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Serious Catholics wind up 'politically homeless' in America

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

So far, I've managed to avoid devoting a single "All Things Catholic" column to the 2008 elections. Secular politics isn't my beat, and anyway, it seemed desirable that there be a reporter left in America following something other than the stock market and Obama vs. McCain.

Along the line, however, that determination began to feel more like stubbornness than good journalistic judgment, given all that's at stake and the obvious passion people feel for the subject. On the lecture circuit I've been repeatedly asked for a take on the election, and so this week I'll summarize what I typically say in terms of three points to ponder about seeing the race through Catholic eyes -- points which, at least from where I sit, have not yet attracted the consideration they merit.

First, a disclaimer: This is not one of those nod-and-a-wink exercises, technically phrased in non-partisan language but obviously crafted to support one candidate or another. There's plenty of that already in Catholic discourse, from a handful of bishops on down. Instead, I'd like to try to think for a moment beyond Nov. 4, to the long-term implications of these elections for Catholicism in America.

Political Homelessness

Most analyses of the "Catholic vote" presume there are three basic camps: pro-Obama Catholics, pro-

McCain Catholics, and the undecided. For purposes of electoral handicapping, that's a natural way of slicing the pie, but it neglects another important constituency. This block has no candidate, no network of think-tanks and advocacy groups, and it only registers indirectly in the polls: Catholics alienated from both parties, who aren't undecided but rather disenfranchised.

I was in Baltimore earlier this week for a speaking engagement, and fell into conversation with a bright young Catholic theologian who offered a terrific sound-bite for this camp: "I can't help thinking that both parties are addicted to preemptive strikes," he told me, "whether it's in the womb or on the battlefield."

John Carr, a veteran policy expert for the U.S. bishops, has said that Catholics who take the church's social teaching seriously wind up "politically homeless" in America. Just like the real homeless out on American streets, the politically homeless are often forgotten, but that doesn't mean they don't exist.

If you want proof of the point, just look at the data from the Pew Forum about the preferences of religious sub-groups. The results for white Evangelicals, white mainline Protestants and black Protestants form flat lines since June; their attitudes haven't really budged in statistically significant fashion. White non-Hispanic Catholics, on the other hand, have oscillated dramatically. In July, they were going 47-44 for Obama; in late September, it was 52-39 for McCain; and by early October, it was 54-39 for Obama. One obvious reading is that there's a sizeable chunk of the Catholic population that simply isn't persuaded by either guy.

Here's a thought exercise: In the abstract, what would the political fortunes be in America of a candidate who actually embodied the full range of Catholic social concerns? What would happen if a serious candidate came along who's pro-life, pro-family, anti-war, pro-immigrant, anti-death penalty, pro-sustainable development, and a multi-lateralist in foreign policy concerned with religious freedom and a robust role for believers in public life? My hunch is that such a candidate could be attractive to a broad cross-section of moderates and independents. The machinery of both major parties, however, appears almost designed to prevent such a person from ever being nominated.

After Nov. 4, Catholics on the winning side will start scrambling for various forms of access and patronage from the new administration, while those who backed the loser will start organizing the opposition. In other words, both the victors and the vanquished in American politics know exactly what to do once the smoke from battle clears.

For disenfranchised Catholics, the road ahead is far less clear. For what it's worth, my own reading is that it's no use trying an end-run around the two-party system. If a holistic Catholic sensibility is ever going to cut ice in American politics, it will have to come from one of the two parties being hijacked from within -- the way Reagan moved the goalposts for the Republicans, or Clinton for the Democrats. (Or, if you prefer an overseas example, the way that Blair built "New Labour.")

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In that light, it would be an interesting experiment if a network of Catholic policy groups, activists, and intellectuals were to take shape once election season is over, devoted to laying the groundwork for influencing both parties from within. I'm talking not just about making compelling arguments, but doing the hard nuts-and-bolts work of political organizing, including identifying potential candidates and making them battle-ready.

All that would, of course, require time, money, and expertise, and I'm not sure where any of it might come from. In the absence of such an effort, however, many of the best and brightest in American Catholicism are doomed to feel perpetually alienated, forever choosing between the lesser of two evils. While no political system is ever perfect, the question these Catholics are asking is: Can't we do better than this?

Beyond Nov. 4

When the U.S. bishops gather in Baltimore for their fall meeting Nov. 10-13, just six days after the election, they plan to discuss the hot-button topic of abortion and politics for the third time as a conference.

To some extent, this discussion was thrust upon them when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Sen. Joseph Biden decided to award themselves honorary degrees in theology and to publicly challenge the bishops' reading of Catholic teaching on abortion. Whatever else one might say about it, that move was destined to provoke a backlash from the bishops, and the agenda item in Baltimore is one clear result.

Quite probably, the bishops will travel one more time down the well-worn grooves of their discussions from 2004: What should the pastoral response be to a Catholic politician who votes in favor of abortion rights? Does such a vote constitute "formal cooperation" in abortion under canon law, triggering automatic excommunication? What about Catholics who assert there are other ways to be "pro-life" beyond seeking the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*?

Those are notoriously hard questions, and there's little reason to believe the bishops are closer to a consensus than they were four years ago. In a sense, however, talking about them after the election is over is a bit like a general still fighting the last war.

If the polls are to be believed, there's a strong likelihood that by the time the bishops gather in Baltimore, President-elect Obama's team will be hard at work just down the BW Parkway organizing its hold on power. In that event, the *Realpolitik* question for the bishops becomes how they want to carry forward their relationship with the new administration.

To put a sharper point on the question, an Obama victory will almost certainly mean that the odds of reversing *Roe v. Wade* become remote, at least in the short term. Do the bishops want their relationship with an Obama White House to be dominated by a political and judicial struggle they almost certainly can't win? Or would it be more prudent to seek common ground -- for example, on immigration reform, health care and attacking the social conditions that sometimes drive poor and vulnerable women to consider abortion in the first place?

Ironically, this may be easier nut for the Vatican to crack than the U.S. bishops. The Vatican has centuries of experience in dealing with regimes that, in one way or another, are hostile to church teaching. When Pope Benedict XVI travelled to Spain in July 2006, for example, many analysts expected an Ali/Frazier-style prizefight with Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who has done battle with the Catholic church on every imaginable front: same-sex marriage, divorce, abortion, stem cell research and more. While the pope laid down unambiguous markers about the church's positions, his overall thrust was positive. In an interview shortly after the trip, Benedict suggested it's better to present attractive models of Christian life rather than forever stressing what the church is against. When he and Zapatero met in Valencia, they also identified areas of agreement on inter-cultural dialogue, peace-making and multi-lateral approaches to foreign affairs.

Should Obama prevail, the question the U.S. bishops will face is whether they want to pursue a similar policy of constructive engagement, or one of unrelenting opposition. Naturally, this isn't an either/or choice, and no doubt the bishops will do some of both. It's a question of accent and emphasis, and their Nov. 10-13 session should offer the first indication of how this may shake out. In truth, however, this isn't a question just for the bishops, but for all Catholics who care about the intersection of faith and public life.

Communion in a Divided Church

All the polling these days shows Catholics fairly evenly divided between Obama and McCain, with Obama enjoying a slight edge. That result more or less mirrors trends among voters in the overall national population.

The split among Catholics is conventionally understood through the lens of Red States vs. Blue States, meaning the divide between the church's liberal and conservative wings. There's obviously some truth to that; while most Catholic pro-life groups, bloggers, and some media outlets skew to both the theological and political right, a substantial share of the Catholic academy, in tandem with other media outlets and a galaxy of peace-and-justice activists, leans to the political and theological left. That division helps explain the contrasting preferences of some Catholic voters.

Less noticed, however, is another reality about Catholic demography in America that lends logic to the polls. Beneath the overall split, one finds a clear division between white and Hispanic Catholics. Despite the swings noted above in the preferences of white Catholics, they remain at least 25-30 percentage points more likely to support McCain than Hispanic Catholics. Obama may have had a "Hispanic problem" in the primaries, but it's largely disappeared in the general election.

Beyond their implications for the presidential horse race, these results point to a deeper truth about Catholicism in America: In some ways, we are at risk of becoming two separate churches. One church is white, affluent, well-educated, and votes on the basis of ideologies of either the right or the left; the other is Hispanic, disproportionately poor and under-educated, concerned with advancing its class interests, and votes Democratic -- a "back to the future" dynamic reminiscent of the blue-collar, ethnic Catholicism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. These are, obviously, over-generalizations, but nonetheless they highlight something real.

In principle, this diversity is marvelous. It becomes dysfunctional, however, if these Catholic subgroups aren't talking to one another, and in some ways come to see one another as the opposition.

As the Hispanic presence in American Catholicism continues to swell, the centrifugal pressures will only become more intense. Increasingly, Catholics at all levels will have to ponder how we can foster a sense of being one church, one family of faith, despite our growing diversity -- and, at times, our deep divisions.

The challenge of fostering communion may, in fact, be the deepest question posed by the '08 elections for American Catholics, even if it's not one given much space on political blogs or newspaper op/ed pages. One hopes that it, too, surfaces when the bishops gather in Baltimore to take stock.

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