

Call to the bishops: 'build on hope, not fear'

David O'Brien | Jun. 18, 2009



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Essay

As Catholic bishops gather in San Antonio this week, they face some tough questions. Their most recent engagements with politics sharpened divisions within the church and left the bishops shaken, even embarrassed.

Many church leaders harshly criticized the University of Notre Dame, long beloved by Catholics, because its administration invited President Obama to give the commencement. The local bishop decided to boycott the event, and one of the country's most respected lay leaders, Mary Ann Glendon, turned down an honor that she had earlier accepted. Highly publicized attacks on Notre Dame and on the president of the United States took place as the most radical anti-abortion groups harassed university officials and students.

But Notre Dame's graduates and their families enthusiastically welcomed President Obama, listened attentively to his persuasive address, and cheered an eloquent introduction by Notre Dame President John Jenkins, C.S.C. Notre Dame emerged strengthened by the controversy while the bishops seemed isolated and at odds with a significant portion of their Catholic flock.

The shrill reaction of many bishops to President Obama's election and visit to Notre Dame reflected a grim image of an embattled church hunkered down against hostile enemies. This defensive posture seemed curious, given the fact that a majority of Catholics voted for Obama, and the president appears to echo Catholic moral priorities when he calls for fair economic recovery, universal health care, comprehensive immigration reform, nuclear disarmament and steps to combat global climate change.

The bishops worry about Obama's earlier support for legislation to remove restrictions on abortion, but he has made it clear this is not among his legislative priorities. Instead, on issues of profound disagreement such as abortion and embryonic stem cell research, the president consistently reaches out to pro-life leaders and demonstrates a genuine desire to find common ground. At Notre Dame, he promised to support a "reasonable conscience clause" and again invited pro-life and pro-choice factions to join together in efforts to reduce the number of abortions.

With the support of Republican politicians who benefit from the abortion "culture wars," well organized extremists like Randall Terry -- a recent convert to Catholicism-- exert powerful pressure on the bishops to single out this issue from the seamless fabric of Catholic social teaching.

Only a few seem able to resist. One who does so is retired San Francisco Archbishop Emeritus John Quinn. As

the ugly rhetoric heated up this spring, Quinn argued that even where there are grave divisions as there are on abortion, Catholics should recognize that it is in the interest of both the church and the nation to work together in civility, honesty, and friendship for the common good.

President Obama struck a similar tone at Notre Dame when he challenged those with strong convictions to bring open hearts, open minds and fair-minded words to the public debate.

The bishops might consider this challenge as they meet this week. Catholic teaching best serves the common good when it is guided by hope rather than fear, and elevates rather than debases public discourse.

Guided by that spirit in the 1980s, the Catholic bishops, led by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, opened a national dialogue about nuclear weapons. Their 1983 pastoral statement on this issue helped clarify the moral responsibilities of citizens and public officials.

The bishops want to do the same on abortion, but so far they have failed, perhaps in part because they have forgotten how Cardinal Bernardin received a fair hearing for Catholic teaching. Before offering moral commentary on nuclear war, and a few years later on economic policy, Cardinal Bernardin and his fellow bishops engaged in genuine dialogue with Americans of all parties and with their own Catholic people. When they finally spoke they were informed, respectful and persuasive.

Catholic bishops have an obligation to speak out passionately for the sanctity of life, and when they do so after appropriate consultation and careful reflection, they enrich American public life. Catholic teaching on abortion, stem cells, assisted suicide, capital punishment and sexual ethics may not always find sympathetic ears, even among Catholics. But the church and its people have long experience on these matters, and they confront these questions today in every part of the world.

In recent years, the church has reaffirmed Christian teachings on human dignity, human rights, and shared responsibility for the common good, core values central to renewing the promises of our democracy. Occasionally, the church's positive witness for human dignity and solidarity is weakened by self-interested factions whose rhetoric fans the flames of division rather than unites people behind a shared moral purpose. When those who are properly shocked by genuine assaults on human life use the dramatic metaphors of war, the Holocaust and slavery, they give up hope of persuading the public, building consensus and solving the problem.

If, in the case of abortion, Americans and their president are as bad as Notre Dame's critics charged, then there really is no other choice for Christians but withdrawal from corrupted institutions and civil disobedience. But few of the critics, so far, have chosen monasteries or jail cells. They want to win and to do so they need to renew their commitment to the disciplines of democracy. President Obama, again and again, offers opportunities for this reasoned engagement.

The recent murder of abortion doctor George Tiller in his church underscores the importance of persuading pro-life and pro-choice supporters to join this search for common ground. Senior White House staff is committed to facilitating this process, while Congress has put forward several packages of abortion reduction legislation like the Pregnant Women Support Act. There is real possibility that these efforts can not only reduce the number of abortions and support pregnant women, but help end the polarized abortion culture wars that have in years past often paralyzed our public debates.

Furthermore, as debates over health care and comprehensive immigration reform heat up, Catholic bishops will be needed as powerful advocates for justice. Catholic hospitals, churches and social service organizations are on the front lines every day serving the sick and welcoming the strangers. Our nation is better off because the bishops so often speak up for the poor and most vulnerable.

The church and its bishops have the capacity to do so again, effectively, without in any way compromising their concern for the unborn. More than ever before our nation could use the wisdom Catholicism can offer. San Antonio may be the place for the bishops to make a new start.

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