

Bishops urged to restore civility in pro-life efforts

Jerry Filteau | May. 11, 2009



Fr. John P. Langan (CNS)

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Calling the Obama presidency a new moment in U.S. history, Jesuit Fr. John P. Langan of Georgetown University warned April 27 of a current "three-way impasse" on abortion. He urged U.S. bishops seeking real change to act with caution, pastoral care and "civil respect for those with whom they disagree."

"The bishops are certainly right to condemn the moral evil of abortion and to warn us against the individualism, selfishness and greed which have had such a devastating effect on American culture and family life as well as on our financial institutions," he said.

"But if they think they make their witness more credible and more effective by developing a quasi-excommunication of the Democratic Party and by aligning themselves with politicians who think that combining pro-life slogans with American chauvinism and exercising American military power without regard to international criticism constitutes an adequate response to evil in the world, they are sadly mistaken," he added.

Bishops who try to make abortion the sole or overriding political issue for Catholics are "marginalizing the church's political influence," he said.

Langan is Georgetown's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin professor of Catholic social thought and rector of the university's Jesuit community. He delivered a carefully nuanced analysis of the Catholic social teaching challenges facing the new Obama administration and the 111th U.S. Congress at a seminar on Capitol Hill, held at the Dirksen Senate Office Building and sponsored by The Catholic University of America's Life Cycle Institute.

Langan pulled no punches on Catholic politicians who do not embrace the church's teachings against abortion. "Catholic Democrats in political and civil life will need to show that they are ready to criticize the practice of abortion and that they do not regard it as the unquestionable exercise of an inherent right or as a morally trivial private choice," he said. "The teaching of the church needs to make some difference in their political behavior

and should not be relegated to a purely private realm.?

But at the same time he excoriated those bishops -- and single-issue pro-life advocates they directly or indirectly support -- who put all supporters of legal abortion in a single camp as proponents of the "culture of death," and who advocate systematic resistance to Obama and his administration on absolutist grounds of opposition to his abortion policies.

"Even for those who believe that it is seriously wrong to vote for Obama or for other pro-choice candidates, it would be a mistake to think that this point justifies a comprehensive rejection of his programs and policies," Langan said. "In fact, it seems clear that Catholics, even those with significant church offices and responsibilities, will need to cooperate with the Obama administration on topics such as immigration reform, financial regulation and foreign aid programs."

"It would also be a serious extension of a pro-life position beyond its original moral premises to hold that pro-life people should work for the failure of Obama's presidency," he added. "Failure of a presidency in a time of war and economic crisis is not a prospect that anyone should regard lightly, whether the president's name is Bush or Obama. National politics in the United States has an inescapably adversarial character, but this is a tendency which thoughtful religious people should look at critically and should try to mitigate rather than reinforce with one-sided demands for righteousness, demands which often turn out to be narrowly focused and rigidly exclusive."

Langan said that while particulars may be debated, the overall thrust of Obama's plans for energy, the environment, financial recovery and health care reform is "inclusive, egalitarian, communitarian, solidaristic and internationalist" and thus "broadly compatible with Catholic social values."

"There seems to be a fairly strong prima facie case for Catholics to support the Obama administration and its agenda as an effort to move American society somewhat closer to the ideals of Catholic social thought and to move our society forward from the pit which it has dug for itself," he said.

At the same time, he said, Catholic Democrats face a core problem: "Even when they do not favor the legal prohibition of abortion, they believe that abortion is a grave moral evil. They would not want to put the Catholic health care system in jeopardy, much less out of business. ... So they are between the rock of Peter and the hard place of the post-McGovern Democratic Party, which has been less than welcoming over the years."

He said the proposed path out of that impasse for many Catholic Democrats -- not criminalizing abortion, but implementing a social and economic agenda that aims to reduce the number of abortions -- "does not satisfy the followers and teachers of the straight and narrow path which leads to the absolute prohibition of abortion, a path which actually leads over some very rough territory and which may well be blocked by insurmountable constitutional and political obstacles."

That proposed path "also fails to satisfy the demand of many pro-choice politicians, activists and experts who favor the full legitimization of abortion as an assertion of reproductive freedom, a choice to be made by women with public funding and support and without public scrutiny," he said.

Such pro-choice leaders, influential in the party and strengthened by the November election results, "feel no need to appeal to pro-life Democrats or to show respect for Catholic teaching on these matters. Their ideological rigidity has the effect of convincing many of the religious that there can be no compromise with what they call "the culture of death," " he said.

"What we are looking at," he said, "is a three-way impasse?":

- ?Pro-life Democrats -- and some pro-life Republicans as well -- are looking for the Obama administration to offer reassurances with regard to conscience clauses [protecting health care workers who conscientiously oppose abortion] and some signs that it is prepared to take seriously the goal of making abortion rare as well as safe and legal. So far there are not many signs that the administration thinks it necessary or worthwhile to make such concessions? and a continued divide on such issues could fracture the religious and secular wings of the current liberal coalition.
- ?The bishops, meanwhile, have been discovering that the pace of their political involvement is determined by three groups: 1) a minority of bishops who take positions which capture media attention, such as the denial of Communion to pro-choice politicians; 2) a noisy movement of activists and populists, which includes many sincerely devout people but also far too many members who use scurrilous and vicious language to attack those who deviate from the antiabortion line which they identify with Catholic orthodoxy; and 3) rationalistic moral theorists who hold that all other considerations pale into insignificance in comparison with the intrinsic evil of abortion. In this situation the political influence of the church is likely to be enfeebled and marginalized beyond the dreams of our enemies.?
- ?To an increasing extent, the pro-life movement within the church shows a desire to act in ways which break amicable and civil relations with those both inside and outside our church who favor abortion or who support compromise on this issue. ... They lump together both those who deny that abortion is a moral evil and those who believe that even while it is indeed a moral evil, it cannot be effectively forbidden by law in the contemporary United States.?

?The bishops need to think carefully,? Langan commented, ?about whether they are showing a heroic resistance to absolute evil or whether they are being used by selfish and dishonest political interests and by zealots who show more passion than judgment when they stubbornly refuse to recognize the limits of what is politically possible in a pluralistic and individualistic society.?

He said that the need in the U.S. church today ?is for a group of bishops to teach in a way which shows that they are sensitive to the wounded condition of American Catholicism and to the complexities of the life issues in a very imperfect world.?

?They will need to show civil respect for those with whom they disagree, pastoral concern for Catholics who may question their teaching and caution in scrutinizing those who offer to fight their battles for them,? he said.

Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.

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