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Social ministers long for unified Catholic voice

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All Things Catholic

I spent part of this week at what is arguably the most courageous annual event in Washington, D.C. -- or the most quixotic, depending upon your point of view. It?s the ?Social Ministry Gathering? sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which brings together more than 500 Catholic leaders for a week of issue seminars and knocking on doors on Capitol Hill.

I shared the stage with Mark Shields of PBS for the event?s closing act, but I also spent some time hanging around the edges, listening in on conversations and taking the temperature of the crowd.

Here?s what makes the shindig unique: It pulls off the oil-and-water exercise of gathering pro-life and social justice activists under one roof, and pushes them to work together. Perhaps no other venue in this ultra-partisan town allows one to get an update about fighting the Freedom of Choice Act in one room, then stroll next door to hear about the dangers of global warming or why natural resources in developing nations aren?t used to help the poor. Even more remarkable, these are largely the same people, who share the same broad vision of defending human life and dignity across the board.

Auxiliary Bishop Martin Holley of Washington, D.C, an African-American prelate born in Florida, struck this tone at a Pro-Life Activities breakfast on Tuesday. He called upon ?pro-life and peace and justice people? to build ?a more integrated network,? comparing the pro-life cause and anti-slavery efforts in the 19th century by arguing that both promote ?equal treatment under the law.? Holley also said that the church?s social message must ?begin at the womb, but not end there.?

Holley told a powerful story from 1972, when he was a lanky teenager in the deep South, about being confronted by three pick-up trucks full of angry white men. One of them, he said, held a shotgun to his head while screaming racial hatred, and for a while it wasn?t clear he would escape without a beating ? or worse. (Eventually the mob ran out of steam, and Holley and his little brother slipped away). Holley said that memory flooded back when he watched Barack Obama on election night. He ended up on his floor, he said, sobbing uncontrollably about what the result meant in light of the African-American experience in this country.

Yet in almost the same breath, Holley described his disappointment with Obama on the ?life issues.? Though he didn?t quite spell it out, one could almost sense the division in Holley?s own heart -- his anguish at being unable to fully embrace this administration, which in many ways seems so full of promise, because of what he sees as its moral blindness on unborn life. Holley?s remarks seemed to capture much sentiment here: strong optimism about some aspects of the Obama presidency, alarm about others, and, in any event, longing for a more unified Catholic voice that could somehow bring both of these instincts together.

While that longing is hugely commendable, one should not be naïve about the cultural tide against which efforts such as the Social Ministry Gathering are swimming.

In that regard, here?s a reading recommendation: Journalist Bill Bishop?s recent book *The Big Sort* offers hard empirical data to illustrate what he sees as a thirty-year trend in American life towards ?homophilia? -- which in this case has nothing to do with sex, but rather love of one?s own kind. Bishop shows that over the last three decades, Americans have retreated into ideologically-defined ghettoes -- both physical and virtual -- in which we have systematically walled ourselves off from people with whom we disagree.

A few factoids from the book:

- In 1976, less than one-quarter of the American population lived in ?landslide counties,? meaning counties in which the spread in the presidential vote was more than 20 percent one way or the other. By 2004, it was more than fifty percent, meaning that Americans are increasingly clustering near people who think like them.
- In 1975, moderates made up forty percent of the House of Representatives; by 2005, that number had fallen to eight percent.
- A 12-nation survey supervised by Diana Mutz of the University of Pennsylvania found that Americans finish dead last in terms of the percentage of people who say they regularly talk politics with those who hold different views. Only 23 percent of Americans reported having such exchanges on a regular basis.

As Bishop observes, when people spend most of their time in like-minded company, a ?law of group polarization? takes over. Positions become more extreme in the direction of the group consensus, and that?s exactly what we see in American politics. Alan Abramowitz of Emory University has found that over the last three decades, the percentage of Democrats who self-identify as ?liberal? has gone up while the percentage of ?moderates? has declined, and an equal-and-opposite phenomenon holds true among Republicans. In 2006, Abramowitz found that 86 percent of Democrats now call themselves ?liberal,? and 80 percent of Republicans say they?re ?conservative,? suggesting that the moderate middle has all but vanished.

All this concerns the world of secular politics, but in many ways American Catholics have reproduced this trajectory within the church. Mutz?s research offers confirmation of the point; in surveys in the late 1990s, she found that the overwhelming majority of regular church-goers, including Catholics, say the people they meet at church are ?like them? politically. Applied to Catholics, this means that pro-lifers and those whose concerns skew towards anti-poverty efforts or immigration reform rarely rub shoulders. More often, they?re socialized to see one another as members of different tribes, with alien customs and worldviews.

Purely in terms of Realpolitik, this laceration within the church means that Catholics speak with a divided voice. Theologically, the problem cuts even deeper. The church is supposed to be the sacrament of the unity of the human family, which is difficult to pull off when we?re clustered into competing factions.

When I trotted all this out during my talk at the Social Ministry Gathering, one young Catholic from the West Coast challenged me, arguing with great conviction that Americans are more unified now and that the 2008 elections marked a sea change in that regard. He also insisted that the same thing is true within the church. I?d very much like to believe that?s right, but my reading of both Bishop?s data and the recent experience of American Catholicism suggests that we?re dealing with long-term historical trends unlikely to be reversed in the flash of an eye.

In any event, I told the crowd in Washington, when it comes to building unity in a divided church, the trick is to hope that things have changed -- but to work as if they haven?t. Anyone looking for inspiration in that regard would do well to keep the Social Ministry Gathering in mind.

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One annual highlight of the gathering usually comes when PBS analyst Mark Shield talks politics, a presentation that?s generally one part sober analysis and one part stand-up comedy. Here?s a sampling of Shields? wit and wisdom from this year?s edition:

?We political journalists are expected to make predictions. It?s what we do ? fish swim, birds fly, and analysts predict. So here?s a prediction: Some time in the next few months, one convict is going to turn to another in an Illinois prison and say, ?You know, the food was better here when you were governor.??

Shields passed along Mike Huckabee?s zinger regarding the lackadaisical presidential campaign of former Tennessee senator and ?Law and Order? star Fred Thompson: ?Fred begins every day at the crack of noon.?

Shields also told the story of a session with a dozen or so political reporters and then-candidate Mitt Romney during campaign ?08. Shields confessed he had initially been left a bit cold by Romney -- a man who, as Shields put it, never seems to sweat, has probably never had a pimple or a chipped tooth, and whose shirts and suits never seem to wrinkle. Yet, Shields said, he was favorably impressed when Romney told the reporters the following story: ?I was talking to my wife this morning about coming here,? Romney told the group, ?and I asked her, ?Honey, in your wildest dreams did you ever think I would be meeting with a bunch of big-name reporters who could help make me president?? Romney then dead-panned his wife?s response: ?Mitt,? she said,? to be honest, you?re not in my wildest dreams!??

A Hillary Clinton supporter, as Shields told the story, once groused about perceived media bias in favor of rival Barack Obama: ?If you listen to the press,? the Hillary activist said, ?the Democratic race has boiled down to a choice between a senator from New York who was born in Illinois, and a senator from Illinois who was born in a manger.?

Shields professed has admiration for people who go into politics, saying that he admires their willingness to risk the sort of public rejection that most of us go to great lengths to avoid. He said his favorite reaction from a losing politician came from a defeated candidate for a state assembly office in California, who, when asked for comment by a local radio station, said: ?The people have spoken ? the bastards!?

On a serious note, Shields told a story about a man who was crying profusely during FDR?s funeral procession. When a radio reporter asked the man if he had known President Roosevelt, he replied: ?No, I didn?t know him, but he knew me.? In the same spirit, Shields said, Catholic social ministers know the people of America, especially those who don?t get invited to White House dinners and who aren?t major donors to political action committees. He encouraged the ministers to go on being the voice of the voiceless -- a role that during this economic meltdown, he said, is more crucial than ever.

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