Opinion

News



Members of the working group for the Faithful Citizenship document are seen Nov. 17 during the 2015 fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore: Archbishop Leonard Blair of Hartford, Conn.; Baltimore Archbishop William Lori; San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone; Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron and Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Later this week, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will hold its spring meeting in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. This meeting began as a retreat for the bishops but gradually, business items have been taken up as well. And, as in previous cycles, the bishops will begin discussing their quadrennial statement on voting, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."

According to the press release announcing the agenda, the bishops will discuss the ethical and religious directives for Catholic health care. That is a hot topic, in which conservative bumper stickers have replaced traditional Catholic moral theology in forming the opinions of many bishops. I hope sanity prevails. They will also be getting an update on the Encuentro process and other items.

Worrisome is the fact that the press release does not mention "Faithful Citizenship." I sent an email query to Judy Keane, director of public affairs, asking why there was no mention of the always controversial document in the press release announcing the meeting. "The press release is not comprehensive and is based on anticipated agenda items which are still subject to change," she replied. "I do not yet have access to the agenda but will post it as soon as it is available to me on our website under our assembly resource section. " I sincerely hope that last sentence is a fib: The director of public affairs should certainly "have access to the agenda" one week before a major meeting is held. If not, things are in even worse shape than I thought at the HQ.

NCR has learned that the working group on "Faithful Citizenship" is proposing that the bishops authorize the conference to produce two new elements: (1) a short letter to inspire prayer and action regarding public life, and (2) a short video and other secondary resources. These will complement, rather than revise or replace, the existing "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" document. You read that correctly: They are proposing to neither replace nor revise the existing document.

A little history is in order. The underlying text was drafted and approved by the bishops in 2007. So, it obviously included none of the magisterium of Pope Francis, and it also did not reflect the magisterium of Pope Benedict XVI regarding Catholic social teaching as his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, was not published until 2009. They kept that document for the 2012 cycle with the addition of an introductory note. In the last cycle, they made some limited revisions to the underlying text, adding a little bit of the vision of Pope Francis.

The little bits they added were not comprehensive and in one instance actually distorting. In the two paragraphs they added on "Care for Creation," the only substantial quote from *Laudato Si*' was the paragraph dealing with population control, which the pope opposed of course, but which was not the central theme of the encyclical. They mention the need for sustainable energy but the language is devoid of the sense of urgency the pope's encyclical conveyed. Unsurprisingly, they do not squarely condemn the insidious efforts of some to undermine the scientific consensus on the human contribution to disastrous climate change. How could they when the same people who largely fund those efforts, the extraction industry titans, the Koch Brothers, are likewise funding the bishops' own business school at the Catholic University of America!

Needless to say, the decision to recommend no new text, or even a revision to the document approved in 2015, does not contain the Holy Father's clear teaching in the recently released apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*. In paragraphs 101 and 102, Pope Francis writes:

> *The other harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. Our defence of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of*

> *human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. …*
>
> *We often hear it said that, with respect to relativism and the flaws of our present world, the situation of migrants, for example, is a lesser issue. Some Catholics consider it a secondary issue compared to the 'grave' bioethical questions. That a politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children. Can we not realize that this is exactly what Jesus demands of us, when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome him (cf. Mt 25:35)?*

I wonder why a group of U.S. bishops would not want to include these very clear, very instructive words? Hmmmm.

A careful reading of "Faithful Citizenship" will show that the underlying text avoids the error of saying it is intrinsically evil to vote for a pro-choice politician. It affirms the role of conscience in making decisions about how to vote. It does not call for denying Communion to anyone. In short, in 2007, the bishops as a whole beat back some of the crazier ambitions of then-Archbishop Raymond Burke and those of like mind. Nonetheless, it has been used, better to say abused, by many on the right to suggest that the category of "intrinsic evil" has relevance to public policy (it doesn't), that abortion is the preeminent issue, even if the pro-life candidate is not running for an office where he or she can be expected to have any impact on the issue, and to prostitute other key concepts of Catholic social teaching such as "prudential judgment" which has been turned into a get-out-of-jail-free card for Republicans on all issues except abortion and same-sex marriage.

In addition to the developments in magisterial teaching, the idea of adopting a 2015 text with no changes whatsoever is to suggest that there is no moral significance to our president's derision of the rule of law, to his administration's cruel and inhumane treatment of vulnerable migrants, or to his decisions to pull the United States out of two of the most consequential multilateral international agreements in years, the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal. None of that warrants the bishops rolling up their sleeves and getting to work on a new text?

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I actually believe that the desire to minimize the magisterium of Pope Francis and the desire not to offend Mr. Trump, neither of these were determinative, although they were significant, in the decision of the working group to recommend no revisions to the 2015 text. I suspect the principal reason they wish to avoid revising the text is because this proposal requires only a simple majority vote, while a revised text would demand a two-thirds majority. You will recall that in 2012, the bishops could not pass a proposed statement on the economy when 134 bishops voted to approve what was an inadequate statement, but 84 voted no, denying the document the two-thirds needed for passage. Today, the bishops are so polarized, I am not sure the Gospel of Matthew could procure a two-thirds majority vote.

I have a suggestion. The bishops who do not think of the pontificate of Francis as a bit of bad weather they hope will soon pass, they should get together and draft a short, five-page statement to replace Faithful Citizenship. They should propose it as an amendment. If it fails, so what? They can issue it in their own dioceses under their own names. And we will all know who does, and who doesn't, think it is important to stand with Pope Francis and accept the mantle of leadership in this fraught time for our democracy. If the bishops and the staff at the conference cannot come up with a document that speaks to the Catholics of this country at this morally demanding moment in history, why not get out of the way and let Pope Francis appoint bishops who can do so?

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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