Opinion



Bishops attend the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 11 in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

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What a mess.

It doesn't take an ecclesiologist to arrive at that conclusion about the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops after witnessing its dysfunction during the group's recent meeting in Baltimore.

If there is an upside to the proceedings, it is that neither the bishops nor the faithful need any longer pretend that the church is being led competently or that the bishops are acting in unity.

What has become clear is that too many of the bishops still are captives of the political culture wars; that the conference as a whole has been drained of authority and credibility because of the ongoing sexual abuse scandal; and that the bishops have been frozen in place by their inability to collectively and honestly examine the secretive, privileged culture that was the pathway to the current mess.

For decades, the bishops have staked their claim to moral leadership on a singular political approach toward opposing abortion. That approach became a point of bitter contention at the recent meeting.

Many faithful Catholics believe that opposing abortion should remain the unparalleled concern of the conference because, as one bishop put it, the matter deals directly with the family and because of the numbers of abortions involved.

Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput affirmed that abortion has held the top spot as an issue for the bishops for years. Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, placed the bishops squarely in the stream of partisan politics when he argued: "We are at a unique moment with the upcoming election cycle to make a real challenge to *Roe* v. *Wade*, given the possible changes to the Supreme Court. We should not dilute our efforts to protect the unborn."

That is a thinly disguised endorsement of not only the Republican Party but also the Trump administration. In more than 40 years of pursuing the narrow objective of a legal remedy to abortion, the bishops have placed themselves at the service of those who want to load the courts with conservative judges, but they've accomplished little, continuous polling tells us, to persuade anyone of their point of view, including Catholics.

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That kind of distortion of the Gospel message and the church's social justice teachings is an example of what Pope Francis describes as a "harmful ideological error." The additional tragedy is that along the way the bishops have made it easy for politicians who oppose abortion to ignore everything else on the social justice agenda.

In his exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Francis explains at length why he advocates what has also been called a seamless garment approach to life issues. Because some of the language taken out of context can become divisive talking points on the Catholic right, it is worthwhile to quote the sections at length:

> 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 defense 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 cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.

Francis goes on to criticize those who view the plight of migrants as "a lesser issue" or "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."

The majority of bishops this year voted for phrasing in the worn-out document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," that makes abortion "the preeminent priority" of our era, when it was clearly pointed out that Catholic social teaching

makes no such claim. Meanwhile, the outgoing president of the conference described climate change as "not urgent."

It's not the first time this group has snubbed the pope. And one can only presume it won't be the last. It's been four years since Francis released his apostolic exhortation "*Laudato Si*, On Care for Our Common Home," and there hasn't been a significant moment dedicated to it in the meetings since.

It's been three years since *Amoris Laetitia*, an exhortation following a multi-year synodal process on pressing questions facing the Catholic community. Is it preposterous to think that bishops might spend some time discussing the ways that document speaks to the real problems of real people and what dioceses might do to implement the teaching?

In addition to the bishops' refusal or inability to deal with the fresh and compelling thinking emanating from this papacy, they have avoided, save for a few isolated voices, dealing with current conditions in the church at home. The church in the United States is experiencing huge demographic shifts, a bleed-out of young people, and a stasis in ordinations — the rate has been essentially the same for more than four decades. Yet very little conversation has occurred at the episcopal level about creative approaches to the future. The only visible change seems to be the continuing ordination of legions of permanent deacons, another thick layer of male clericalism highlighting the exclusion of women from church governance and ministerial roles.

The U.S. bishops probably constitute one of the most resistant episcopal audiences Francis faces in the global church. The consequences of the papacy of Pope John Paul II, who demanded absolute loyalty, brooked no questions and allowed the politics of abortion to become the preeminent preoccupation of the U.S. bishops, are far-reaching. Francis is asking for a church of far greater dimension and complexity. Such a change is long in the making.

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