

Pius XII and the Political Scene

Richard McBrien | Oct. 22, 2008 Essays in Theology

October 9th is the 50th anniversary of the death of Pope Pius XII. Although his memory has been shrouded in controversy over his actions, or lack thereof, during the Second World War and specifically during the Holocaust, he is also remembered for his many encyclicals and messages that laid the groundwork for future developments within the Catholic Church.

His encyclicals on the Mystical Body of Christ and the renewal of Biblical studies, both published in 1943, provided inspiration for a more biblically-based ecclesiology and for a scientifically critical study of Sacred Scripture, both of which had a major influence on the Second Vatican Council, convened two decades later by his successor, John XXIII.

In 1947 Pius XII issued yet another encyclical on liturgical renewal, followed almost a decade later by his full-scale reform of the Holy Week liturgies. Both of these also fed into Vatican II, which promoted the active participation of the laity in the Church's worship.

Earlier, in 1944, with the war still raging, the pope issued a Christmas message on democracy and the need for a lasting peace.

Reading that message today, one is struck by its florid style. What was unprecedented at the time, however, was its near-endorsement of democracy as the form of government best suited to insure justice for all.

The call for "democracy and more democracy," he wrote, "cannot have any other meaning than to place the citizen ever more in the position to hold his own opinion, to express it and to make it prevail in a fashion conducive to the common good" (para. 20).

Nearly a half-century later, Pope John Paul II gave voice to the Catholic Church's strongest support for democracy thus far.

In his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus annus*, marking the one-hundredth anniversary of Leo XIII's landmark encyclical *Rerum novarum*, John Paul II wrote: "The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate" (n. 46).

Those values are tested regularly in democratic elections held at various levels and intervals. Indeed, the United States is currently in the midst of a campaign to elect a new President and Vice President.

Like the pontificate of Pius XII, the campaign is shrouded in controversy. The candidate for Vice President on the Republican ticket, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska, is what we used to refer to as a "fallen-away" Catholic.

Baptized and raised as a Catholic, she began attending a Pentecostalist church as a teenager and later joined, and

retains active membership in, a fundamentalist Bible church in Wasilla, Alaska, where she formerly served as mayor.

She may, however, escape criticism from the vocal group of bishops who tend to be more upset with practicing Catholic candidates like Governor Palin's counterpart on the Democratic ticket, Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware. They disparage him as pro-choice on the issue of abortion, and therefore pro-abortion, because he does not favor the path of criminalization.

In a recent interview on "Meet the Press" (9/7/08), Senator Biden made clear that he accepted the teaching of the Catholic Church that human life begins at the moment of conception. But he also pointed out that this is a "religiously-based view," a matter of faith, not scientific evidence that every reasonable person would have to accept.

Senator Biden noted that many American citizens "Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and others" have a different view, even though they "believe in God as strongly as I do. They're intensely as religious as I am....For me to impose that judgment (of faith) on everyone else who is equally and maybe even more devout than I am seems to me is inappropriate in a pluralistic society."

When Tom Brokaw, the interviewer, asked why Senator Biden had voted for abortion rights, Biden objected. He said that he had voted against "curtailing the right, criminalizing abortion. I voted," he continued, "against telling everyone else in the country that they have to accept my religiously-based view that (life begins at the) moment of conception."

He pointed out that he has not voted in favor of public funding of abortion "because that flips the burden. That's then telling me that I have to accept a different view."

What we all need to do, he said, is "reduce considerably the amount of abortions...by providing the care, the assistance and the encouragement for people to be able to carry to term and to raise their children."

Such are the ways of democracy, as Pope Pius XII noted in 1944.

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