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

The American way -- whatever that is

Joan Chittister | Feb. 13, 2008 From Where I Stand

I got a good dose of U.S. politics last week, but it wasn't in the United States. I was at one of the Western world's rare institutions -- the Irish village dinner party. Here people from all over the world who happen to be in the village at the time sit alongside locals who, I am convinced, are among the best read people in the world. After all, computers and the internet have far less hold in an Irish village than in the States. And there aren't too many expensive TV packages either. Just book talk. And lots of it. Over the dinner table, late into the night, about everything on the globe.

Last year's concern was Darfur. This year's attention, of course, is focused on the current race for president of the United States. Our election, after all, affects everyone in the world, one way or another. What we do will have a profound impact on lives everywhere, they are quick to note. (And anyway, Barack Obama, remember, has an Irish ancestor from County Offaly.)

The Irish concerns about our election differ radically from our own. They don't understand that an election that will cost, the analysts tell us, more than $2 billion by Election Day doesn't seem to bother the electorate. Two billion dollars, they point out, would build a lot of schools, do a lot of medical research, provide a lot of decent housing for people who are obscenely poor, even in the richest country in the world. The old "anyone can become president of the United States" line doesn't impress them much anymore.

They don't understand elections that appear to depend more on who's endorsing whom than they do on who's saying what about the issues. They forget that we're a celebrity society and if we don't have a celebrity, we'll make one.

They don't understand our nomination process. And, frankly, who does right now? In some states only those who belong to the party can vote in the primary. In other states anyone who walks in the door can cast a vote -- whether they intend to vote for this party in the general election or not. And in every state you can lose votes and still gain delegates -- or get more votes than your opponent and lose delegates, depending on where the voters are from.

The Irish seem to feel more keenly than we do that, as a result of such a complex and cumbersome system, we won't know much more coming out of this primary season than we did going in. Except, of course, that we seem to be almost totally demographically divided. So much for "uniters."

And I admit it: I don't understand the logic of a primary system that can run for almost a year -- depending on when you say it started -- and then launch a campaign for the general election that looks like it will barely run for eight weeks. How did we ever get into a situation like this?

I heard at the table, too, that the Irish have a very high level of discomfort with the degree of "identity or personality politics" that seems to grip the United States. The notion that what a person looks like or how much we "like" them can determine whether or not we vote for them smacks to them of a Hollywood culture -- unreal, plastic, superficial, scary. "Does anybody know what these candidates stand for?" they ask. "And does anyone care?" Good questions.

Maybe we ought to start some polling on who knows what about the candidates' positions on issues. Just to keep the rest of us -- the electorate -- honest when it's all over. After all, if candidates don't tell us what they'll do and how they'll do it and we don't demand that they tell us so that we can critique their plans before they go into office -- how can we hold them accountable if and when our secret expectations are not met after they are in office?

The sea of signs and balloons, the portrait posters and campaign ads on TV, the Irish see as more about selling slogans than presenting or explaining policies. The Irish like to sit down and talk about things. We, on the other hand, are a snake oil society. We sell things in pretty bottles and colored boxes. Never mind what's in them, just buy! You'll find out the ingredients later. After all, we've been selling presidents on slogans for a long time now. The motto "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion" dominated the election of 1884. "Return to Normalcy" got Warren G. Harding elected. "A Leader for A Change" carried Jimmy Carter's election. "Let's Make America Great Again," swept Ronald Reagan into office. How many of the slogans matched the man they were selling, nobody seems to want to say.

Don't worry, however, all is not lost. Some people are trying to identify the content under the chaos. The Irish if no one else. Just last week Radio-Television Erin, the national broadcasting system in Ireland, aired a radio talk show program on the U.S. election. One of the themes that emerged on the show was that Obama was weak on substance and, given the fact that he had been in the U.S. Senate only two years before running for President, short on experience, too, for such a serious moment in world history. "Change" -- Obama's campaign slogan -- puzzles them. Change what and change how, they wanted to know.

But even better than that, perhaps, one of the program participants referred to a front page story, "Are Girls Wired Not to Win?" in a recent *Sunday Times* book review feature. (*The Times*, Feb. 10, 2008) The speaker learned that the hormone oxytocin - "the elixir of contentment" that surges during childbirth, breastfeeding, sex, cuddling and nurturing -- is what leads women to choose to nurture their families rather than to go for top positions in public institutions. The program participant laughed wryly at a theory that fails to account for the men, as well as for the women, who make the same kind of choices every day.

The same writer, however, points out, that it is also oxytocin that increases a woman's ability to reach out, befriend, understand and trust people -- precisely the factors that government and corporate society, in their dash for power and greed, may need most right now.

From where I stand, then, it looks like the rest of the world is beginning to catch on to the flavor, confusion and

superficiality of contemporary politics in an apolitical world. Pretty soon they'll probably be as good at it as we are. Maybe that goes, too, with spreading democracy around the world.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/06/2015 - 06:35*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/american-way-whatever