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On Tobin and Kennedy, the question isn't 'why' but 'why now'?

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tI suppose like other members of the Catholic chattering classes, I?ve spent a fair bit of time over the past 48 hours talking to TV and radio outlets about the news that back in 2007, Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island, sent a letter to U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy advising him not to take communion because of his pro-choice views.

tI have no insider scoop to offer, but I can summarize here what I?ve been saying on-air: the most interesting question about the story isn?t so much ?why,? but ?why now??

tThat is, there?s no mystery about why Tobin took this step. It?s the same logic that has led a handful of other bishops to issue similar edicts to other pro-choice Catholic politicians: communion implies unity with the church, and if you can?t accept a core principle of Catholic morality such as the right to life, then taking communion is a sham. One can, of course, debate the theology of that conclusion, or the pastoral wisdom of policing it. The majority of American bishops have not gone this far, mostly because they don?t want to turn the Eucharist into a political weapon. But in any event, the terms of debate are reasonably clear, and have been for a long time.

tThe meaningful question thus becomes, why is a step taken almost three years ago just coming to light now? The answer would appear to have everything to do with the current national debate over health care reform, a debate in which so far the bishops have been fairly important players.

tThe revelation came from Kennedy, not from Tobin, in an interview with a Providence newspaper. I don?t know why Kennedy made the disclosure, but it could be as simple as that he was asked. I?ve seen it happen with public figures before: they don?t plan to make a statement about something, but if the question comes up, they feel obligated to answer it. (The pope?s comments on condoms en route to Africa are a classic case in point.)

tOn the other hand, Kennedy has a deep reservoir of political savvy swimming in his gene pool, and it?s impossible not to notice that there are at least two clear political objectives to be served by revealing Tobin?s disciplinary act now:

?tIt?s reminder that the bishops don?t speak for a unified Catholic bloc when it comes to abortion policy. The political translation is that a legislator doesn?t have to worry about losing all 67 million Catholic votes in America if they don?t back the bishops? line.
?tIt creates a PR headache for the bishops, because it shifts the terms of debate from the merits of the pro-life argument to the bishops? tactics in suppressing dissent. In a culture that prizes tolerance, anything that makes an institution look intolerant usually hurts its image, and therefore its political effectiveness.

All this comes at a time when the bishops are on something of a roll, politically speaking. Most observers credit them with making significant contributions towards passage of the Stupack Amendment in the House, barring

new federal health initiatives from funding abortion. More broadly, the bishops can take some credit for President Obama?s public evolution on the issue. On the campaign trail Obama vowed to sign the Freedom of Choice Act, but in office he?s pledged to make health care reform ?abortion neutral,? and he promised Pope Benedict XVI last July to work to bring down the abortion rate.

For those on the pro-choice side, all of this is obviously a bit unsettling.

In purely political terms, one could argue that the best friend of the liberal position on abortion inside Catholicism has been the handful of hard-line bishops who ban people from communion, as well as a small circle of ferocious pro-life activists who impugn the Catholic credentials of anyone who tries to find common ground. Distaste for those tactics is fairly widespread, even among Catholics who see themselves as 100 percent pro-life, to say nothing of reaction outside the church. The fact that the bishops have largely avoided such confrontational moves in the health care debate, keeping the focus instead on the content of the pro-life argument, may well have something to do with their success.

It may also have something to do with why a pro-choice Catholic politician might actually welcome public disclosure of his ecclesiastical woes ? because whatever else such a revelation may be, it?s arguably pretty good politics.

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