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A voice of reason in a maelstrom of condemnations

Joan Chittister | Jul. 2, 2009

Pope Benedict XVI leaves from his general audience in St. Peter's Square July 1. (CNS)

Commentary

Well, we're in trouble now. U.S. bishops, not all of them but clearly a vocal few, have brought the church to the point of serious confusion. By denouncing Notre Dame for inviting President Obama to give the university's 2009 commencement address and, in the course of that ceremony, to receive the honorary degree awarded to eight U.S. presidents before him, the bishops are surely in an awkward position. To say the least.

The problem is that on July 10, Pope Benedict XVI will receive President Obama at the Vatican itself. That kind of reception is, of course, no small honor for anyone and surely a symbol of dialogue and listening at the highest level of Vatican diplomacy.

So will those same bishops denounce the Vatican, too, as they did Notre Dame? And if not, what is that saying?

It must be saying that to be in the presence of someone who does not agree with you, to engage in dialogue with someone who holds your values but seeks to achieve them differently, is not a moral misdemeanor.

It is surely saying that the church at large is not seeking either to separate itself from the rest of the human race or to wage silent warfare -- a kind of civic passive aggression -- against those who hold our same regard for life but pursue that ideal in ways other than ours.

Finally, it may well be saying that for all of us as citizens of a pluralistic society, as Catholics in a world so often at odds with us on social questions, it is possible to make common cause on major issues -- while we continue to work our way toward consensus on those that take longer to define, are more difficult to discuss, have multiple shades of morality or scientific meaning.

It does not, surely, under any condition, mean that the pope and the Vatican have abandoned the Catholic world view on questions of the value of life or can no longer be considered "Catholic." All of which are allegations made of those who fail to judge, condemn, deny or reject Catholic politicians who seek to eliminate abortion by making it unnecessary rather than simply criminalizing abortion and ignoring the social system that breeds it.

On the contrary, early reports indicate that the pope's upcoming encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (?Charity in Truth,?), clearly argues that the defense of the poor and the defense of unborn life are "necessarily linked."

Which leaves us in a quandary. Is the attempt by some to ostracize those who seek alternative approaches to the subject of abortion really the most effective -- and the most moral position -- a Catholic can take? By ignoring -- and so minimizing -- all other social justice issues, can we possibly consider ourselves sufficiently grounded in a Catholic vision of the world, even in regard to our commitment to this one?

In fact, despite the papal pronouncement of John XXIII, that "nuclear weapons are a sin against humanity," the church did not condemn politicians who voted for the continuing existence of a weapon that threatened the life of all humankind.

The church did not, for instance, inveigh against politicians who supported the invasion of a nation, the destruction of a people, the death of thousands upon thousands of innocent civilians even after it was clear that the so-called "cause" of the Iraq war was at best false and possibly inveigled.

Nor did the church denounce Ronald Reagan and his war against unions despite our century of support for laborers.

Neither did the church oppose, let alone excommunicate, those who contributed to the poverty of the world by pursuing the principles of "The American Century," which -- translated -- meant the manipulation of the rest of the world into supporting the intentions and policies of American foreign policy.

Instead, in this soon- to-be-released encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, the pope speaks resoundingly in favor of the global authority that will be necessary to assure justice for developing countries as they strive to achieve their own goals and interests.

He calls labor unions of all nations to work together against the corporate interests that use the poor for the sake of the rich.

He calls for a two-state solution in the Middle East despite the fact that U.S. support has historically tilted far more heavily toward Israel than toward Palestine in regard to land rights in the area.

The encyclical, in other words, confronts the world with issues, questions, and policies designed to defend the interests of the poor without condemning the work or policies of the rich. He promotes no particular programs or politicians or political systems. But he does call for justice for those people and places where it is most lacking at the present time.

What can the rest of us gather from such an approach? Maybe this: That it is the function of churches to form the consciences of their members who seek to lead moral lives in their societies, rather than to take political sides against particular politicians or political systems.

From where I stand, that could do a lot to heal divisions in the church as people of goodwill attempt to live moral lives in a period of history in which new questions assail old answers daily. It would also unleash another kind of Catholic voice in the public arena, a voice that not only promotes its own position but can respect the positions of equally moral-minded others.

We are, after all, the church of the Medicis and the Borgias, the Papal States and the Avignon Papacy, the Documents of Discovery and anti-Modernism, the condemnation of "mixed" marriages and the rejection of the U.S. policy of separation of church and state. It may behoove us to be a bit more compassionate in our

condemnations and a bit more humble in our attempts at political dialogue.

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Editor's Note: An earlier version of this column had the title of Pope Benedict's encylical *Caritas in Veritate* wrong. We regret the error and thank readers for bring this to our attention.

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