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Political responsibility and human trafficking

by Paul Lauritzen

Commentary

The Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas is well known for his view that Christians must be uncompromising in their dealings with the political order. He refers positively to Christian "fanatics" and spiritual "terrorists." There is certainly a place for this sort of prophetic stance in Christian tradition, but it is not one that has typically been embraced by Catholic Christians. By contrast, Catholic tradition has sought to work pragmatically with political leaders to secure the common good, while not compromising core beliefs.

This is why the ongoing conflict between the Obama administration and the U.S. Catholic bishops is so disheartening. The most recent dust-up is over the decision by the Department of Health and Human Services not to award a federal grant to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services office to continue its work with the victims of human trafficking. Apparently the decision of HHS was influenced by the fact that MRS does not refer trafficking victims for contraceptive or abortions services.

When the bishops' conference was notified of this decision, the director of media relations for the conference, Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, wrote: "There seems to be a new unwritten reg at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It's the ABC Rule, Anybody But Catholics."

Walsh's claim is factually unfounded and rhetorically unhelpful. Her comment that MRS will not refer trafficking victims because "the principle of church teaching is that all sexual encounters be open to life" is profoundly insensitive to the women whose rapes are being lumped together with loving sexual relationships.

At the same time, it must also be said that the changes to Health and Human Services guidelines made in

the most recent round of grant applications to give "strong preference" to organizations that provide referrals for a full range of gynecological services severely reduces the chances of Catholic organizations winning the grant. This is particularly unfortunate because, by all accounts, the bishops' Migration and Refugee Services office has provided exceptional services to women and children victimized by the reprehensible actions of human traffickers.

And the number of victims is staggering. According to the Department of State, approximately 600,000 to 800,000 victims are trafficked across international borders worldwide every year, including roughly 16,000 brought into the United States yearly. The Office of Migration and Refugee Services estimates that 100,000 U.S. children are commercially sexually exploited every year. And the 2010 Trafficking in Persons report estimates that 12.3 million adults and children are currently held in conditions of modern-day slavery worldwide.

The impasse between the American bishops and the Obama administration on trafficking services is particularly disturbing because the Catholic Coalition Against Human Trafficking, a collection of approximately 20 Catholic organizations that work together to combat trafficking, has for years worked collaboratively with government agencies to advocate for the victims of trafficking. For example, the coalition helped pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and its various successors.

Recently, the American bishops reissued the document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility." The introductory note that accompanies the document warns against reducing "Catholic moral concerns to one or two matters" or "justifying choices simply to advance partisan, ideological, or personal interests."

"Forming Consciences" is not a prophetic call for fanaticism of the sort envisioned by Stanley Hauerwas, but instead, as its subtitle suggests, a call to political responsibility. Alas, neither the Catholic bishops nor the Obama administration appears to be heeding this call, at least not on the issue of human trafficking. The consequence is that the poisonous tentacles of abortion politics claim yet more victims.

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