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'Surprising support' and the future of the center-left

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Ideological labels for the church are notoriously ill-fitting, but if we're going to use them, I prefer the European taxonomy of "left, center-left, center-right, and right" to the American convention of "liberals, moderates and conservatives." In my experience, most self-described moderates actually lean one way or the other, but their defining trait is a preference for consensus.

Applying the European frame to American Catholicism these days, you have to feel a little sorry for the center-left, meaning Catholics whose instincts run to the liberal side but who still believe in working within the system.

Looking around, everyone else seems to know what to do. The right is egging the bishops on in fights over religious freedom, while the left is howling over the latest perceived outrage -- above all, a Vatican-mandated overhaul of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which is meeting this week in St. Louis. Center-right Catholics generally can find something appetizing on the official smorgasbord, such as the "new evangelization."

The center-left, however, sometimes seems adrift.

You can find these folks working in chanceries, ministering in parishes and teaching in Catholic schools, not to mention making up a good chunk of the rank-and-file. They don't like some of what they're seeing from Rome and the U.S. bishops, but they don't want to end up in opposition either. It's not always clear to them what the third option might be.

Here's one possibility, and it will be interesting to see if it gains traction in that crowd: The quest for confidence-building measures with the bishops one might describe as "surprising support."

By that, I mean areas where the resources and concerns of the center-left intersect with the emerging priorities of the bishops in surprising ways and thus have the potential to recalibrate perceptions on both sides of the relationship.

In addition to an ecclesiology of communion, "thinking with the church," or whatever spiritual motive one might advance, offering surprising support is also smart tactics. It means opening channels of conversation before a crisis erupts, and it would give the center-left more leverage to push back against trajectories they don't like. As a rule of thumb, it's generally easier to manage disagreements among friends than strangers.

To flesh out the concept, opposition to the death penalty or support for immigration reform wouldn't count as "surprising support," even though those positions are in sync with the bishops, because they're what everyone expects from the center-left. However, the Catholic Health Association's opposition to the Obama administration's restrictive definition of a religious employer in its contraception mandate is a good case of surprising support because the CHA and the bishops famously had their disagreements over health care reform.

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At least three such opportunities seem to be hanging out there like low-lying fruit.

First is the issue taken up by the CHA: Defending the notion of a religious employer as any group inspired by a religious tradition, as opposed to the narrow standard proposed by the Department of Health and Human Services, which is that a religious employer means an entity that explicitly inculcates religious teachings and that hires and serves primarily people of that faith. By that test, the vast majority of Catholic hospitals, schools and charities wouldn't pass muster.

Left-leaning Catholics have always rejected the idea that one has to proselytize in order to be genuinely religious, and anyway, this issue hits them where they live. The natural habitat of center-left Catholics is formed by the church's schools, hospitals and charities.

A second possibility is lending support to the bishops' mounting concern with anti-Christian persecution around the world, especially the estimated 150,000 new Christian martyrs every year.

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Defense of beleaguered Christians could galvanize the center-left for two reasons. First, many new martyrs fall victim to police states, corporate interests and religious fanatics -- precisely the *bête noires* of the liberal imagination. Likewise, many new martyrs are found among the poor of the developing world, such as Dalits and tribals in India, or people suffering collateral damage from Western foreign policy, such as Iraqis. These are the kind of folks whose plight usually stirs left-leaning souls.

Third, the center-left could play a lead role in helping the bishops navigate the transition to a world church, something they all know is coming. Today, two-thirds of the Catholics on earth live in the southern hemisphere, a share that will be three-quarters by mid-century. Missionary orders and charitable outfits, which tend to be top-heavy with center-left types, often have the best connections with the global south, including bishops and clergy in the developing world.

One could envision, for instance, a consortium of missionary orders or a major Catholic university in the States volunteering to organize a regular summit meeting of bishops from North America and Africa to

discuss shared concerns. (The European and African bishops held their second such symposium in Rome in February, hosted by Regina Apostolorum, a university operated by the Legionaries of Christ.)

To be clear, what we're talking about is not a Machiavellian strategy to advance a political agenda. Instead, it's about a significant swath of the church that's uncomfortable with some of what's going on -- whether they're right or wrong is, for these purposes, irrelevant -- but that nevertheless puts a premium on good relations with the hierarchy and appears to be casting about for ways to make that happen.

Once upon a time, when the tone-setting camp among the bishops came out of center-left circles, it was the conservatives and the center-right that had to be intentional about building relationships. Today the shoe is on the other foot, and showing "surprising support" at least seems a possibility worth pondering.

If you're not sure what else to do, making new friends generally isn't a bad place to start.

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