

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 7, 2011 at 10:26am

Picking the brain of the U.S. bishops' thinker-in-chief

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

In his first interview since stepping down in mid-November as president of the U.S. bishops' conference, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago looked back this week at the pivotal moments during his three-year term: The election of Barack Obama; a bruising debate over health care reform; chronic tensions over the authority of the bishops; and a massive new wave of the sexual abuse crisis.

I sat down for the exclusive conversation with George, who celebrates his 74th birthday later this month, on Wednesday in his office at the Archbishop Quigley Center in downtown Chicago.

When George was elected president of the conference in 2007, it inevitably evoked memories of another Chicago cardinal, Joseph Bernardin, who also once held the job, and who shaped the ethos of American Catholicism throughout the 1970s and 80s. Whether George's more evangelical imprint will have the same staying power as Bernardin's moderate, social justice-oriented vision remains to be seen, but there's no doubt that a vast swath of the conference today sees George as its intellectual leader.

If Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York is now the face and voice of the U.S. bishops, in other words, George is still their brain -- and it's well worth picking that brain for his sense of the "state of the union" in the American church.

Among the highlights of the interview:

- George said debates over Catholic identity these days often pivot on the authority of the bishop -- and he said bishops are more prepared to "take possession of their vocation," not just as teachers and preachers, but as governors who exercise, however reluctantly, "the power to punish."
- He wondered aloud if the "Faithful Citizenship" guides issued by the bishops in advance of national

elections may be an exercise in futility, since they offer broad moral principles to a pragmatic culture interested only in specific conclusions.

- He asserted the church has been "true to its promises" on sex abuse, weeding out predators and creating a safe environment. He expressed hope that as time goes on, the "zero tolerance" policy can be balanced against protecting priests from false accusations -- some of whom, he said, have been "severely damaged" by the experience.
- George conceded that while bishops are now punished just like priests if they abuse, there's not the same degree of accountability for bishops who covered up abuse or failed to prevent it. He said more work may need to be done, while insisting there is a growing "informal" spirit of accountability in the church.
- He said a breach between the U.S. bishops and the Catholic Healthcare Association over health care reform has produced "good conversation" -- adding that if the CHA wants to repair relations, one important signal would be joining the bishops in support of the Pitts-Lipinski Amendment, designed to restore restrictions on abortion funding.
- George admitted some surprise that the bishops broke with tradition by passing over the vice-president of the conference, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, to elect Dolan as president. He admitted that given the pace of change in the 21st century, it now may be an anachronism to think the bishops can pick the right leader three years in advance.

Excerpts from the interview appear below.

NCR: Three years ago, I asked you if there was an overarching theme you hoped would mark your term as USCCB president, and you said "Catholic identity." Three years later, were you able to move the ball?

George: I don't know that I was able to move the ball, but I think the divergences in understanding of Catholic identity have been clarified in the last three years. If that creates better dialogue, clearer dialogue, then I think that's something desirable.

Part of Catholic identity is the role of the bishop, meaning the ministry of bishops and the leadership of bishops, which has been contested for many reasons. We need a lot more conversation around that topic.

Are you encouraged by how that conversation is shaping up?

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It depends on where you start. Am I encouraged by divisions in Catholic communion? No. Am I encouraged by the fact that it's now necessary to talk about differences in self-understanding? Yes. Am I hopeful about the bishops taking possession of their own vocation in the church? Yes.

By the bishops' vocation, what do you mean?

The teaching dimension, I think, has been very well carried for many decades, both individually in many dioceses and collectively by the conference. The part of the definition that hasn't been attended to is governing. The sexual abuse crisis is evidence of that. If bishops had governed more clearly between 1973 and 1986, when statistics tell us most of the abuse took place, it might have been contained more quickly, and we would not be subject to the terrible crisis it has caused us.

Your reading is that bishops today are more ready to exercise their powers of governance?

Yes, and to do so responsibly.

You led the conference during the 2008 elections, when it followed a different process to produce the 'Faithful Citizenship' document intended, in part, to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation. How do you think that worked, and what's the future of 'Faithful Citizenship'?

I think it's hard to use a document like that, because it gives principles and not conclusions, and in a pragmatic culture people always go for the conclusions. So, I don't know that it worked well, and therefore I don't know what its future is. Some have spoken about starting from Caritas in Veritate [a 2009 social encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI] and reconstructing the document. I think that's an idea that should be looked at.

If you stay with classical moral theology, then 'Faithful Citizenship' is a very good statement of the principles that help to guide a conscience when you make a decision about whom to vote for. The bishops will not, and should not, come to a conclusion about any particular candidate or any particular party – to the chagrin of some and the dismissal of others. I think we have to look at the whole question again, about how the bishops participate in the public conversation that leads to political choices.

One irony of your term is that shortly after you were elected president of the conference, a fellow Chicagoan was elected President of the United States. Has that given you any entrée to the Obama administration?

No, and I don't think it should have. No matter who was president, I think the administration related to the bishops appropriately. We're not of the same mind about a lot of things, but I think the conversation would probably have been the same no matter who was the president of the conference.

In 2010, we saw another eruption of the sexual abuse crisis, this time focused on Europe, the Vatican, and the pope. Did the events of 2010 effect your thinking about where things stand?

They reinforced the frustration of a good number of bishops, and of Catholics generally, that the story told by the media really hasn't changed in fifteen or twenty years, when in fact the response of the church has changed mightily.

I think the church is true to her promises. The bishops promised that nobody reasonably accused of this crime, after a preliminary investigation of some sort, could be in active ministry. Many of them are now out of the priesthood. Besides that, we've helped children come to understand what an unwelcome advance might be, and we have children coming forward now saying, 'I wasn't comfortable.' We have also trained lay people to watch for evidence of abuse, and a lot more of that now is part of parish life. Because of background checks, we've also indicated to some people that we really can't accept you as part of the public ministry of the church. So, we have put in an enormous number of precautions.

What I'm most proud of in this archdiocese is the outreach to victims. Sometimes it's well received, sometimes not, because many victims are struggling mightily with their own burdens. I've talked to dozens of them, and each one is different. Some you can reach and help to liberate, help them to liberate themselves, and others you're going to be in contact with for years to come. We do that systematically, and I think we do it very well.

All of that continues to advance, but there's no [media] story about it. That doesn't excuse the abuse of

children by priests or bishops, nor does it excuse bishops looking the other way and not governing as they should. But it still is part of the story, and it's not being told. I get letters all the time saying, "You've done nothing." While there's always more to do, we have done something, and some considerable things.

Do you feel the last eight years have vindicated the policies the U.S. bishops adopted in 2002?

It's hard to say. I think we've moved to remove the predators, and to do the other things I've said. In that sense, I think we got it right. Of course, mistakes were made even in doing that. In a different context, I think you could perhaps say that the regulations should be more nuanced, but that's not possible now.

By "nuanced," do you mean the possibility of returning priests to ministry in some circumstances?

No, not putting them back. The rate of recidivism is high enough that it's too dangerous to put anybody back into ministry. A bishop has to be able to say, "I'm putting before you someone who is trustworthy." I believe that, and I can't say that about anybody who has done this.

This has been very painful at times, especially when it's a false accusation. In some circles, if you're at all sympathetic to a priest, even one who's been falsely accused, somehow you're betraying victims. We'd like to say that we don't want to betray victims, but nonetheless if it's a false accusation and there are false accusations what happens to the priest? He doesn't know if he can trust his bishop, he doesn't know if he can trust anybody. Some of them are severely damaged by the process. We have to keep trying to ensure that predators are permanently removed, but in a way that also doesn't harm people who are innocent.

As the crisis of 2010 unfolded, some bishops were highly critical of the media almost as if you think they're out to get you.

How much of the media attitude is part of deliberate decisions by individual reporters or writers, and how much is just a reflection of the cultural constant in this society, is hard for me to judge. People who want to believe that the Catholic church is essentially corrupt, that the bishops are all self-serving sycophants or are themselves guilty of dishonesty, now have something to point to and say, "See, we were right all along." Go back a hundred years that was the story about the Catholic church then too. People who have that kind of view in their cultural genes are ready to believe the worst. I don't know that the media are any more out to get us now than they ever have been.

I don't think it would be wise to imagine that we can control the media, or should try to control it. All we ask is that it not be controlled by other, sometimes unexamined sources, such as various groups out there. We have tried to be transparent in recent years, to a great degree. Other groups that haven't done that self-scrutiny are sometimes given an automatic pass, or are given the benefit of the doubt about their credibility, in ways that we are not. It's not just facts that are wrong, but there's a meta-narrative, whether cultural or personal, that controls which facts are reported and who's taken seriously.

At the grassroots, maybe the single most common criticism of the bishops' response to the crisis goes like this: You've adopted tough accountability measures for priests, but not for yourselves. How do you respond to that?

First of all, there are the same rules of accountability when you look at the sexual acts. There are eight bishops who have been taken out of ministry in this country, not always for sexual activity with a minor, but because they have been guilty of serious sin and sometimes crime.

The larger question is, when you get beyond the sexual activity and into the governance issue, where's

the accountability for that? Looking around today, most bishops who knowingly appointed or transferred somebody judged to have been a sexual predator are already gone. I don't know what more people would want to be done. Public disgrace, perhaps? Is that what's at issue?

You know the response a lot of Americans would make ? start by removing Cardinal Bernard Law from his cushy job in Rome.

I think the gesture of his resignation from Boston and his going into exile, which is where he is, should not be discounted.

Do you think there's more work to be done on episcopal accountability?

Yes I do, although it's very hard to know what shape it should take.

From the beginning, it would have helped if the bishops had an apt tool in the Code of Canon Law to deal with offenses. That's being changed now, as the penal code is being revised. I remember that when I became a bishop and read through it, I thought, "This is not a very effective tool for governing, because it reduces the power to govern to the power to persuade." Unfortunately, there are times when the power to govern means the power to punish. The [post-Vatican II code] was created to go beyond the earlier code's insistence on duties and obligations to talk also about rights. Of course, everybody applauded at the time, but now those rights have to be balanced against the tools a bishop is given to govern.

In terms of accountability, there is an increased insistence on mutual accountability, even if it's informal. Whenever the province of Chicago meets, we always go around the table and say, "What are you doing about the sexual abuse of minors?" There's increased financial accountability. Bishops have to report to the metropolitan, who for his own archdiocese reports to the senior suffragan. So there are new instruments of accountability that are in place, a few formal and most informal.

Our problem is that in our kind of society, accountability that's not legal is no accountability at all. We legalize everything. What we have [in the church] is instead the accountability of a family. Of course, family life has weakened in this society, so now even family relationships all go before courts. That, however, is not necessarily a good way to organize anything other than a country.

Do you believe that the strong position you took during the health care reform debate put down an important marker?

Yes, except that I don't think the marker was new. It was always there. It's just become clearer, perhaps. It hadn't been conceded by everybody that the bishops have the right to judge the moral content of a piece of legislation.

As we go forward, we look for ways to cooperate. For example, I think the conversation with the Catholic Healthcare Association is moving along quite well. One question now is whether we might jointly approve, and ask Congress to approve, the Pitts-Lipinski Amendment that would put back the language of the Hyde Amendment into the bill, language that the Senate explicitly removed. Whether that amendment has a chance of being passing the Senate or being approved by the president I don't know, but I think the fact that we would together this is where we want to be would help to repair the relationships that should exist between the bishops and the healthcare association.

Are you optimistic the CHA will join you on Pitts-Lipinski?

The conversations are good so far. ? Informally, I talked recently with Sr. Carol Keehan. She had some

good questions that she raised, but there was an openness there, as I read her, so I was encouraged.

You're saying that if the CHA supports Pitts-Lipinski, it would help put the breach behind you?

It would help repair and strengthen the relationship. I don't know that you 'put behind' any experience. We can't ignore it, but we should learn from it. One way to show that we are learning from it would be joint support for the Pitts-Lipinski legislation.

[Note: In an early November address to the Illinois Catholic Hospital Association, Sr. Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association, said that the association would support the Pitts-Lipinski legislation. Keehan told NCR that the association is working with the Pro-Life Committee of the bishops' conference on language and other issues.]

Were you surprised that the bishops broke with the custom of automatically electing the vice-president as the next president?

Yes and no. I expected [the election] to be very close, but in my own thinking, I had assumed the custom would be followed. I talked about it once with Bishop Kicanas. The discussion was going on, and we both knew it. It was fed by many factors, which have been analyzed and discussed. Some interpreted it ideologically, but I don't know there's that much ideological difference. Some saw it in terms of different eras - new bishops and old bishops. Obviously, Bishop Kicanas has the capacity and the personality to be president of our conference, and so does Archbishop Dolan. Maybe some bishops simply thought, since both are worthy candidates, why should we be bound by a rule we didn't make?

I'd like to add something about Bishop Kicanas, because sometimes he doesn't get the credit he should for the work he did for the conference. He was really the one, behind the scenes, who saw to it that the work of the independent committees is now coordinated into the five priorities the bishops established. It was an often hidden administrative responsibility, but he worked extraordinarily hard for the conference, and it was of immense benefit for the church in this country.

Was the custom of the vice-president automatically becoming president an anachronism? Given the pace of change today, is it unrealistic to think you'll know three years in advance the kind of leader you'll need in, say, 2013?

Circumstances change so quickly now that three years can make a greater difference than would have been the case ten, twenty or thirty years ago. The office of president, by force of circumstance, has taken on a higher public profile than it once had. In that light, what you say makes good sense. Things can change a lot in three years, and you might want to think about who represents us publicly.

In a few days you'll celebrate your 74th birthday, and I imagine thoughts of retirement have crossed your mind. Have you begun thinking about what you might like to do?

Yes, I have. One of the things I most miss as a bishop is hearing confessions. The conversations that take place in the sacrament of reconciliation are the most important conversations on the face of the planet. There you meet a soul in the presence of God ... I would very much like to make that ministry a large part of my life.

Beyond that, I like to study, and there are a lot of things I'd like to read I never have. That might be somewhat self-indulgent, but I'd try to read things I could share with others in some capacity, whether it's preaching retreats or being in parishes. I love to be in the parishes on Sunday, and I hope I could continue to do that.

I'd also like to look back and reflect more on that question that has stayed with me for a long time: How can we be more effective as the Catholic church in this particular culture? It's a culture that has demonic aspects to it, as all cultures do, but it has great virtues too. So, how can we continue to take up here the mission that Christ gives his church in every generation, which is to introduce people to their Savior? How can we do that more effectively? I would like to think about that and to write about that.

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