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Who's Sorry Now?

Joe Feuerherd | May. 13, 2009 NCR Today

Does NCR owe the Catholic community an apology? Russell Shaw, former spokesperson for the US bishops and the Knights of Columbus, **thinks so** [1].

?In a special way these days I?m reminded of those Catholic sources ? periodicals like the National Catholic Reporter and Commonweal as well as some individuals claiming special wisdom ? who raised their voices often and loudly last year to declare that even if Barack Obama and the Catholic Church didn?t quite see eye-to-eye on everything, the candidate was moderate man, committed to reducing the frequency of abortions and to much else congenial to the Church.?

Typically, for Shaw is both a fine writer and a real gentleman, he offers a fair characterization. NCR has indeed editorialized that the new administration has much to offer to the Catholic community, including those (like those of us at NCR) who want to see actual results instead of endless rhetoric when it comes to reducing the scandalous number of abortions in the US.

Shaw, however, thinks NCR should apologize because the Obama Administration has lifted George W. Bush?s Mexico City policy, is allowing federal funds to support embryonic stem cell research, threatens conscience protections accorded health care workers, and will appoint a pro-choice justice to replace David Souter.

Bottom line: Less than four months into the new administration we don?t plan a mea culpa. Rather, we agree with **L'Osservatore Romano** [2], that the administration has demonstrated thoughtfulness and moderation, even as some of its less temperate Catholic critics declare, **?We are at War!?** [3]

Here?s the larger point: Politics is the art of the possible and Shaw and his allies in the professional pro-life movement in Washington have repeatedly proven ineffective in moving the agenda forward. The key moment, ironically, came in the summer of 1990 when, given the choice of opposing the ?stealth nomination? of Souter, the professional pro-lifers chose to believe the assurances of the Republican White House that Souter was ?one of us.?

Though Souter?s record was elusive (fresh from the Clarence Thomas debacle the Bush I White House was looking to avoid the fight that would result by nominating someone with a long track record) there were at least three things known about him that should have given pro-life lobbyists pause: one, Souter served on the board of a hospital in New Hampshire where abortions were performed and there was no record of his opposing those procedures; two, Souter was the protégé of pro-choice Republican Senator Warren Rudman; and, three, in the ?Live Free or Die? state there is strong strain of libertarian conservatism which equates abortion rights (along with Second Amendment protections and low taxes) with civil liberties.

Instead of mounting opposition to Souter, however, the professional pro-lifers, **in the words of Conservative Caucus Chairman Howard Phillips** [4], one of few who opposed the Souter nomination, behaved like ?Republican sycophants.?

Two years later, in 1992, Souter provided the swing vote in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, the decision that cast abortion rights in constitutional stone.

Most recently, Shaw and others in Washington demonstrated similar political ineptitude when they **supported a massive campaign** [5] ? it included a letter-writing campaign promoted in parishes throughout the country -- to oppose the so-called ?Freedom of Choice Act,? legislation that, for heaven?s sake, has not even yet been introduced in either the House or Senate. In his recent press conference, President Obama stated what was **obvious to anyone who was paying the least bit of attention** [6]: FOCA is not a priority of his administration. The time, energy and resources focused on fighting the FOCA straw man are truly scandalous.

But don?t hold your breath waiting for an apology from those who gave Souter a pass or wasted effort fighting the FOCA fraud.

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