

So much for the 'irrelevance' of the bishops

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 11, 2009 NCR Today

Passage of the Stupack Amendment in the House of Representatives, applying existing bans on federal funding for abortion to any new government health programs, has left pro-choice activists fuming. The primary villains of the piece, in their eyes, are the Catholic bishops of America.

The Associated Press has a story today quoting Eleanor Smeal of the Feminist Majority to the effect that the bishops "dictated" the outcome, and that it's "totally inappropriate" blatant interference between church and state. In a similar vein, Rep. Diana DeGette, a pro-choice Democrat from Colorado, said, "No one group should get to dictate the outcome of legislation in Congress. I don't think one group should be given veto authority over what we do."

One can obviously debate the merits of the bishops' role, but for now I want to put this story to a different use: As an object lesson in the hazards of predicting the future.

Trying to get a handle on the future of Catholicism is, of course, the *raison d'être* of *The Future Church*, which makes the caution I'm about to deliver all the more topical.

Think back to 2002/2003, the white-hot period of the sexual abuse crisis in the American church. The eyes of the world were upon the church, and a whole cottage industry quickly sprung up attempting to explain what the crisis meant. One popular diagnosis at the time was that the crisis had so badly compromised the moral authority of the American bishops, so badly tarred their reputation, that they would become all but irrelevant.

Because the bishops had lost the ability to lead their own flocks, or so the theory went, politicians would have no reason to take them seriously, and hence the bishops' capacity to influence public policy would be essentially zero.

Obviously, that prediction isn't looking so good today.

That's not to say, of course, that the sex abuse crisis wasn't (and isn't still) an enormous blow to the image of the church and the bishops, or that it hasn't taken a toll on the capacity of the bishops both to govern the church from within and to influence the world on the outside. Yet, it clearly has not generated the "irrelevance" some predicted.

It's elementary logic (the law of the excluded middle, "P or not-P") that the bishops can't be both "irrelevant" and, simultaneously, in a position to "dictate" the course of the most important domestic policy initiative in a generation. One can argue that they're inconsequential, or that they're exercising way too much influence, but they can't be both at the same time.

Bottom line for the fine art of futurology: Smack dab in the middle of a crisis is usually a bad moment to try to decide what its long-term significance is likely to be. In that sense, however the process of health care reform eventually shakes out, it's already offered a valuable lesson for anyone thinking about the future of the church.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/22/2017 - 01:58): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/so-much-irrelevance-bishops>