

USCCB Writes To Congress

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 19, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The [USCCB yesterday released two letters](#) [1] to members of Congress. The first from newly installed USCCB President Archbishop Timothy Dolan outlined the conference's objectives for the upcoming Congress. The second letter, sign by Cardinal DiNardo as head of the Pro-Life Committee, Bishop Stephen Blaire, chair of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development and Archbishop Jose Gomes, chair of the Committee on Migration.

Dolan's letter certainly breaks no new ground, although the inclusion of an entire paragraph dedicated to Internet access was curious. The letter perfectly shows how most bishops prioritize their socio-political agenda: They lead first with their concern to protect life, followed closely by their concern to defend traditional marriage, and then they take up a variety of concerns about social justice and the poor that range them more on the political left than the political right. The most disappointing aspect of the letter is that immigration comes near the very end, as if it was not a real priority for the bishops and a pressing issue for the country, more than, say, internet access.

The strength of this scatter-shot approach is that the bishops do not pigeon-hole themselves into the ideological clutches of either party. The weakness of this scatter-shot approach is that it is, well, scatter-shot. This letter needed an editor badly. The different positions articulated by the bishops are not presented as emerging from a cohesive stance. They read like a laundry list. Compare this letter to Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate*, in which the Holy Father took pains to explain how all of the Church's social and moral teachings flow from our anthropological beliefs about human dignity.

Perhaps a letter to Congress should not include the kind of theology found in a papal encyclical, but why not? Why should the bishops content themselves with a laundry list approach, one item from the right, one item from the left, a couple of items where there may even be common ground. I am all for common ground, but the only way the Church is ever going to truly affect the politics of this nation is if we successfully invite both sides to go deeper, not just to the center, but deeper. We must ask our conservative brethren why their commitment to the magic of the market has allowed them to ignore the traditional conservative value of solidarity. And we must ask our liberal brethren to explain why the protection of conscience ceased being a liberal concern. There is plenty in the Church's teaching to make all sides squirm, and squirming would be a good thing for those besotted with any variety of political orthodoxy.

The other thing that emerges from the text of this first letter from Archbishop Dolan to Congress as President of the USCCB may be indicative of his style of leadership. This is a document that was written by a committee. There is a lot to be said for such collaboration, even if the resulting work lacks a kind of literary vigor. But, clearly, this letter is not the result of a late night session at Madison Avenue.

The second letter from the trio of bishops is interesting because of its stated agnosticism on the effort to repeal the health care reform law, but its enumeration of all the reasons the health care law is a good thing, apart from the bishops' reservations concerning federal funding of abortion and conscience protections for health care workers and Catholics hospitals. These last concerns can all be achieved by enacting other bills that amend the

law without repealing it, already introduced in the last Congress, one that would essentially put the original Stupak-Pitts language back in the bill, and the other that would shore up conscience protections. I continue to think that the final language on abortion in the health care exchanges is actually preferable, and will result in fewer insurance policies covering abortion, than the original Stupak-Pitts language, but I could vote for Stupak-Pitts and not lose an ounce of sleep. Both approaches achieve what I think is vital: They do not treat abortion like other types of health care, they make people who want abortion coverage pay for it out of their own pocket, and they express the ambivalence most Americans feel about the procedure, not necessarily wanting to go back to the days of back alley abortions, but not wanting to encourage the procedure either.

The thing that both letters exemplify, and which is a very good thing, is the lack of sharp elbows. Sharp elbows are for bloggers, not bishops. The respectful tone, the lack of any demonization or mischaracterization of the views of others, the ideological balance and measured analysis, these all distinguish the bishops' voices from so many in the public square. If the next three years of Dolan's leadership will look like this, the Church's relationship with the political realm might be less volatile and more constructive. Here's hoping it is so.

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