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Yes, but who will you invite next year?

Joan Chittister | May. 11, 2007 From Where I Stand

"A real Christian prays," Karl Barth wrote, "with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other." I have never been able to forget that image. There is something about the insight that rings true. After all, if what we learn about the mind of God, the heart of Jesus, in Scripture has nothing to do with the way we live, then the spiritual life is at best an exercise designed to make God a private devotion.

Nevertheless, the problem is clear: the temptation is to get mired in one of those elements of the Christian life to the exclusion of the other -- the scripture to the exclusion of the newspaper, the newspaper to the exclusion of the scripture.

One thing is obvious, however. If you want to know the state of the culture you?re in -- as well as the spiritual task of the time -- read the paper.

Three newspaper stories, for instance, gave me particular pause this week. The first headline from Reuters news agency as compiled by the Catholic Media Report of May 9 read "Pope Warns Catholic Politicians Who Back Abortion."

The second headline from the same source, citing the online edition of Britain?s newspaper, *The Independent*, read "Infant Mortality in Iraq Soars as Young Pay the Price for the War."

The third appeared in the *Washington Post*, May 9, and read, "For Bush the Welcome Mat Seems A Little Less Welcoming."

The first story deals with Pope Benedict?s recent public statement that politicians who vote for the legalization of abortion must consider themselves excommunicated from the church and deprived of the Eucharist, however sincere they may be in working to eliminate abortion by other means.

The second story is about protecting the lives of children, too. But this story is about the hundreds of thousands of children who have died in Iraq as a direct result of the two Gulf Wars waged by the United States against that country since 1990. But this story carries no threat of moral consequences or even hints that such a position may be in the making.

These two stories, in other words, draw the line that separates Catholic morality from itself. On one side, moral values are defined as sexual life. They deal with contraception, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia and are absolute on all counts.

On the other side, the concerns are also for the right to life but concentrate on the issue from the perspective of a broader array of social justice issues: from the effect on all life from preemptive war, for instance, or

nuclearism, or poverty, or immigration, or ecology or civil rights or the death penalty.

On the one side lies the "hold-the-line" position. This position argues that the standards of the country, the ones we all took for granted prior to the present scientific revolution and all the new life questions with which it faces us, must not be breached. Must, in fact, be maintained at whatever cost to all other issues.

On the other side stand those whose life questions are more global than personal, more public than private. They argue on the basis of the great documents on Catholic social teaching and assume that justice is of the essence of personal morality.

Both positions are very, very Catholic. One cannot exclude the other.

Maybe that?s why the third story is the one we need most to hear and heed if both scripture and society are to come together in our lifetime.

This third story is about a small Benedictine college in Latrobe, Pa., which, thanks to the fact that its new president is a past director of the Bush White House Office for Faith-based and Community Initiatives, managed to contract the president of the United States as this year?s commencement speaker. No small coup.

They did it, they said, to bring attention to a small college that lives in the shadow of some of the great ones in the country: Pitt, Duquesne, Carlow, Carnegie Mellon and a myriad of others. And it worked. They got attention, all right.

The question of whether or not President Bush represented the Catholic ideals of the college and should therefore be showcased as a graduation speaker began to overshadow the fact of the graduation itself. The amount of division the question generated might have weakened any number of other institutions.

Instead, we may all be getting a model of how to handle dissent in a period when dissent and division are of the essence of the time.

In this case, the Benedictine community of St. Vincent?s Archabbey, rather than simply either canceling the speaker or repressing the dissenters, had its own discussion of the implications of the event. The college held faculty meetings, student forums and public exchanges on the question. Peace groups -- including other religious and even Benedictine Sisters themselves -- held vigils and public demonstrations on campus to remind the campus community and the country of all those other Catholic values which, they argue, are either not being stressed or are being damaged by the policies of the Bush administration.

And then, tenured faculty, both religious and lay, that disagreed with the invitation, wrote an open letter to President Bush, the subject of the third news story, explaining their concerns about his choice as commencement speaker.

It is in this letter that the world gets a clear schema of how to deal with differences in a time of social turmoil and equally competing positions about crucial issues. They made three points very clearly:

First, *"In the spirit of Benedictine hospitality,"* they welcomed him in the hope that his stay would be *"warm, engaging, and enlightening."* And they added, *"Just as we will welcome your presence, we have the opportunity to welcome those who protest your visit."*

Second, they pointed out that this *"visit affords us the opportunity and the obligation to bear witness ourselves."* Then, citing principles of Catholic social teaching, they expressed their disagreement with the preemptive war on Iraq, the environmental policies that threaten the welfare of the globe, the economic policies

that favor "the rich and powerful" to the detriment of the poor, and the fear mongering that poisons public discussion in the United States.

Finally, they ended the letter in the same spirit of welcome and honesty with which they began it. They wrote, out of the Benedictine commitment to conversion, *"Just as we have graduated generations of men and women committed to peace, care, community, stewardship and hospitality, we pray that your visit with this graduating class turns your heart to these same values."*

They made the whole incident a display of concerns rather than simply one more instance of repression.

From where I stand, in a period when it is becoming ever more popular for the church to bar speakers from platforms on the basis of single-issue politics than to talk about those issues, we might all take a lesson from the way this community handled this situation.

And we?ll know if they really meant it if they invite John Kerry, or better yet, Hillary Clinton, to give next year?s commencement address.

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