NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Headlines from bishops' meeting often obscured the message

Joan Chittister | Nov. 21, 2007 From Where I Stand

Headline writers are a very special breed of print journalist. They have three major tasks: 1.) To get the reader's attention and, therefore, interest a person in the material being presented, 2.) To fill the column space allotted to the article with a font that gives design and balance to the page, and 3.) To tell the story by emphasizing its central thesis. If you're keeping score, I suppose two out of three is better than nothing. Nevertheless ...

The Chicago Tribune, for instance, ran a double-decker, four column headline across a front page six column story this week against a picture of Catholic Bishops in session at their annual national conference that fit the space precisely and was sure to get people's attention. Whether it was fundamentally true to the main point of the story is, however, in question.

The headline read: "Catholic bishops say voters' souls at stake." After years of single-issue politics, I watched the people around me frown and then glance past it as they moved on to other front page stories.

Did bishops publish such a document in Fascist Franco's Spain? I wondered as I read it. Did bishops say that to the German people during the rise of Hitler's Third Reich and the holocaust of Jews?

The question is a compelling one. If moral concerns are selective, moral guidance is confusing. And often dismissed.

How many of those readers simply disregarded the announcement of one more story about the electoral concerns of the Catholic church as either unimportant or unacceptable is unclear.

How many of them went back to read the story in its entirety is also anybody's guess.

What they took with them from the headline is even more in doubt. And it is problematic. The fact is that all of them got one more impression from the headline of churches using religion to influence politics by threatening church-goers with eternal damnation if they don't vote the way the church says they must.

In a world reeling from "the war on terror" and in a country debating the devastating results of global warming, the need for universal medical insurance, the deterioration of the educational system, the loss of Social Security benefits for generations to come, the need for a sound and humane immigration policy, the loss of status in a nuclear world and the threat of bankruptcy from an increasingly militaristic foreign policy, the headline was

indeed a tease. But it was not the story.

The truth is that the bishops in their latest document, "Faithful Citizenship" -- the church's attempt to teach the importance of civic participation in the political process -- eschewed single issue politics entirely. "As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. A candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support," the document says quite directly.

They completely avoided drawing moral comparisons between political parties and candidates on the basis of isolated topics, the more common character of church intervention in recent elections.

Instead, the document sets out to remind people that voting is, indeed, a moral act but that political morality -- social morality -- is made up of more things than sexual issues, all of them morally important, all of them to be seen as the voter's moral obligation to weigh issues and their effects on society at large. "Life is under direct attack from abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, and destruction of human embryos for research. These intrinsic evils must always be opposed," the document reads. But then says, just as clearly, "This teaching also compels us as Catholics to oppose genocide, torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty, as well as to pursue peace and help overcome poverty, racism, and other conditions that demean human life."

It is a far more sobering and balanced document than the headline would seem to imply. Yes, abortion is defined as a major social and moral issue but so, the bishops insist in this document in a way they have not in the past, "are church teachings on immigration, just war and poverty."

Given the immediate past history of the U.S. church on electoral guidance, however, and the nature of the headline itself, the real content of the document may well be obscured just when it is needed most.

And that's a pity.

The document is a significant one precisely because it teaches rather than bullies or hectors the faithful.

It does not insist or suggest that Catholics should vote for any particular candidate or political party. "We do not tell Catholics how to vote," it says -- a signal to those clerics who, at very least, flirted with the temptation in the last election.

It recognizes the primacy of the individual conscience.

It stresses the obligation of individuals to form their consciences carefully.

It presents the breadth of Catholic social teaching rather than insist on only isolated elements of it.

It acknowledges, at least implicitly, the complexity of moral decision making in a pluralistic society and the need for 'discernment" and "prudence," in the process.

It calls for informed voting on the part of the entire Catholic community.

It raises Catholicism to the level of adult participation in the political process again.

In short, the document may well do much to restore the credibility of the church's social role and reduce the tendency to stereotype Catholics as single-issue voters, as well. Data reported by the Pew Institute on Religion and Public Life, after all, indicated that as many Catholics voted for John Kerry in 2004 as for President Bush.

The bishops may still, it seems, debate whether or not Catholics and Catholic politicians who refuse to criminalize abortion while working in other ways to eliminate it ought to consider themselves barred from receiving communion.

But then, if they do that, as they did, for instance, during the birth control debates of the late '60's, the effect may simply be the same now as it was then -- alienation from the church entirely or wholesale disregard for all its teachings.

From where I stand, moral suasion, idealism, personal example, and respect for the complexity of moral decision-making are always more effective in bringing people to commitment than punishment, intimidation and excommunication ever are. It's called "catching more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar." Sometimes it's even called "Christ-like."

Maybe someone should tell headline writers that.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/16/2014 - 03:14*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/headlines-bishops-meeting-often-obscured-message