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The Bishop of Brooklyn Gets Political

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

The fracas in Brooklyn over the recording by Bishop DiMarzio on behalf of a candidate is telling in many ways, but none more so than the way the Church's culture tends to lag behind the mainstream culture. DiMarzio is old enough to remember a time when dealings between the Church and the State were conducted personally, and when the laity were not inclined to question their religious leaders, and religious leaders were not inclined to become publicly involved in political storms. Those days are gone.

We saw another leftover of the old days earlier this year when a Connecticut legislator questioned the way Catholic parishes were incorporated in that state. Those laws were put on the books in the 1950s and, without any particular historical research, I can guarantee nonetheless that what happened in the 1950s was the Governor of Connecticut called the Archbishop of Hartford and asked, "How do you want us to do this?"

As the Church's hierarchy decides where it will stand on the final health care bill, it is good to remember that those days are gone. One of the saddest things I heard all year was when a lifelong Catholic activist was wondering about what stance the USCCB would take and he said, "Well, of course they will oppose it. They're Republicans." This called to mind the statement, perhaps apocryphal, of John Kennedy when running for the presidency: "The Monsignors are against me but the nuns are all for me."

Bishop DiMarzio should not lend his name to any office seeker, of course. He may have jeopardized the tax-exempt status of his diocese, although I doubt you will find a prosecutor in the Big Apple who is interested in a long, public fight with a man of the cloth over such an incident. No matter how bishops engage the political process, they need to be prudent. As they gather later this month for their annual meeting, they can start their examination of how the Church involves itself with politics by looking first at themselves.

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