

A Question on the Meaning of Silence

Joe Feuerherd | May. 22, 2009 NCR Today

Approximately 80 US bishops spoke out against Notre Dame's decision to invite President Obama to speak at the university's commencement ceremony, which means that about 190 bishops offered no public comment on the controversy.

It's frequently said, particularly in progressive Catholic circles, that the vast majority of the bishops who remain silent on controversies such as

Obama's speech or denying communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians generally favor a more liberal line (these two issues are not, of course, entirely comparable, and the terms "liberal," "conservative" and "progressive" are too broad, but you get the idea).

The only data that I've ever seen used to support the contention that the silent majority of bishops are more liberal than their more vocal colleagues are the elections held within the bishops' conference. There, almost invariably, when a hard line conservative bishop faces off against a colleague perceived as more moderate, the conservative loses.

To the question: Is there anything, beyond these elections and, perhaps, intuition, that provides a basis for the belief that silence on such issues equates with a more liberal stance?

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