Pennsylvania Catholic Conference
Interview with Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. – Candidate for U.S. Senate –
Monday, July 23, 2012

How do your personal religious beliefs influence your public leadership?

My work as a public official is inspired by a lot of the social teachings of the Church. It has always been impacted that way. Whether I am remembering when I was in North Philadelphia teaching after college as a member of the Jesuit volunteer corps or recalling a hymn from Church, I have always had great inspiration from my faith. That makes up part of who I am as a public official. I am struck by the number of times when something been taught growing up finds its way into public policy in one way or another.

How should Pennsylvania address the needs of the poor, the elderly?

Well, I think federal policy that concerns the poor in the next couple of years is not going to be as much about what we should do, it's going to be more about we should not do. Indiscriminate cuts that might make sense to some when looking only at the bottom line, but they don't make sense in terms of the impact on vulnerable people, and indiscriminate cuts really don't get you the true savings that you might hope to achieve.

I voted for a trillion dollars in cuts to the federal budget and I'll vote for more; but I am not going to vote for cuts that are mindless and indiscriminate just because they make the numbers add up. I think you have to make an assessment between what is a good cut versus a bad cut, especially in this kind of an economy. This doesn't mean we can't make programs more efficient, it doesn't mean we shouldn't cut if we can.

When I was auditor general, I was really tough on public spending. I hit public agencies really hard. Some of the work that I did all but sent people to jail. So I know a lot about being fiscally tough. I have voted for a lot of cuts in the past, but some of the proposals in Washington today under the guise of dealing with fiscal challenges would be devastating. I am going to be as vigilant about fighting against policies that take those kind of steps as much as I am about the affirmative steps we can take.

As an underlying philosophy, if we are growing the economy and creating jobs, everyone is better off. First and foremost we have to keep growing the economy and keep a focus on what can we do to create jobs in the near term and the long term. We have to make sure the economy stays headed in the right direction and we have to be thoughtful and compassionate about the kind of cuts that some people want to make.

One of the best anti-poverty strategies we have had for years is the Earned Income Tax Credit. Debates are coming up about the Bush tax cuts, but it isn't just about what happens to millionaires, the debate should also be about what happens to the poor.

What are your views on expanding protection for unborn children?

For more than 15 years now I have been a pro-life Democrat. I believe that life begins at conception and we should do everything that we can to protect and preserve it throughout the whole continuum of someone's life. I do think that debates in the last couple of decades haven't allowed enough of a focus on where people can come together. One thing that I am proud of is in the midst of the larger debate about the Affordable Care Act I was able to make sure that

pregnant and vulnerable women could get some direct help. That was an unprecedented government initiative. We got $250 million dollars in that bill to support pregnant women. We also got $1.2 billion to expand the adoption tax credit. In addition, we worked with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to improve conscience protections. I had to push to get my way on this and I did. We should continue to debate these issues so we can figure out ways to get people on the same page.

Would you support a federal tax credit program or voucher program of some nature for businesses or individual families that would help students attend the school of their choice?

I have always opposed that. I have always been very concerned about limited and ever shrinking tax dollars for public schools. If you divert some of those public dollars to another venue, you are going to short change the public schools. I say this as someone who was educated in Catholic grade schools and I devoted a year of my life as a volunteer teacher in a Catholic school as well. And I have lived and benefited from and seen the results from Catholic education, whether it was from middle income kids or upper middle income kids or very poor children, but I just get concerned about the diversion of public dollars.

How would you alleviate the concerns that Catholics have about the new federal health care law – no restrictions on funding abortions in community health clinics, inadequate conscience protection for health care institutions and providers, and limited coverage for immigrant?

There is a lot there. I worked with the staff of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to strengthen the conscience provisions in the Affordable Care Act. I also worked to include an adoption tax credit and support for pregnant women in the act. When you take those features and the expanded reach of the coverage, I believe and will always believe the totality of that legislation is more pro-life than not. I support family planning because it reduced the number of abortions. However, religiously-affiliated institutions should not be forced by the government to violate their beliefs. That is why I voted for the Blunt amendment. I appreciate the spirit of the Administration's announcement on contraceptives and the attempt to satisfy concerns on both sides of this issue, but it does not go far enough to ensure that this ruling doesn't infringe upon conscience rights.

A typical Washington debate includes a lot of yelling, screaming and finger pointing, but not much in the way of consensus. However, I still think the administration and its opponents are willing to work it through so that conscience rights will be protected. We should work to protect conscience just as we have in the past. There are plenty of ways to come together. If someone is an employee of a particular institution and needs family planning services they should be able to get that with funding that is not paid by the religiously affiliated institution or the church itself. The more particular concern is self-insurance. I hope we can reach an appropriate, reasonable accommodation without restricting conscience rights. I said to my Democratic colleagues, we can do this one of two ways, work out a compromise that makes sense and doesn't violate anyone's conscience rights, or we play to the usual Washington game which is zero sum - you win I lose or I win you lose.

What is your position on the death penalty and why?

When I was a state official I supported it. I think it is important that we make sure those who are accused in a capital case have adequate and competent representation. It is not an issue that arises too often under federal policy, mostly at the state level.

What is your position on the federal Defense of Marriage Act? Should it be overturned or should it be allowed to remain in place?

I am not a co-sponsor of the legislation to repeal it. I support civil unions, but I think the debate on that particular bill is down the road. When it comes up for a vote, we will certainly take a close look.

Your position on legislation to make it unlawful for employers to discriminate based upon one's sexual orientation.

I certainly think that we have to make sure that when someone seeks employment that they are not the victim of discrimination. I think that should be as broad and as wide as possible. When there is a bill on the floor, we should certainly talk more about what it will mean to religious employers. My position on the issue would depend upon the specifics of the legislation.

Illegal immigration, what do we do about it?

When I was a new senator, I thought the best approach would be to first demonstrate that you can control the borders, and then over time you could make other changes. But that hasn't happened yet. I don't really see any substantial immigration legislation passing anytime soon. Whatever administration is in power has to decide what they can do.

I think trying to do one comprehensive immigration reform policy at one time probably is not going to work. The first step is to be tough on the employers that violate the law and re-establish a gap in accountability that is 25 years old. If we can do that I think then we might be able to get other reforms in place. This issue seems to defy any kind of consensus. There is so much acrimony that it is controversial to acknowledge children who come to this country not one their own but by their parents for having a clean record, doing well in school and being model citizens. There is no way to recognize them. Unfortunately immigration reform is going to take a lot more work. A state-by-state effort to address immigration really doesn't make sense. It has got to be a national policy.

Is there anything else that you would like to say to the Catholic public about your candidacy?

It is a privilege to serve in the Senate and represent Pennsylvania. I feel the obligation every day to do my best to represent the people of this state, Catholics and non-Catholics. As an individual and as a public official I have benefited from a number of really rich blessings. One is to grow up in a family with a mother and a father who loved each other and were able to care and provide for us. We never had the trauma that some families experience. Another is my Catholic education. I benefited from the experiences of both the IHM nuns and the Jesuits, two pretty dynamic forces. And when I was in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps my boss was an IHM nun. They were just wonderful and still are. I have been blessed by all of that and I hope it has enriched my public service.