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Obama: echoes of Catholic social justice teaching

Maureen Fiedler | Sep. 10, 2009 NCR Today

It was the conclusion of President Obama's address on health care that truly moved me. I heard strong echoes of Catholic social justice teaching, in both the words of Sen. Ted Kennedy, and in Obama's own embrace of the philosophy of the "common good."

Obama quoted a letter written in May by Sen. Kennedy reminding him that health care "concerns more than material things." "What we face," he wrote, "is above all a moral issue; at stake are not just the details of policy, but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country."

"Social justice!" How long has it been since we've heard a president utter that phrase? Too long.

Obama continued on that theme as he laid out, almost professorially, a mini-history of the competing philosophies that have shaped our political history ? rugged individualism and self-reliance with its skepticism of government vs. a concern for the other and a realization that justice and fair play demand a positive role for government. And then, he came down squarely in favor of the latter:

> "That large-heartedness -- that concern and regard for the plight of others -- is not a partisan feeling. It is not a Republican or a Democratic feeling. It, too, is part of the American character. Our ability to stand in other people's shoes. A recognition that we are all in this together; that when fortune turns against one of us, others are there to lend a helping hand. A belief that in this country, hard work and responsibility should be rewarded by some measure of security and fair play; and an acknowledgment that sometimes government has to step in to help deliver on that promise."

As I heard those words, I wondered if Obama's own experience as a community organizer, working with Catholic Charities on the south side of Chicago, had more influence on him than we knew.

PS: Read Tom Fox's earlier blog post for an extended excerpt of this part of the president's speech: Obama's moral case for health care [1]

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