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Theologian says one-issue bishops violate their own teaching

by Thomas C. Fox

Kansas City, Mo.



Bishops who make a case for one-issue politics or openly oppose a

political candidate are in violation of the guidelines set out repeatedly in their own documents on political responsibility, said noted theologian Fr. Richard McBrien in a recent talk here.

McBrien of Notre Dame University, author of a number of major works on Catholicism, including the recently published *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*, was speaking to an overflow, mostly Catholic audience of several hundred at a Unitarian Church in Kansas City, Mo. His talk was hosted by a group of lay Catholics who run a speaking forum called "Topics to Go."

NCR's Tom Fox interviewed Fr. McBrien earlier this month about his new book, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*. Listen the interview by clicking on the red type: [Audio interview with Fr. Richard McBrien](#)

In his talk, McBrien listed five Catholic principles, taken from Catholic teachings, that he said can be applied to the current political process.

1. Although bishops and other Catholic officials have the constitutional right to participate in public policy debates and in the political process generally, they impose certain limits upon themselves as a matter of prudence. t
2. Catholic voters and their bishops should examine the positions of the candidates on the full range of issues as well as their integrity, philosophy and performance.
3. Catholic voters and their bishops must not forget the distinction between moral principles and their application in the political order. It is possible to agree on an important moral principle and yet disagree, in good conscience, on the way that principle is applied in the political order.
4. Because there is a distinction between the moral law and the civil law, Catholics and others?--Christians and non-Christians alike--cannot expect that every element of the moral law, as they understand it, can or should be translated into civil law.
5. Given the principle of sacramentality, in the final analysis the most effective way for the church and its members?-or for anyone?-to influence public policy is by force of their own example.

McBrien cited a statement by the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference issued in March 1984 titled, "Political Responsibility: Choices for the '80s." In that statement the bishops wrote that they ?specifically do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc; nor do we wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing candidates.?

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He said that following a 1984 attack by Cardinal John O'Connor on then Democratic vice-presidential candidate Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro from the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral the bishops added the words ?or opposing? after the word ?endorsing.?. This has been the policy of the U.S. bishops since, having been re-affirmed in statements of 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003 and 2007.

He cited last November's election policy statement, which reads: ?The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues. ... Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace ...?

McBrien noted that the U.S. bishops' policy was most recently reiterated in a letter to *The New York Times* that appeared Sept. 24, written by Bishops William Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., and Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y.

The letter made the point that the bishops do not teach that abortion is the only issue, but that it is an issue

of high moral importance, which nevertheless must be seen within the context of "the whole teaching of the church on justice and peace, serving the poor and advancing the common good ...?"

In a question and answer period, on a different subject, he asked the audience to imagine a scenario in which President Bush were in office for life and that he had the authority to make appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court and throughout the federal court system at will, without even a U.S. Senate to hold hearings and vote on the nominees.?


?That's exactly what Pope John Paul II -- or any other pope for that matter -- was able to do in his long term of office, and that is why the Catholic church finds itself today -- and especially during the height of the sexual-abuse crisis in the priesthood -- with such a dearth of pastoral leadership.?

McBrien said John Paul's greatest failing, as pope, were the bishops he named. ?Men were appointed bishops or promoted within the hierarchy on the basis of loyalty to the Holy See rather than on the basis of pastoral aptitude, theological sophistication and leadership skills.?

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... refers Benedict XVI to John Paul II because of their difference in style. ... l-back and self-effacing, in contrast to John Paul II who usually occupied center ... ained. ?John Paul II tended to personalize the papacy to the point where ... with his devotional preferences, spirituality and theology became, for many inside ... he touchstones of fidelity to Catholicism.?

Fox is interim NCR executive editor.

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