

The leadership crisis

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Political commentators have been reflecting for several weeks on television and in the press about the crisis of leadership facing the Republican Party in the United States.

Larry Sabato, an oft-quoted professor at the University of Virginia, suggested recently that we may now have a one-and-a-half party system in this country, rather than the traditional two-party system.

His reason is that the Republicans have lost the support of most young voters, minorities, women, moderate suburbanites, and those with graduate degrees, and in the process have been reduced to a party consisting mainly of white Southern males. Sabato pointed out that no party can hope to win national elections with so narrow an electoral base.

At the same time, various spokesmen for the Republican Party have been ratcheting up their rhetoric against the Obama Administration, calling it by turns Socialist and even Fascist. As another commentator pointed out, the Republican Party runs the risk of being perceived as a party that stands against gays and for torture.

What does this have to do with the Catholic church and its own current pastoral leadership?

The Catholic church also runs the risk of being perceived as the church which stands only against abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, and homosexuality. This opposition, when voiced without any corresponding concerns about war, violence against women, capital punishment, torture, global warming, and governmental responsibilities to the poor?to cite only a few of the life issues that confront this country and the world at large?turns off many younger people, the educated, and women generally.

The bishops of the Catholic church had already lost much of their credibility because of the sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood. Their recent tussles with prominent Catholic politicians and their condemnations of the University of Notre Dame for inviting President Obama to be its Commencement speaker this coming Sunday have begun to solidify the impression, deserved or not, that they have become purveyors of single-issue morality and, in the process, unwitting tools of the Republican Party.

The bishops, too, will find that they have alienated a significant number of younger Catholics as well as those who are highly educated. It has long since been evident that the hierarchy has a serious credibility problem with Catholic women.

In spite of the concerted efforts of a minority of the U.S. Catholic bishops, a few threatening hell-fire on those who voted Democratic in November, Catholics supported the Obama-Biden ticket by 9 points (54-45 percent). This reversed the situation in 2004 when a smaller majority of Catholics (52-47 percent) favored the re-election of President George W. Bush, despite the fact that his opponent, Senator John Kerry, was himself a Catholic.

Something has changed since the election of John Paul II as Pope in 1978, namely, the composition of the Catholic hierarchy.

At the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the following bishops (a partial list only) exercised significant leadership: Cardinal Bernhard Alfrink (Holland), Bishop Joseph DeSmedt (Belgium), Cardinal Julius Döpfner (Germany), Cardinal Joseph Frings (Germany), Cardinal Franz König (Austria), Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger (Canada), Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro (Italy), Cardinal Achille Liénart (France), Cardinal François Marty (France), Cardinal Albert Meyer (U.S.A.), and Cardinal Leo-Jozef Suenens (Belgium).

What is remarkable is that every single one of them first became a bishop under Pope Pius XII. The only exception was Cardinal Liénart, who had been appointed by Pius XI.

Can one imagine a similar group of progressive bishops assuming major leadership positions at, let us say, Vatican III? Not likely, since Pope John Paul II, unlike Pope Pius XII -- no liberal, he -- made a conscious effort throughout his long pontificate to appoint only rigid loyalists to the hierarchy and to exclude, just as consciously, the very type of priests who could become the pace-setters of another much-needed renewal and reform of the universal Catholic church.

John Paul II's bishops, with outstanding exceptions to be sure, tended to be priests known first of all for their readiness to do whatever they were told by the Vatican, and not to think for themselves or to be responsive to pastoral challenges identified by their own priests, religious, and laity.

These appointees were largely "careerists" whose apparent main concern was to curry favor with those in the Vatican who could promote them within the hierarchy, and not to do or say anything that could abort their rise to the top.

At least three cardinals have publicly attacked careerism in the priesthood: Vincenzo Fagioli, former head of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, Bernardin Gantin, former head of the Congregation of Bishops, and Joseph Ratzinger, at the time head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now Pope Benedict XVI.

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