

Progress doesn't always come easy

Mary Ann Walsh | Dec. 10, 2009



Sr. Mary Ann Walsh

Commentary

Recent talk about the Catholic church's role in politics reminds me of two great moments in church social teaching in the United States: the New Deal and the Civil Rights eras.

Both moments found the church embroiled in controversy, with strident cries that it did not belong in the public arena. The eventual rewards for the church's role were huge for society, but came at a cost for the church.

The same, unfortunately, remains true today.

A leading figure of the New Deal era was Monsignor John Augustine Ryan (1865-1945), who headed the social action department of the U.S. bishops' National Catholic Welfare Council, the predecessor of today's U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Critics pejoratively referred to him as "Monsignor New Deal" for his social action efforts, which included fighting to establish a living wage and authoring the 1919 "Program for Social Reconstruction" -- essentially, an outline for what would become Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

What Ryan and the church sought in the early 20th Century seemed radical then, though it is commonplace today. He agitated across the board as he applied the church's social teaching and theology to the ills he saw about him and worked to remedy some of them.

Ryan is now a hero in social teaching lore, but he didn't reach such heights without making foes, both inside and outside of the church.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s saw church leaders speak out against racism and discrimination, most dramatically in Selma, Ala. During a series of marches in Selma in 1965, Catholics from 44 dioceses were among the peaceful protesters on and after Bloody Sunday, when police attacked marchers with ropes and whips as horrified Americans watched on TV.

Among the marchers was the Rev. John Cavanaugh, the former president of the University of Notre Dame, who stood with priests and nuns as they walked alongside Protestant ministers and rabbis. The presence of these religious figures put off those who would have preferred that the men and women of the church had stayed home and prayed instead of disquieting everyone with their peaceful march.

Accusations against the church inevitably arise whenever the church meets its obligation to fight for the weak and speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. In recent years, it's become popular to say that the bishops -- even the church itself -- are irrelevant. Some even believed it, which is why it was shocking to some when a majority of House members shared the bishops' concerns and voted to ensure that health care reform does not expand abortion. Critics underestimated the church's sense that Americans abhor paying for someone else's abortion, and now they decry an alleged violation of the separation of church and state.

The bishops took their stand as citizens and leaders, and made sure the voice of millions of Americans -- Catholic and non-Catholic -- was heard. They stood exactly where they should stand, fighting for the poor and voiceless.

The challenge before us is to make health care affordable for all, both for citizens and legal immigrants, and to ensure that reform does not expand abortion. There is nothing new here. Standing for the poor and voiceless is where the church always has been.

No one seems to mind when Catholic Charities annually delivers \$3.5 billion worth of food and human services to people of all religions -- and of no religion. Nor do they mind when the church provides \$5.7 billion in health care annually through its network of more than 600 health care institutions. It's only when the bishops are heard in the public sector that the critics speak out.

American history shows that when the church stays true to its mission, America is a proud nation -- where the elderly have Social Security and the young do not live in a world of separate water fountains for whites and blacks.

It's worth remembering that steps toward those ends did not come without criticism, and they didn't come easy.

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Source URL (retrieved on 05/24/2017 - 22:00): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/progress-doesnt-always-come-easy>