

A bigger and more robust Catholicism

Tom Roberts | Jun. 25, 2009 NCR Today

More Catholics are more visibly active in the Obama administration than in any other administration in recent memory, [reports Jerry Filteau](#) [1]. That realization in itself is no small thing for Catholics but the larger significance could be that the culture finally understands that Catholicism represents far more than a one- or two-issue culture war.

For too long the religious right, including Catholic thinkers adept at wringing the tough parts out of the beatitudes, crafted a version of civil Christianity that hewed disturbingly close to the ambitions of the state, blessing unbridled capitalism, military adventurism and extreme individualism. We're paying for all of that now, and I don't hear anyone asking why God's made such a mess of things.

One can only hope that the presence of Catholics in government who view serving the common good as the highest calling will bring a greater range of the church's riches, its teachings particularly about the dignity of each person, to an ever greater range of issues. As I've heard it put recently, being Catholic means being against abortion, but being opposed to abortion doesn't make one Catholic. And being against abortion doesn't mean there's only one approach to the problem.

I certainly have my own considerable arguments with Obama, particularly over a range of military/security issues, but I also think the administration holds enormous potential for seeking the common good in ways we haven't seen in decades. The irony, of course, is that we have a president more conversant with Catholic social teaching than any in my lifetime and he's got to strain to have a conversation with Catholic leaders.

If there is a renaissance of Catholic presence in politics at the level of the administration, it began amid the frustration many felt during the campaign of 2004 with Sen. John Kerry's inability to articulate what his Catholic faith meant to him in any coherent or convincing fashion. In a larger sense, lacking as well were any voices who could articulate what it meant to be a Catholic presence in the political world other than to be against abortion.

Out of the frustration grew several groups that found a way to clearly and quickly state the values that Catholic teaching brings to the issues of the day, and those groups — Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, Catholic Democrats, Catholics United, to name some — along with more established organizations like Network, were no small reason for the change in tone of the conversation.

At their hands, Catholicism became bigger and more robust and, as a consequence, so did Christianity as a whole on the American landscape. Our political discourse has benefitted immensely from the injection of new thought and energy and the application of a broader religious sensibility to a wide range of issues.

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/news/politics/progressive-catholics-home-obama-administration>