

# RC Leaders Call for Religious Tolerance in Elections

by [Michael Sean Winters](#) on Nov. 02, 2011

- [Distinctly Catholic](#)

Former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, Thomas Melady, released a statement signed by a host of prominent Catholics “of different political persuasions,” today calling for a renewed commitment to religious tolerance in American politics at a press conference held at the National Press Club.

“Two hundred and twenty three years ago our Founding Fathers established through our Constitution, a high ideal for religious tolerance and understanding,” the statement begins before going on to note that “Catholics are particularly sensitive to the history of anti-Catholic bias that surfaced in the election of 1928 and in 1960.” The statement was prompted by recent comments by Pastor Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, at the Values Voter Summit, in which Jeffress suggested voters should prefer Christian candidates for office and called Mormonism “a cult.”

“The word ‘cult’ in its technical sense is unobjectionable,” Melady said at the press conference. “But in common usage it usually is filled with ridicule and sarcasm.” Melady added that “As Catholics, we have felt the sting of anti-religious bias in past elections.”

“There is so much hatred in our system right now,” said former U.S. Ambassador to Barbados Paul Russo. “It has to be combated. The pastor’s outrageous comments get covered but the response doesn’t always get as much attention. That’s why I was pleased to sign the statement.”

Professor Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America, recalled the anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic biases of the past. “This discrimination has never entirely gone away.” Schneck noted that in addition to the questions about former governors Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman on account of their membership in the Mormon church, there have been recent attacks on Congressman Steve Israel for being Jewish. “It is worth reminding ourselves about the value our diverse religious faiths bring to American public discourse.”

Melady indicated that the statement would be sent to the new ad hoc committee on religious liberty set up by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. “It would be incumbent upon us as U.S. citizens to combat bigotry,” Melady said.

The statement was signed by the great grandson of Gov. Al Smith, the first Catholic to be nominated for the presidency by a major political party in 1928. Other signatories include two former ambassadors to the Vatican, Raymond Flynn and Corrine Boggs, Frank Fahrenkopf, former Chairman of the Republican National Committee and Fred Rotondaro, Chair of the progressive Catholic organization Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good.

The full text of the statement:

The Religious Question in American Presidential Elections: A Statement by Catholic Lay Leaders

Two hundred and twenty three years ago our Founding Fathers established through our Constitution, a high ideal for religious tolerance and understanding. We have found this to be a long arduous journey to go from where we were as a country in the late 1700s to the present day. Progress remains to be accomplished. In

the past several decades Americans, of Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant faiths have been nominated to be a presidential or vice presidential candidate.

Catholics are particularly sensitive to the history of anti-Catholic bias that surfaced in the election of 1928 and in 1960. In the first case, the Catholic candidate, Al Smith, was not elected. There were certainly several reasons for it, but the shameful manifestation of religious bigotry throughout the country was not a valid reason or acceptable behavior in a Republic possessing the proclaimed ideals of these United States. There was less bigotry in 1960 when a Catholic candidate, John F. Kennedy, by a very narrow margin, was elected President. In the past several decades both Catholic and Jewish candidates were on the national political scene, and most Americans noted that there was less expression of religious bias or bigotry.

The recent expressions made from a Texas Pastor at a values conference in Washington D.C. bring to the forefront the unfortunate prospect that the discussion of a man's particular religious belief may become a major divisive political issue. While there is no question that a candidate's character, moral beliefs, and reputation for integrity should be subject to public review, there is significant danger to the goal of our forefathers; maintaining harmony and understanding among all faiths and rejecting bigoted questions and comments about personal religious beliefs. Article VI of the US Constitution states, "...no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

We the following, all Catholic citizens of different political persuasions, wish to cite our concern and our determination to assure that not only civility be maintained in the public discourse but that all inclinations to raise the issue of personal religious affiliation be avoided. As Catholics, we have felt the sting of bias in previous national elections. We share the concern of many of our citizens of all religious faiths that allowing the question of a candidate's religion to be subject to public ridicule is a grave regression from what we have accomplished in our forward movement as Americans since the establishment of our Republic.