

## U.S. bishops miss the real issues in this campaign

Maureen Fiedler | Mar. 13, 2012 NCR Today

The U.S. Catholic bishops are out in far right field these days. I guess that's not news, but here is the latest analysis of their public pronouncements .

They are still harping on the HHS mandate in the health care reform law, even though there are negotiations going on to solve any remaining problems. These are the issues remaining after President Barack Obama's compromise said religiously affiliated institutions, like Catholic hospitals and universities, do not have to purchase contraceptive coverage for their employees -- the insurance companies will pay for it. Questions of self-insurance and other matters are being discussed in order to work out the problems remaining.

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Meanwhile, the bishops, if they chose, could cool it with Obama and pivot to the central issue of the campaign. For the record, that is NOT contraception or some fictitious "war on religion."

The central issue is this: In these still-difficult economic times, do we bear some responsibility for one another or not? There is a stark difference between Obama and any of the Republicans on this central question. Are we our sisters' and brothers' keeper? Are we all in this together or not -- meaning the economy? Do we bear any responsibility for one another?

Simplistically put, Obama says yes; the Republicans say no. The Republicans emphasize economic doctrines that say we are on our own in the marketplace.

On this central issue, it is Obama who is trumpeting Catholic social teaching. He doesn't call it that, of course, but that's what he's saying. The touchstone document on social justice from Vatican II -- *Gaudium et Spes* [1] -- says, "If the demands of justice and equity are to be satisfied, vigorous efforts must be made ... to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities which now exist." And THAT was the mid-1960s when those inequalities were not as pronounced as they are today. Heavens! The Vatican II bishops might be right at home with the Occupy movement!

Paragraph 69 talks about treating private property as accruing not only to the benefit of the owner, but to the benefit of all. It's not far-fetched to suggest that the wealthiest might indeed contribute more in taxes (for the benefit of all) than they do now.

And these passages are merely starters when it comes to social teaching.

What is clear is this: The bishops will be big losers unless they start looking at that larger message of Catholic social teaching and its relevance in this campaign.

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[1] [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)