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What Happened at USCCB Mtg?

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One of the difficulties in covering the Church is that the most important conversations tend to happen behind closed doors, such as this week's discussion of the fallout from the health care debate at the bishops' retreat in St. Petersburg. Putting together a narrative of what did, or did not, happen reminds me of the old art of Kremlinology, where analysts considered the wording of Pravda texts and the relative positions of the Party leadership atop the Lenin mausoleum on May Day.

But, this week, we got a bit of a glimpse of what happened at the bishops' meeting. John Allen filed his typically balanced and researched report, getting on-the-record comments from Cardinal George, who evidently is most concerned about the divergence of opinion between the Catholic Health Association and the USCCB, and from bishop Robert Lynch, who defended Sister Carol's role and her right to disagree with the bishops. Money quote from Bishop Lynch: "I have never before this year heard the theory that we enjoy the same primacy of respect for legislative interpretation as we do for interpretation of the moral law." For his part, Cardinal George's comments to Allen were almost conciliatory towards CHA, saying of the currently tense relationship, "We're dealing with people of good will, so dialogue should be possible."

On the other hand, the Catholic News Agency, which is fast developing a reputation for being journalistically shady, ran a very different report. It would seem that someone leaked them a copy of Cardinal George's remarks. They quote Cardinal George as saying, "the Catholic Health Association and other so-called Catholic groups provided cover for those on the fence to support Obama and the administration." The CNA report was all fighting words.

How to account for this difference? Apart from the evident fact that John Allen is the most respected reporter on the hierarchy in the business and CNA is something of a propaganda outfit, I think the

differing accounts illustrate that something happened at the bishops' meeting. If Cardinal George's text was accusatory going in, and his remarks in a telephone interview after the meeting were decidedly conciliatory, what happened? It will be a while before we find out, but I suspect that some bishops resented the attacks on Sister Carol and they spoke up at the bishops' meeting, that they do not think the words "other so-called Catholic groups" does justice to the hard work and profound faith commitment of the good people at CHA, and, dare we venture to suppose, that some bishops actually thought the CHA was right to endorse the bill and the USCCB was wrong to oppose it.

I sympathize with Cardinal George's desire to figure out how to "govern" the Church. I understand, too, that the fact that the issues are at the same time so important and so complicated, it is important to get it right. But, in the twenty-first century, the days of governing by fiat are over. The bishops must learn to persuade and when they fail to persuade, they must recognize that the failure is not only on the part of their hearers. They can do what they want with the canons of the Church, but when some of their number attack the integrity of Sister Carol, others of their number are going to roll their eyes and, finally, blessedly, push back.

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