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

Obama and the Catholics

NCR Editorial Staff | Jun. 9, 2009

President Obama at Notre Dame

It is increasingly evident that the Catholic conversation in the public square has undergone a significant change during the past two years and with the help of some unlikely participants. The first of those would be the new president, who has drawn significant fire from certain episcopal quarters and another would be the Vatican, which has been playing against type -- or at least the expectations of some -- when it comes to the new president.

A third set of players -- high profile neoconservative Catholics in the United States -- has succeeded in highlighting not only the changing conversation but the disintegrating royal construct out of which bishops could once command authority simply because of their station.

Unlike Sen. John Kerry, who was easily roughed up and dismissed by the aforementioned bishops and many like-minded on the Catholic right four years before, Barack Obama came to the national political arena comfortable not only in his own skin, but also with his own religious experience, about which he speaks with ease, and with a highly developed moral compass. All of that made him comfortable, too, with the language and issues of a large segment of the Catholic community that had, of late, lost its voice.

The immediate rejoinder, of course, is that on the issue of abortion his moral compass has gone haywire. And others would make the case that he?s not found true north either on such matters as war and indeterminate detention of prisoners. But no president is perfect, and at this point one might give him the benefit of the doubt on each score: that on abortion he is actually seeking, within political reality, to substantially reduce the number and, also within obvious political constraints, seeking to end wars, not start preemptive hostilities.

Those presumptions -- and granting of the benefit of doubt -- seem to be the approach taken by some at the Vatican and by the editors at *L?Osservatore Romano*, essentially the Vatican?s newspaper, in its assessment of Obama.

As a May 19 report from Religion News Service observed, the ?pope?s paper? has been ?consistently friendly, and at times openly enthusiastic, since his election in November.?

NCR?s John Allen has noted that such reaction should be no surprise. For starters, conservative Catholic intellectuals in Europe have never seen abortion as the overriding issue it is for conservative Catholics in the United States. Further, the Vatican often takes a much wider view of the world and of international interests

than the professional anti-abortion Catholics in the United States. So, having someone in the White House who shows an understanding of the need for multilateralism in international affairs, who is intent on winding down the war in Iraq and who has placed nuclear disarmament and protection of the environment high on his list of priorities is apparently more important than his having a political strategy on abortion that satisfies the most extreme U.S. Catholics.

What to make, then, of the U.S. bishops who condemned the University of Notre Dame for inviting the president to speak? What to make of the loud objections of neoconservatives such as George Weigel, Michael Novak and Deal Hudson, self-proclaimed Vatican loyalists and protectors of orthodoxy who now say that the Vatican and *L?Osservatore Romano* have suddenly become ?ignorant? and ?misinformed??

These are revealing scenes we are witnessing. On the matter of some bishops, it becomes clear that the issue is both political (they have largely backed Republicans and a failed antiabortion strategy for the past quarter century) and one of authority. If no one listens, if most Catholics decide to vote for Obama, if Notre Dame defies the loudest among them and greets Obama, if the Vatican itself has a far more moderate assessment of the administration than the bishops, then what? Some might consider reassessing their position and strategy. Most of the loudest have chosen instead to get even louder, as if attracting more attention will somehow retrieve some of that lost authority.

Weigel, Novak and Hudson have joined this public tantrum, and for them it is certainly a matter of politics -- the neoconservative dream of an American century having crashed in the sands of Iraq -- as well as diminishing access to ecclesial power. This pope doesn?t do lunch, as was the case with his predecessor, with crowds of admirers. And the Vatican doesn?t seem to be listening to them, either.

What Obama knows most about Catholics is what he experienced as a young professional and community organizer on the South Side of Chicago. There he met the priests, nuns and laypeople who were the face of the Campaign for Human Development, the church?s walk with the poor and marginalized. There he met the whole panoply of social concerns -- all the dots that get connected in Catholic social teaching, the seamless garment approach, if you will -- that gives the Catholic witness to the Gospel its power and integrity.

It is Catholics steeped in that tradition and that kind of work that he consulted during his campaign and that he has brought into his administration. New political organizations emphasizing the Catholic social justice tradition have made a forceful entry onto the national stage in the past four to five years.

There is a sad symmetry to the political dance our bishops have done with politicians in recent decades. For the 12 years of the Reagan and first Bush administrations and then again during the most recent Bush administration, they tolerated politicians who ignored and even assaulted the church?s social justice teachings in exchange for largely unfulfilled promises of strongly combating abortion.

Now, with a president more conversant than most with that tradition and who speaks repeatedly of his intent to work for a reduction in the number of abortions, the bishops are unable to have a conversation because he is of the wrong party and refuses to play the futile abortion politics of old.

It is sad, because the conversation will go on without our religious leaders, in a much broader framework, and others are commanding attention.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/03/2016 - 18:30*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/obama-and-catholics