

Bishops in the spotlight: Return of the culture wars?

John Gehring | Dec. 2, 2009



(CNS photo)

Roman Catholic bishops have made front page news recently by wielding significant influence over health care debates in Congress. Many pundits and politicians are outraged at the bishops for ensuring passage of the controversial Stupak amendment, which critics argue rolls back access to a legal medical procedure as part of health care reform. Some lawmakers have questioned the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' tax exempt status.

"Do Catholic Bishops Run the United States Government?" a recent Huffington Post headline harrumphed. One editorial cartoon depicted the U.S. Capitol dome replaced by the dome of St. Peter's Basilica. As a Catholic and progressive who values my faith tradition's commitment to the common good on such diverse issues as poverty reduction, immigration reform, nuclear disarmament and health care, I've been grappling to articulate a thoughtful response to the wave of headlines. Sound-bites don't cut it.

For many decades, Catholic bishops have been leading advocates for universal health care as a fundamental human right. Catholic hospitals serve the poor and most vulnerable on the front lines of this crisis every day. One out of every six patients receives medical care from a Catholic hospital. The Catholic Church, which operates some 600 hospitals and 1,000 long-term care facilities and clinics, is the largest non-governmental provider of health care in the nation. The bishops' Migration and Refugee Services staff have often been lonely voices advocating for both legal and undocumented immigrants to have quality health care, a politically charged issue even some liberal elected officials refuse to touch.

Catholic leaders are not newcomers to health care and earned a seat at the table. Unlike some reactionary, pro-life organizations that are appendages of the Republican Party, the bishops' advocacy on behalf of anti-poverty programs and comprehensive immigration reform gives them credibility in the eyes of many Democratic lawmakers.

As the legislative director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities told the *Los Angeles Times*, the bishops have "played a critical role in a number of initiatives over many years that affect our most vulnerable people. Their work has made a tremendous difference on the fundamental issues of poverty and economic justice."

While people of goodwill can disagree over the Stupak language and how to best preserve the status quo when it comes to abortion funding -- a goal broadly shared by pro-life and pro-choice leaders -- depicting Catholic bishops as theocratic bullies riding in at the last minute to dictate policy is a stretch. Bishop staffers have been on the Hill from the beginning. Let's also remember that the bishops didn't enthrone those pro-life Democrats that Rahm Emanuel worked so hard to elect when he was leading the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

But even many Catholics find it discouraging that the bishops rarely activate the same well-oiled lobbying machine when it comes to promoting the broader moral case for health care reform. Bishops launched a high-profile bulletin insert in 19,000 Catholic parishes across the country that starkly announced: "Health care reform should be about saving lives, not destroying them."

The message goes on to tell Catholics that the bill "should be opposed" if abortion funding concerns are not addressed. Advertisements the U.S. bishops' conference have published in newspapers focus exclusively on abortion, as if passing health care reform itself would not be a significant "pro-life" victory that would save lives. (Harvard researchers estimated recently that 45,000 people die every year because they lack health insurance) It's also rare to see the same flexing of institutional muscles on other urgent moral issues central to Catholic teaching.

Imagine if bishops used the gravitas of their pulpits and lobbying prowess to mobilize Catholics to support a new approach in Afghanistan, stronger financial regulations to reign in corporate abuses or to ensure Congress passes robust climate change legislation. Sure, the bishops address some of these issues, but usually in carefully-worded statements buried on their web site.

Meanwhile, more than a dozen Catholic bishops -- including Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington and Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York -- recently joined prominent conservatives Tony Perkins, Charles Colson, and James Dobson in signing a declaration released at the National Press Club on Nov. 20 that highlights abortion, gay marriage and religious liberty as the preeminent issues for Christians.

Religion reporter Laurie Goodstein of the *New York Times* described the Manhattan Declaration as "an effort to rejuvenate the political alliance of conservative Catholics and evangelicals that dominated the religious debate during the administration of George W. Bush." Ann Coulter, the conservative firebrand who says hateful and outrageous things several times a day, also embraced the manifesto. Why are Catholic bishops, inheritors of a rich social justice and intellectual tradition that transcends narrow ideologies, mixed up with this crowd?

Instead of articulating a positive vision and engaging the culture, some bishops too often seem driven by a fortress mentality that views the wider culture as an ominous threat. Some in the hierarchy also have a nostalgic yearning for a 1950's "pray, pay and obey" Catholicism that is particularly alien to a younger generation.

Educated young Catholics in their twenties and thirties are inspired by their faith's social justice history and view service as the heart of their religious commitment. But we are uncomfortable with, and often bewildered by, statements like those from a recent bishops' meeting that denounce contraception and describe gay marriage as "a multifaceted threat to the very fabric of society." You might think that in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression the bishops could find a few other "threats" to discuss.

Those who have left Catholicism outnumber those who have joined the Catholic Church by nearly a four-to-one margin, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

James Joyce famously described Catholicism's eclectic big tent as "here comes everybody." It's unlikely that church leaders will stem the tide of those leaving the faith by embracing fundamentalism, using Communion as

a political weapon against elected officials and defining themselves more by what they stand against rather than what they believe.

Several members of the hierarchy have recognized the pitfalls of this approach and are beginning to speak up. The nation is better off for the moral witness and enduring service of the Catholic Church. Let's hope Catholic bishops can chart a path into the future defined by hope, reason and prudent engagement in the public square. There will be plenty of others left to fight the culture wars.

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