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Postmortem of the bishops' meeting; U.S. relations with the Holy See

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

From the outside, it's tempting to conclude that a hard-line position on abortion prevailed among the U.S. bishops during their Nov. 10-13 fall meeting in Baltimore. That seems to be the impression people got from news reports; one prominent American Jewish leader called me on Wednesday, for example, to ask why the bishops were the first major group in the country to fire a "shot across the bow" of the incoming Obama administration.

To be sure, that reaction has a basis in reality. The bishops were remarkably compact in their determination that there will be no "truce," as Bishop Daniel Conlon of Steubenville, Ohio, put it, in their defense of unborn life. The bishops seem especially galvanized in opposition to the Freedom of Choice Act, or FOCA, which would bar restrictions on abortion at state and federal levels such as parental notification laws or limits on partial birth abortion, and which, according to worst-case readings, could eventually put Catholic hospitals in the position of either providing abortions or closing their doors.

In truth, however, the fact that the bishops confirmed their opposition to abortion seems a classic "dog bites man" bit of news. Beyond that utterly predictable result, the bishops can seem "hard-line" only by the standards of secular opinion; to anyone who knows the realities of intra-Catholic debate, the picture looks much different.

Perhaps the greatest paradox of Catholic life in America has long been that abortion is one of the few

contentious issues where Catholics are basically in agreement. It's tough to find many Catholics who disagree that abortion is always a tragedy, and that a world without abortion would be a better world. Yet abortion also fuels the most painful divisions in the church, because Catholics are split in three other ways:

- First, whether opposition to abortion necessarily implies efforts to outlaw it. Catholic Democrats often argue that a "reduction strategy" of social policies in support of women and children are more effective, not to mention less divisive. Pro-lifers, however, often compare such arguments to the false compromises of the 19th century over slavery, insisting that sooner or later the country has to face the issue itself -- whether it will allow the legal destruction of a whole category of human beings, or not.
- Second, how much weight abortion should carry among the church's social concerns. For one camp, abortion is the contemporary Holocaust, and to pretend that any other issue is comparable is a kind of moral blindness. Others insist that the church should have a "consistent ethic of life" giving comparable weight to matters such as poverty, health care, and war.
- Third, how punitive to be with Catholics, especially politicians, who don't support legal restrictions on abortion. Some argue for dialogue, while others are firmly convinced that pro-choice Catholics must be denied communion -- on the grounds, as Jim Sedlak, vice-president of the American Life League, put it in a thundering address outside the bishops' hotel in Baltimore, "You can't say abortion is a sin against God, and then deliver that God into the hands of those who vote for abortion."

In truth, only on the first of these points can one meaningfully talk about a clear victory for the more "hard-line" position in Baltimore. The bishops were crystal clear that it's not enough merely to favor reducing abortions, as desirable as that result would be; ultimately, they affirmed, human life must also be protected in law. As Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the conference, put it in his opening address, "The common good can never be adequately incarnated in any society when those waiting to be born can be legally killed at choice." At the end, George drew a standing ovation.

On the other two questions, however, the discussion suggested lingering tensions among the bishops, and in neither case did the "hard-line" view clearly have the upper hand.

To be clear, there was no real dissent from a consensus that abortion must be a towering social and political priority. There were, however, differing accents on how exclusive the focus should be, and how confrontational the advocacy should be.

Bishop Blase Cupich of Rapid City, South Dakota, for example, warned that "a prophecy of denunciation quickly wears thin," arguing that "we must be, and be seen to be, caring pastors as well as faithful teachers." Archbishop Elden Curtiss of Omaha, Nebraska, urged his brother bishops "not to be seen as being deliberately divisive now, or creating division by our actions."

Perhaps the clearest evidence came in Tuesday's election for the new chair of the bishops' Committee on Communications. To some extent, the bishop who holds that job plays a role as a public spokesperson for the conference.

This time around, the race pitted Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., against Auxiliary Bishop Gabino Zavala of Los Angeles. It offered a sharp contrast between what one might call the "hard-line" and the "moderate" blocs in the conference. Prior to the election, Finn had warned Catholics considering a vote for Obama that their "eternal salvation" was at risk, while Zavala said that "we're not a single-issue church" and that issues such as "racism, torture, genocide, immigration, war, and the impact of the economic downturn" deserve consideration alongside abortion.

In the end, Zavala won by a margin of 129 votes to Finn's 97, meaning 57 percent to 43 percent. Though one shouldn't over-interpret that result, it's nonetheless intriguing that the moderate notched a clear victory.

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There also seemed precious little appetite in Baltimore for revisiting the question of communion bans. On the margins of the meeting, for example, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., told reporters he would not seek to deny communion to Vice-President-elect Joseph Biden after he becomes the country's first Catholic vice-president in January.

For a rough indication of the temper of the conference, consider the evolution of the language on Catholic politicians in the statement issued on Wednesday.

Before the conference opened, the Committee on Pro-Life Activities prepared a draft statement which included fairly strong language to the effect that Catholics who do not follow church teaching on abortion should not receive communion. By Tuesday, when George led the bishops in a public discussion, the language had been softened in his talking points to expressing a desire that "all Catholics in public life be fully committed to the common good," and that communion in the church "may always be complete."

By the time the statement actually appeared on Wednesday, the language was even more diplomatic: The bishops, it said, "want to thank all those in politics who work with good will to protect the lives of the most vulnerable among us. Those in public life do so, sometimes, at the cost of great sacrifice to themselves and their families; and we are grateful. We express again our great desire to work with all those who cherish the common good of our nation. The common good is not the sum total of individual desires and interests; it is achieved in the working out of a common life based upon good reason and good will for all."

The way things were left obviously chafed with some bishops, who believe the time has come for a more muscular approach.

"At some point this conference will have to address its reticence to speak to Catholic politicians who are not just reluctant, but stridently anti-life," said Bishop Joseph Martino of Scranton, Pa. Martino argued that in an earlier era, when some Catholic politicians supported racist laws, Catholic bishops of the time

"spoke strongly and took canonical measures against them."

Yet in comments to reporters Tuesday afternoon, George suggested that Martino's comparison was inexact, since there's a difference between being openly racist and saying that one privately opposes abortion but won't vote to impose that view in the civil law. George also said the question of whether a pro-choice vote constitutes "formal cooperation" in abortion, under the classic categories of canon law and moral theology, "would have to be studied."

The bottom line on Baltimore, therefore, seems that the bishops set a course unlikely to fully satisfy either pole in Catholic debate -- far too explicit for the "common ground" constituency, yet not tough enough for the most militant pro-lifers.

What all this bodes for relations between the bishops and the Obama administration remains to be seen. At least in the early days, the stars seem aligned for confrontation, since the president-elect's team has said he plans to sign executive orders lifting restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research and on abortion counseling services by NGOs in various parts of the world. Certainly if the administration moves forward with FOCA, it doesn't take an oracle to predict that the bishops will let slip the dogs of war.

Yet there were also indications of openness in Baltimore to collaboration with Obama on other fronts; George's statement mentioned "economic justice and opportunity for all; immigration and the situation of the undocumented; better education and adequate health care for all, especially for women and children; [and] religious freedom and peace at home and abroad."

Whatever else one might say about it, that's not such a hard-line position as to make the bishops nothing more than chaplains to Obama's opposition. Reading Baltimore that way doesn't do justice to what actually happened, nor to what might happen from here, depending upon how the bishops and the White House navigate both the peril and the promise of their relationship.

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Speaking of relations between Obama and the church, readers may recall that last week I offered an open letter to Obama advising him to "pick up the phone" should the pope call, or, better yet, to initiate the conversation himself.

Though I can claim no credit whatsoever for the result, the president-elect did precisely that on Tuesday. Obama phoned Pope Benedict XVI to thank him for his expression of congratulations, part of a round of calls that also included President Luiz Lula da Silva of Brazil, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India, King Abdullah of Jordan and President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesperson, said the pope and the president-elect did not discuss contentious issues, such as the prospect that Obama might lift restrictions on funding of embryonic stem

cell research. This was largely a "getting to know you" call, though it happened to take place on the same day that the Vatican's top official on health care, in a different context, reiterated the church's opposition to the destruction of embryos.

Now we'll have to see if Obama takes the other bit of unsolicited advice I offered, which is that he appoint a serious ambassador to the Vatican -- someone known to have his ear, who can move the ball on areas of common concern.

Here's one additional thought on that score. The Obama team could expand the talent pool by not restricting the search, at least initially, to Catholics. Though it's been the American tradition to appoint Catholics since full diplomatic relations were launched in 1984 under President Ronald Reagan, there's no legal requirement to that effect, and other countries do not always send Catholics. (For example, the current Ambassador of the United Kingdom, Francis Campbell, is the first Catholic to hold the job since the era of Henry VIII.)

There's one practical reason why it might be wise for Obama to think outside the Catholic box. Many of the most prominent Catholics in the Democratic Party are pro-choice, and trying to send a pro-choice Catholic to Rome would be seen by the Vatican as provocative. Under international law, the host country has the right to refuse a prospective ambassador for any reason, and it wouldn't be good for anyone if the opening chapter in this relationship involved the Vatican spurning the new administration's envoy.

Of course, it's desirable that the Vatican ambassador know something about the church, which is one reason the position has gone to a Catholic. Yet my conversations with senior Vatican diplomats over the years suggest that they would much rather have a serious ambassador with real influence in the government he or she represents, regardless of religious affiliation, than an inexperienced Catholic who got the job largely as a "thank you" for support during the campaign.

In any event, this will be the first important decision by the new administration with regard to Vatican relations. For a host of reasons, one prays they get it right.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is jallen@ncronline.org

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