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Bishops in agreement - and not in agreement - on abortion

by John L. Allen Jr.



Baltimore

Two things seem clear from the U.S. bishops' much-anticipated discussion of abortion and politics during their fall meeting in Baltimore: The bishops are united in making the fight against abortion their top political priority, but they're no closer to agreement on what to do about Catholics, especially Catholic politicians, who won't fall in line.

Yesterday, the bishops asked Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the conference, to issue a statement on the "present political situation," meaning the reality of an Obama administration, which clearly identifies abortion — especially the prospect of the Freedom of Choice Act, which would bar legal restrictions on abortion at the state and federal level — as their towering concern.

In some ways, the action marks a shift from the tone, if not the content, of the bishops' "Faithful Citizenship" document, issued before the election, which gave pride of place to abortion and other "life issues" but also said that Catholics are not single issue voters. While George stressed yesterday that "Faithful Citizenship" remains their official statement on politics, many bishops wanted to send a clear message to the new administration that there will be no "truce," as Bishop Daniel Conlon of Steubenville,

Ohio, put it, on the life issues.

To be sure, the bishops offered a nod to areas where they might collaborate with the Obama White House, such as economic justice, health care, and peace. On the whole, however, the pro-life emphasis was palpable in Baltimore; one symbolic expression was the adoption of a new "Order for the Blessing of a Child in the Womb," which Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville described as "a very tangible way to witness pastorally and sacramentally to the life of the unborn child."

In talking points issued to George from the floor of the meeting, the bishops asserted that "the church is also resolute in opposing evil," and that they are "completely united and resolute in our teaching and defense of the unborn child from the moment of conception."

Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Chicago spoke most strongly about the potential threats to Catholic health care if they were to be compelled under the law to offer abortions.

"It could mean discontinuing obstetrics in our hospitals, and we may need to consider taking the drastic step of closing our catholic hospitals entirely," Paprocki said. "It would not be sufficient to withdraw our sponsorship or to sell them to someone who would perform abortions. That would be a morally unacceptable cooperation in evil."

"I do not think I'm being alarmist in considering such drastic steps," he said. "We need to respond in a morally appropriate, responsible fashion."

On the other hand, the bishops stopped short of issuing any explicit threat to deny communion to Catholics, especially politicians, who don't support legal restrictions on abortion.

Before the full meeting began, the Committee on Pro-Life Activities prepared a draft statement for the conference that included a paragraph with fairly sharp language regarding communion. After what several bishops described as "tense" discussions, that assertion was softened in the talking points offered to George, phrased as a desire that "all Catholics in public life be fully committed to the common good," and that communion in the church "may always be complete."

That seemed to reflect the pastoral sense of many bishops. In an interview during the meeting, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., for example, indicated that he would not seek to deny communion to Vice-President-elect Joseph Biden, the country's first Catholic vice-president.

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In effect, the way things have been left in Baltimore means that the split between hard-liners and moderates regarding bans on communion will continue.

Echoes of that division were heard during floor discussion yesterday.

"At some point this conference will have to address its reticence to speak to Catholic politicians who are not just reluctant, but stridently anti-life," said Bishop Joseph Martino of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Martino argued that in an earlier era, when some Catholic politicians supported racist laws, Catholic bishops of the time "spoke strongly and took canonical measures against them."

Martino clearly signaled he was ready to follow that example.

“I can’t have the Vice-President-elect coming to Scranton saying he learned his values there, when those values are utterly against what the church teaches,” Martino said.

Yet in response to a question from *NCR* yesterday, George suggested the historical parallel Martino offered is not exact.

“There’s a difference between someone who is openly racist, and someone who says their personal conviction is one thing while voting is another,” George said. On the broader issue of whether a pro-choice vote constitutes “formal cooperation” in abortion, George said “we have never really studied that carefully.”

Not every bishop appeared comfortable with a combative approach to the new administration.

“A prophecy of denunciation quickly wears thin,” said Bishop Blase Cupich of Rapid City, S.D. “We need a prophecy of solidarity with the communities we serve and the nation we live in, which needs healing. We must be, and be seen to be, caring pastors as well as faithful teachers.”

On the other side of the Baltimore meeting, in other words, it seems that the great paradox within the conference on the abortion issue largely remains: the bishops are unified on the substance of their position, but still not of one mind on whether to follow what one might call a “prophetic” or a “punitive” line on how to back it up.

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