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Change is in the air for politics and the church

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NCR Today

Americans woke up Wednesday to a significantly changed country. No, it was not because we elected an African-American president. We did that four years ago. On the other hand, it was not a status quo election either. Yes, maybe the Senate and presidency is still Democratic and the House is still Republican with a strong tea party contingent. But something has changed.

Mitt Romney received 60 percent of the white male vote and lost the election. More young people voted than in 2008. Recreational marijuana usage was passed in two states. Latinos made up an increasing share of the electorate and made the difference in the presidential race. Gay marriage referenda were approved in three states. The first openly lesbian senator was elected to Congress. Catholics paid little attention to their bishops, with 50 percent of Catholics voting to re-elect President Barack Obama.

Key to these results is that the demographics of the country are changing, and there is no turning back. Obama won among women, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and young people. That's quite a coalition. Republicans have a problem in that their coalition is shrinking and they have not done anything to expand it. The percentage of minority voters is continuing to grow. A new generation of voters is not motivated by arguments over same-sex marriage or other wedge issues. In 2004, Republicans were able to use the gay marriage issue to help re-elect George W. Bush. Eight years later, the same issue proved to be a motivator to bring out more voters for Obama. Now that's real change.

Without overstating the case, it is clear that today's Republican Party cannot continue on the path it is currently pursuing. These demographic changes are real and permanent. Republicans can continue bashing immigrants, demanding strict adherence to rigid positions on social issues, and catering to the most extreme elements of their party. This strategy can continue to serve them well in primary campaigns, and in gerrymandered congressional districts. It cannot however, appeal to the general electorate.

What is true for Republicans is also true for those Catholic bishops who threw in their lot with the Republican Party and a number of right-wing Christian groups. This group of American bishops has been so busy trying to overturn the work of the Second Vatican Council that they have failed in their pastoral duties. We have heard from too many bishops how Catholics are going to hell if they vote for Obama or support same-sex marriage legislation. Check the Faithful America website for more information on the pronouncements of certain bishops.

They have distorted the notion of religious liberty to foster their own agenda. They have also distorted the notion of episcopal leadership. Somehow they have assumed they had carte blanche to compel their sheep to blind obedience.

The bishops need to start listening to their people and trying to understand what is actually going on in the real world. As they sit in their comfortable residences and dust off their weighty volumes of Thomas Aquinas, they risk devolving into complete irrelevance. A first step would be to quit picking unnecessary fights in the public forum. They won appropriate concessions on contraception from the Obama administration and chose to continue attacking the administration, accusing it of denying them their religious freedom. Americans actually understand what freedom of religion means in our country and did not buy the bishops' argument. The bishops also misunderstood the same-sex marriage issue making it into a religious issue instead of a civil rights issue. Yet the people saw the issue as one of fairness and realized it didn't impact their exercise of religion at all.

The election presents real challenges for Republicans and this cadre of bishops who believe that the Middle Ages were the golden age of Catholicism. The first step for Republicans is to come to terms with the re-election of President Barack Obama and work cooperatively on resolving issues like the fiscal cliff. They need to come up with a fair budget deal. It is time to discard the offensive tax pledge promoted by the ubiquitous Grover Norquist and come to grips with the real issues and challenges that face our nation. The passage of a fair and comprehensive immigration bill would also go a long way to rehabilitate Republican legislators.

As for the church, it needs to reach out to the world and make a genuine attempt to understand it. It needs to determine an appropriate way to position itself to be a meaningful contributor to this larger society. The conservative bishops need to move away from their empty threats and adopt the stance of the Jesus of the Gospels who came to serve. Invite the laity in, recognize that we have skills and knowledge lacking in the episcopacy, and understand that working together we can build a better church for a new generation of Catholics seeking to live their faith in a bold new way.

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