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The Republican (Catholic church) Captivity

Nicholas P. Carfardi | Sep. 3, 2009

Last November at their post-election meeting, a vocal minority of bishops lamented the election results, aghast that not only a majority of Americans, but more tellingly a majority of Catholics, had voted to make Barack Obama President of the United States. So extreme were the comments of these few bishops that some could easily have confused them with Republican ward-heelers, and be prone to the fear that a new ?Republican Captivity? of our Church was in full force.

A lot of the bishops? hysteria at their November meeting was over that great Republican bogeyman, the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA), which was not a part of the Democratic platform, and had absolutely no priority among the issues facing the new administration. This did not prevent the public lamentations of select bishops on how FOCA would force Catholic hospitals to close - despite the insistence of the Catholic Health Association to the contrary.

They did not let facts get in the way of their agitation. One bishop, who did not even have a Catholic hospital in his diocese, was so carried away with anti-Obama fervor that he said he would close his fictitious Catholic hospital, if he had one!

That same vocal minority is now at it again, this time taking up the Republican cause to defeat President Obama?s universal health care proposals. One Midwestern bishop has written his flock that ?health care should not be subject to federal monopolization; ?that ?the Catholic Church does not teach that ?health care? as such, without distinction, is a natural right;? and that ?the proper role of government is to regulate the private sector in order to foster healthy competition and curtail abuses. Therefore any legislation that undermines the viability of the private sector is suspect.?

Two bishops of near-by sees wrote in a joint pastoral statement that ?The teaching of the universal church has never been to suggest government socialization of medical services,? and that it could create ?a future tax burden,? and foster ?permanent dependency for individuals or families upon the state.?

Perhaps because it was written so long ago, these bishops have forgotten what Pope John XXIII said in Pacem in Terris when he listed the right to health care as one of the rights that society (i.e., the government) had to protect:

Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and, finally, the necessary social services. In consequence, he has the right to be looked after in the event of ill-health; disability stemming from his work; widowhood; old age.... (11)

Or perhaps they never realized, or understood to begin with, that it was their brother bishops in Vatican II who definitively and collegially taught that private property and private enterprise had to yield to the common good:

By its very nature private property has a social quality which is based on the law of the common destination of earthly goods. If this social quality is overlooked, property often becomes an occasion of passionate desires for wealth and serious disturbances... .? Gaudium et spes, 71

Whether they realize it or not, these bishops in their purportedly ?pastoral? statements are doing the work of the Republican Party. They are espousing political positions, not moral ones, and they are doing great harm to the body of bishops, not to mention the Body of Christ, in their transparent and patent political advocacy. What they wrote was neither theology nor catechetics nor spiritual direction. It was politics, pure and simple, politics that would warm Rush Limbaugh?s conservative Republican heart.

They need to stop. Our bishops need to be bishops, not political shills, if they ever want their people to listen to them and to respect them again. Siding with one political party in such a public way won?t do that, especially when the objective appears to be to deprive the poor, the disadvantaged, the unemployed, the bereft in society, of the right to health care, a right which is unquestionably theirs in any fair reading of authoritative Catholic social teaching.

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