a senior facility or a school in my District just about every week because of my position on the Education and Labor Committee, usually on a Friday or a Monday. I had in my district one out of the ten worst Medicaid living facilities. A week after I visited, they closed it. We helped get someone else to take over.

Let me bring up one more item: senior veterans. There was for our senior vets living in a Philadelphia VA facility where you had live maggots falling out of a flesh wound. So I have submitted legislation for proper transparency and accountability for inspections. I have now visited 5 of the 14 homes around the state so far. They had 3 inspections at this particular facility where they found those horrible conditions. The results included urine next to breakfast and things like that. Horrible conditions and the problem is we don't have transparency. Unlike at Pennsylvania state facilities, where you have to publish inspection results on a website, our VA doesn't mandate that and so there is a lot to be done.

My bottom line is -- and I say this now because my district has a lot of seniors -- we have many challenges to deal with, so we do a lot of work for my constituents. We are holding a health care resource fair. That's my third health care event since we passed the bill and we are bringing organizations together to help my constituents take advantage of the resources available to them. We have had a senior summit as well with AARP and other senior service organizations to help with issues ranging from taxes to Social Security to reverse mortgages.

We keep our office open 7 days a week. It is headed by a good friend of mine, a naval academy classmate from my rival high school, Monsignor Bonner We retired after three decades and he

ran my first campaign. The office is open until at least 9:00 at night. We have handled over 18,000 constituency cases in 3 ½ years. That is four times the average congressional office. People have been slammed by the recession and we see problems that range from vet issues and senior issues to student loans. We've handled 1,000 home foreclosures out of our office. People come from around the state because we are open all the time. It's like the kind of work you all do to help people. We work to team with organizations such as yours to help people.

### **Your view on expanding protection for unborn children.**

My position is that the Supreme Court made a decision. I abide by that and I do think it is a decision made in the privacy of a family with their doctor. I respect others' views and until the last months on this campaign, every three months those who don't agree with me are called together and I ask them on a Saturday morning to come on in and have an hour discussion on it. To me it is an issue obviously with strong beliefs on both sides that we should respect.

### **Would you support a federal tax credit program for businesses or individuals that would help students attend the school of their choice?**

If it doesn't come out of the monies that presently are focused upon public schools, then I think it's an option worth exploring. I grew up in Catholic schools and my wife grew up in public school. I think we have to salvage our public schools and I don't think there is enough effort going into it. I am on the Education and Labor Committee. I was supposed to be on the Intelligence Committee because I had been in an anti-terrorism unit and I knew intelligence. I asked to get out of it and go to an Education Committee because it is the long pole in the tent for economic viability.

My father was one of the leaders in Springfield in getting buses to take private school children, but it has to be done without impacting the funding that goes to public schools. And so it is a matter of finding the money. It is easy to say yes, but I am also a fiscally prudent guy and you have got to find the money for that tax credit.

### **How would you alleviate the concerns that the Catholic church has regarding funding of abortion in community health clinics, inadequate conscience protection for religious providers, and care of the immigrant in the federal health care bill?**

You know I got into politics because of health care. When my daughter, my first and only child, was 4 years old she got a brain tumor. I put my papers in and asked to resign from the Navy. It was glioblastoma, the same brain tumor that Ted Kennedy had. And with a clean MRI next week we will be 5 years and it hasn't come back. Only 18% of the kids make it. So there will be a 95% chance she grows to 18. She is now 9. I announced I was running for Congress in 2006 for one reason: to pay back this nation because in the military I had the best health care plan. With 3 brain operations, chemotherapy and radiation, my daughter is now all she can be. I want everybody to have that opportunity and providing affordable, accessible, quality health care is why I got into politics.

I have always supported the Hyde Amendment. In this bill, I thought we did it right, personally, to follow the Hyde Amendment very closely so that no federal money would be used for abortion. People have to look at this principled compromise that ensures there was no federal money for abortions.

Number two: we have laws passed in 1986 and 1996, Freedom of Conscience laws, that do let practitioners have the right not to perform abortions. And those should be enforced. If they are not being enforced, they should be enforced. When somebody elects not to, that is their right not to, because you shouldn't be forced to.

For low-income individuals, including legal immigrants, in Upper Darby, I found the need for a free health care clinic. It took us 2 years, but we had a study done and proved that there was need in the community. We do a lot of work for legal immigrants out of my office. My take is that is why we need comprehensive immigration reform. Until we have the courage down there to do what Kennedy did with Bush, we won't change the system. Their effort wasn't perfect, but it was a principled compromise for the bill to get everybody out of the shadows. In the meantime, we have got to secure our borders, but I do think everyone should be given emergency health care, at least enabling them to come into something like a free health clinic and be taken care of no questions asked. I work for that in my own district, but I do think you need to fix the source of the problem, which is comprehensive immigration reform and securing our borders.

### **Your views on illegal immigration?**

We must have a multi-faceted approach that begins with securing our borders to protect our Nation from the narcotics trade, terrorism and other dangers, and also establish an employer electronic verification system to ensure an employee is here legally. As we work to resolve the issue of border security and verification of legal status, we can begin to address the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in our country. We must carefully consider what is practically possible and what is best for both the long-term prosperity and security of our country. We should offer one opportunity to allow them to come out of the shadows, to get into line, and, after a thorough process, be here legally. You are not going to find, at least in my opinion, practically 12 million illegals, and you are not going to rip them away from 3 or 4 million children who are born here. During the time it will take to secure our borders and implement an employer verification system, we can give illegal immigrants an opportunity to come out of the shadows, be identified, be fingerprinted, pass a thorough criminal background check, be interviewed by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and be documented.

We owe it to the history of our country, and the qualities that make it so great, to move forward with a comprehensive reform of our nation's immigration laws. We need leaders who will address serious issues, not avoid them and then we can have the comprehensive reform we need to put a problem behind us that shouldn't be out there.

### **What is your position on the death penalty?**

I think the death penalty, eventually, should be outlawed, with improvements to our justice system. We must ensure that those who commit the most heinous crimes can be locked up forever without parole. Right now, too many times, people who commit these crimes are eventually released, so we are not there yet. Until we are, this should be reserved only for the most heinous of crimes. We just need to get a system where you know there are crimes that result in no chance of the perpetrator ever being let out.

### **What is your position on the Federal Defense of Marriage Act?**

I think it should be overturned, but within that I am very supportive of ensuring that churches or anyone else should not be forced by law to recognize a marriage that they do not want. That is left to a church, which is separate from the state, to decide.

I strongly believe we are a nation of laws, and laws apply to everybody. When people ask me about "don't ask don't tell," I say, well, we went to war with a certain percentage of the people that we know from outside surveys were gay. I then cannot come back home and say they don't deserve equal rights. Now people may agree or disagree with that and I don't think you can force upon any religious institution what they believe is right, just as I don't think doctors, including Catholic doctors, should be forced to do abortions.

## **What is your position on the Employment Non-Discrimination Act?**

I am supportive of ENDA. I voted for it when it came out and we worked hard to ensure that religious organizations are not forced to do anything that goes against their religious tenets.

## **Is there anything you would like to say to the Catholic public in Pennsylvania?**

I intend to be a senator who is not a Catholic senator, but a senator who is Catholic, and I don't shy from my faith. I love it, sitting in the back Sunday mornings in an early mass is one of the most peaceful moments I have in my life, and not just because of my campaign. It was that way when I was in the Navy. You know it is a precious, precious time.

What I want Pennsylvanians to know is that, as their Senator, I will represent their interests first. We got into an economic situation that has hurt all of us because Washington, DC failed to put working families first and instead made special interests their top priority. We need to recognize that the middle class and small businesses are the engine of our economy and we can create the jobs here that allow Pennsylvanians to be all they can be.