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

Obama and the bishops: time to hit the reset button

NCR Editorial Staff | Jul. 20, 2009

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The last time the U.S. Catholic bishops were fully united in their approach to the nation's secular political leadership was the early 19th century, when Baltimore Archbishop John Carroll had only to consult his mirror to develop the unanimous view of the American episcopacy.

Today, with cardinals, archbishops, bishops and auxiliary bishops representing more than 190 dioceses around the country, some general consensus on matters of both principle and strategy is considerably more difficult to achieve. But it is as important, perhaps more so than ever.

The relationship between President Obama and the bishops began badly. Many bishops rejected the pro-choice candidate's support for abortion-reduction programs as mere political lip service, rhetoric not worthy of engagement or test. A New Jersey bishop compared candidate Obama to Herod (the one who had John the Baptist beheaded); others warned -- both directly and obliquely -- that Catholics who supported Obama over Republican presidential candidate John McCain risked damnation.

While the vast majority of the country, including millions who voted for his opponent, celebrated the inauguration of the nation's first African-American president, too many of our church's leaders chose confrontation over civil engagement. Of the many examples, a sampling: One Rhode Island bishop penned a fictional interview with the president in which Obama says, "If you control the population and eliminate the children, you don't have to worry about giving them food, clothing, shelter and medicine now do you?" Appallingly, Masses in two Midwest dioceses were offered "for the conversion of Barack Obama."

As Obama took office, the bishops launched an expensive nationwide letter-writing campaign designed to foment Catholic opposition to the so-called Freedom of Choice Act, fast-track legislation, we were told, that would codify abortion rights into federal law. In this case, the bishops were either cynically manipulated by the professional antiabortion lobby in Washington or were complicit in stuffing this strawman. But duped or duplicitous, the effect (the goal?) was achieved: Millions of American Catholics were told from the pulpit and frightened into believing that the new president's top priority was to expand abortion rights. Six months into the Obama presidency the Freedom of Choice Act has still not even been introduced. Virtually all knowledgeable congressional observers said all along that the bill is going nowhere.

And then came the announcement of the president's commencement address at Notre Dame. The shrillness escalated. "That the premiere Catholic university in the United States would give an honorary doctorate of law to one of the most aggressive pro-abortion politicians in our history is profoundly shocking," snarled Raymond Burke, former archbishop of St. Louis, now prefect of the Apostolic Signatura.

Things got so out of hand, the rhetoric so overblown and disrespectful, that Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the pope's representative to both the U.S. government and the U.S. bishops, reportedly chastised leaders of the American hierarchy.

Perhaps, as a relative outsider, Sambi sees what many others see and what the bishops seem not to notice -- that their insults and vilification, their political and partisan posturing, the disrespect they've shown toward the office of the president come off as a public juvenile tantrum. Their hysterics may reinforce support among a small percentage of like-minded, but they have had little success in convincing anyone else, including many in the Vatican, and Pope Benedict XVI himself.

The bishops can only be effective, can only hope to influence policy, if they can be perceived as respected partners, and not shameless partisans, in the national dialogue. On that score, they might take their cue from the pope.

This is the moment, perhaps fleeting but quite real, to diffuse this hysteria. Benedict, in his July 10 meeting with the president, provided a model of engagement that his brother bishops would do well to emulate (**see story** [1]). By all accounts, the Holy Father did not shy from raising concerns with the president on issues where the church and the administration have significant differences, most notably abortion policy and embryonic stem cell research. Nor did the pope hesitate to embrace the many areas -- food security, global warming, Middle East peace, immigration, economic development and more -- where the Obama agenda dovetails with the church's vision for a more just world.

Their discussion, and the behind-the-scenes diplomatic work that led up to the meeting, was conducted with the candor and grace we should expect from the leaders of a great church and the world's lone superpower. Over time, much good can flow from it.

Meanwhile, Obama -- despite the sometimes shabby and shameful treatment from some leaders of our church -- continues to reach out to the Catholic community. This is not, of course, pure altruism on the president's part. Catholics make up one-quarter of the electorate and represent the classic "swing vote." They cannot be simply dismissed, however crudely some members of the church's leadership behave.

But there is more than political calculation at play here. It is abundantly clear that the president, as a matter of both temperament and personal experience, appreciates the work of the church and understands its dynamics.

Speaking to a small group of religion writers July 2, prior to his departure for Europe, the president displayed a command of the issues plaguing the divided American Catholic community. "The American bishops have a profound influence in their communities, in the church, and beyond," said the president. "I know the potential that the bishops have to speak out forcefully on issues of social justice."

At that meeting, the president spoke of his experience as a Catholic church-funded community organizer, working out of Catholic church rectories, at the time when Cardinal Joseph Bernardin headed the Chicago archdiocese.

"When I was first becoming interested in social justice issues, the American bishops were talking about nuclear freezes and sanctuary for illegal immigrants, and protesting U.S. policy in Latin America," recalled the

president. "And there was ... a very different set of perspectives that were represented, arising out of the Second Vatican [Council]. And then there was a decided shift that I think took place ... among church officials. And in some ways, that tracked changes in American society at large, or at least American politics.

"So there's no doubt that I think responses to my administration mirror tensions within the church as a whole."

The president continued: "Cardinal Bernardin was strongly pro-life, never shrank away from talking about that issue, but was very consistent in talking about a seamless garment and a range of issues that were part and parcel of what he considered to be pro-life. That meant that he was concerned about poverty, he was concerned about how children were treated, he was concerned about the death penalty, he was concerned about foreign policy.

"And that part of the Catholic tradition is something that continues to inspire me. And I think that there have been times over the last decade or two where that more holistic tradition feels like it's gotten buried under the abortion debate.

"Now, as a non-Catholic, it's not up to me to try to resolve those tensions. As I said, all I can do is to affirm how that other tradition has made me, a non-Catholic ... reflect on how I can be a better person and has had a powerful influence on my life. And that tells me that it might be a powerful way to move a broader set of values forward in American life generally."

Obama's citing of Bernardin is telling and genuine. A Chicagoan doing church-funded work at the height of Bernardin's influence, he is not recalling some mythical near-sainted figure, but a savvy and smart religious leader who maximized the church's influence.

"We can keep our deepest convictions and still keep our civil courtesy," Bernardin said a quarter-century ago. "We can test others' arguments but not question their motives. We can presume goodwill even when we strenuously disagree. We can relate the best of religion to the best of politics in the service of each other and the wider society, national and human, to which we are bound in hope and love."

That message is vastly more important today than it was then. Let's hope the American bishops are listening.

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