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In politics, hierarchy applies selective blackmail

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Commentary

The Catholic bishops in the United States for years now have been crossing into political waters for the distinct purpose of outing high-profile Democratic politicians who don?t vote the way the bishops want on the abortion issue. It is fascinating that in recent memory the Catholic hierarchy has never spoken out against any Republican. Could it be that the only political sinners are Democrats and that the only political sin is favoring a political strategy of upholding the law regarding the right to abortion while seeking policies aimed at reducing the number of abortions?

Are there no sins involved any longer in supporting preemptive war, massive expenditures on nuclear weapons, the death penalty, economic policies that encourage greed and extreme individualism, or don?t such issues rise to the level of abortion and homosexuality? These are questions that, to my mind, have not been answered sufficiently.

The latest dustup between Rep. Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island and his bishop, Thomas Tobin, is particularly intriguing. The question I have is whether the sin of having an abortion -- which, incidentally, can be forgiven through the sacrament of penance -- has been trumped by the sin of speaking about it. I guess it is something like the sin of having impure thoughts. I don?t follow how this 40-year-old man is guilty of the equivalent of a mortal sin for merely uttering pro-choice sentiments in a political context. Such activity would seem to preclude many church members from going to Communion, or is it just a penalty for politicians?

This seems squarely to be an area where we can apply the wisdom Jesus gave us about rendering to Caesar those things that are Caesar?s. It?s one thing to tell the politicians your point of view and attempt to sway opinion, and quite another to bring religious punishment to politicians who don?t agree with your strategy as a matter of public policy for all of their constituents.

I find it intriguing, too, that the bishops can speak so loudly against abortion but be so silent about death, war and greed. It is difficult for rational adults to process. It is also difficult to understand how they can be so precise in their punishment of politicians on certain narrow issues when they have excused themselves from any consequences for their role in covering up sexual abuse of children, which remains an indelible mark against the church.

It appears that the hierarchy is applying selective blackmail, where the rules apply only to politicians, not to themselves in their very public defiance of the law, or even to ordinary churchgoers who might disagree with the bishops? political strategy on abortion.

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