

Pennsylvania Catholic Conference
Interview with Gubernatorial Candidate Dan Onorato- July 12, 2010

How do your personal religious beliefs influence your public leadership?

Religious belief helps establish my own moral compass on issues. I think it is very clear during my years on City Council, as county controller, and county executive, that a lot of my decisions were based on not just my formal education, but also my Catholic upbringing. I am a product of twelve years of Catholic school, so I know it very well. I don't think you could ever say that faith doesn't have an influence. It is a part of who I am. I hope it would be part of my rationale when I have to make tough decisions on the issues of the day and how the state government should treat the 12 million people of Pennsylvania.

How should Pennsylvania address the needs of the poor? What about the elderly?

Allegheny County, my county, is the second oldest in the United States, behind Miami Dade in Florida. We have had to deal with senior issues a lot earlier than other counties. Even in tough economic times, I found a way to transform four of our nursing homes. They were losing \$10 million a year and I got them to break even by shifting two of them from nursing homes to an Alzheimer's unit and a continuing care unit. There are only so many dollars, we all know that, but we have to recognize that the needs of the seniors today are different than they were 20 years ago. People are living longer. If people are able to stay in their own homes longer with a little bit of help and support, it is good for the senior and it is good for taxpayers. We can't be afraid to change how we provide services. There is still a role for the government to play here because there are a lot of people who just simply don't have the money, or more importantly, don't have the family structure anymore to singlehandedly take care of them as they get older. In tough economic times like we are in now, it is even more important that we spend the limited dollars we have in a way that meet the needs of the elderly population as it is today, not as it was 20 years ago.

The safety net programs that the state provides have to be in the forefront of this budget crisis. A year ago the state went 101 days without a budget. Two of the line items that weren't funded were higher ed and human services. In Allegheny County, I run the second largest human service department in the state. I had to take out a loan of \$15 million to keep organizations up and running. Their needs were big and yet the state wasn't giving them any money. As governor, I will make sure that we pass responsible budgets every year and that we do it on time – just like I've done as County Executive for six years in a row without ever raising property taxes.

What is your view on expanding protection for unborn children in Pennsylvania?

I am personally pro-life, and I support Pennsylvania's current law, which was adopted under Governor Casey. As governor, I will continue to support that law and I would veto any changes to it.

You probably are aware that Governor Rendell has created his plan to implement health care reform in Pennsylvania. What is your vision on this?

I will implement health care reform and do it in a way that we cover as many people as possible and lower the cost. I watched the health care costs for Allegheny County's employees go from \$35 million to \$65 million in 6 years. The status quo just simply isn't working. My view on health care reform is probably one of the biggest differences between my opponent and me. My opponent wants to block it in court; I think we should focus on how to implement it. Affordability, accessibility and quality care are the standards that we should be looking at.

The federal healthcare law prohibits the use of public funds for abortion, and I will ensure that our implementation adheres to this separation. I will also ensure that the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference and other stakeholder groups have the opportunity to have their voices heard and provide input into Pennsylvania's implementation of the federal law.

I also want to be clear that I would not support a program that would somehow put religious organizations, particularly Catholic hospitals, in a position where they couldn't fulfill their mission because of what the state expects them to do. You should be allowed to provide medical care and be allowed to fulfill your mission religiously, too. The government shouldn't interfere with that. A religious institution should not have to change its point of view to be eligible for the state program.

Beyond health care organizations, what about conscience protection for employers or individuals?

You would have my full support that Catholic employers would be allowed to follow their religious beliefs. Public money should be allowed to flow there without interfering with the policies of a Catholic or any religious organization that is providing a service to the public. I am very supportive of the faith-based organizations in my county right now. They provide a lot of human services. A couple times, I've had to stand up to block some efforts to insist that certain rules apply across the board; but for some agencies, those rules would be in contradiction to the religious institution's beliefs. I would fight to block that mandate and make sure that Catholic employers and others are able to provide services and still keep all of their beliefs in place, while ensuring the public's right to all services.

What is your opinion about school choice?

I support school choice; I have supported it historically in my political life. Back in the 1990s, I started talking about giving residents of the city of Pittsburgh some options; and since then we have seen charter schools develop and we have the EITC. I personally also am very supportive of increasing the Educational Improvement Tax Credit. I think it is a great tool, a great vehicle. I would like to get it back to at least where it was in the \$75 million range. My goal would be to go above that. As county executive, I have not only supported, but many schools in my county have utilized it. I encourage private companies to use the tax credit to give money so the private schools can give somebody an option. I am a big supporter of the EITC.

Would you be supportive of some kind of legislation that gives dollars to the parents to choose the best education for their children, public or private?

Here is my view on education: Academic achievement is essential for economic success and I want to make sure that every school is a great school.

It starts with early childhood education, and I am a big supporter of high-quality pre-kindergarten programs. The earlier we can reach these children, the better chance they will have for success.

I also think that within the K-12 educational system, we have to provide options and choices. I support the state's school funding formula, which increases student achievement in our public schools while reducing the burden on local property taxes. I also support charter schools, along with strong academic and financial standards.

As I said earlier, the EITC is a great program to give families options. And I support a new grant program, with even more flexibility than the EITC, that would give low-income families in academically distressed communities direct choices about which schools their children should attend.

What is your position on the death penalty and why?

I do support it; but I support it with all the safeguards in place. We should use DNA testing and other methods to examine evidence. If a person is proven beyond a doubt to be a cop killer or is found guilty of first degree murder; if he or she gone through a review of his or her peers, exhausted all appeals, and had all DNA and other evidence thoroughly examined; then the death penalty is appropriate.

As governor would not be directly involved in this because it is a constitutional amendment, but what are your views on the Pennsylvania Marriage Protection Amendment?

Personally, my thoughts are that marriage should be between a man and a woman. That is the current state law, and I support that. We do not need an amendment to the constitution to say that, but I would oppose legislation that tried to change the current marriage law to allow same-sex marriage.

Illegal immigration. How would you address that issue in Pennsylvania?

First of all the law that was passed in Arizona, I would not support. I think the federal government has to do comprehensive immigration reform. They need to deal with securing the border and address the needs of the 10 – 12 million undocumented people who are in the country right now. That has to be done by the federal government because if not, a hodge podge of states will do what Arizona did and to me that would not be productive. I support a very strong federal comprehensive bill to deal with all of the issues on immigration. As governor, I would lobby for that.

What else would you want to tell the Catholic public?

I am a product of a Catholic grade school and high school. I am very respectful of religious organizations and their roles in society. I believe they have rights to their beliefs like anybody else in society and to not have interference of those beliefs because they receive public money. Just as I have as county executive, as governor I would work with all organizations including religious groups as a part of the social service network that we have in this Commonwealth. I think they bring a good perspective in providing a resource to our residents. My track record has been very strong working with the faith based organizations.

I support the educational improvement tax credit and making sure religious based organizations can participate in the overall educational network. I think that the Catholic community is going to have a very strong friend in an Onorato administration, a very receptive ear. I understand and have worked with the Catholic community as an elected official for a long time. People can actually go check on my record, talk to leaders of my Catholic community, and see it is a pretty positive relationship.