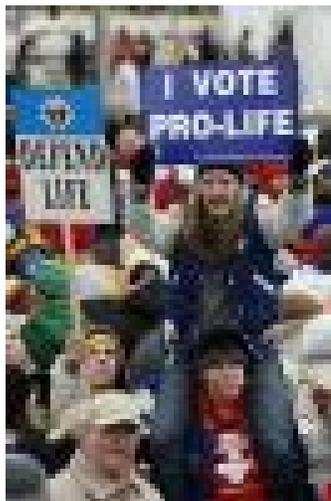


After 30 years, bishops, politicians, voters vexed by abortion

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 11, 2008

News Analysis

The U.S. bishops' administrative committee announced Sept. 10 the bishops' conference will take up the enduring and vexing issue of politics and abortion in America when it meets in Baltimore next November.



The meeting, which will come one week after the national elections, will take place

with an urgency generated by a series of critical statements bishops have made in recent days of major Democratic Party political figures.

The announcement came as the committee, headed by Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, added its weight to statements made by Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia and Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairmen of the U.S. bishops' pro-life and doctrine committees. The bishops took on Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Democratic Party vice-presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Biden, for remarks they have made about abortion.

Rigali and Lori criticized Pelosi Aug. 25, saying that her statements on a recent Meet the Press "misrepresented the history and nature of the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church on abortion." Answering a question on when life begins, Pelosi said: "I don't think anyone can tell you when life begins, when human life begins."

When program host Tom Brokaw responded that the church "at the moment feels very strongly that it begins at the point of conception," Pelosi answered, "I understand. And this is maybe 50 years or something like that."

The two bishops later issued a lengthy critique of comments Biden made Sept. 9. Biden, who like Pelosi is a Catholic, said he accepted Catholic teaching that life begins at conception, but did not believe that he could impose his beliefs in the public policy arena.

"I'm prepared as a matter of faith to accept that life begins at the moment of conception," the senator said. "But that is my judgment. For me to impose that judgment on everyone else who is equally and maybe even more devout than I am seems to me is inappropriate in a pluralistic society."

Rigali and Lori responded that "the obligation to protect unborn human life rests on the answer to two questions, neither of which is private or specifically religious."

The first question is when human life begins, they said, adding emphatically it is a matter of "objective fact," taught in embryology textbooks, that life begins at conception. The second, "a moral question, with legal and political consequences," is which human beings "should be seen as having fundamental human rights, such as a right not to be killed," they said.

The U.S. bishops' administrative committee, meeting in Washington Sept. 10, quickly endorsed Rigali's and Lori's views: "As the teachers of the faith, we also point out the connectedness between the evil of abortion and political support for abortion."

Meanwhile, Pelosi Sept. 5 responded to an invitation to meet with Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco, her archbishop, to discuss church teaching on abortion and other topics. Pelosi said she welcomed the opportunity to meet with him.



The issue of abortion the manner in which it is addressed by Catholic politicians,

dates back the 1973 Supreme Court ruling giving women the right to choose abortion. Until that ruling, political opposition to abortion by U.S. Catholics had been spotty and local.

At the time of *Roe v. Wade* the issue of contraception was the most prominent moral issue for Catholics, still in the throes of digesting *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 papal encyclical, upholding the church's contraception ban.

The Second Vatican Council, held less than a decade earlier, had little sense that abortion would emerge as the divisive issue it eventually became. The council was unequivocal in its condemnation of abortion, but gave it scant attention.

Writing in the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," council bishops addressed abortion in only a few lines, condemning it with the following words: "Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception; abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes."

The word *abortion* is not mentioned in the forty-five page index of the American edition of the documents issued by the council.

The 1976 U.S. presidential election was the first election to follow the Supreme Court ruling. It was the first in which the bishops' anti-abortion committee became involved in national politics. The bishops found themselves, meanwhile, attempting to conduct two parallel but seemingly conflicting political strategies. The

first was to make abortion the church's most prominent political concern; the second was to place abortion within a broader pro-life context, encouraging voters to weigh all issues.

Echoes of the tensions involved in trying to satisfy these twin objectives have persisted among the bishops and the wider Catholic populace to the present.

In November 1975, the U.S. bishops released the "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities." In it they encouraged the development of a tightly organized "pro-life" unit in each congressional district. The plan, in short, committed the bishops to raising the political profile of abortion during the 1976 election and to conducting a grassroots campaign to elect "pro-life" officials at every level of government.

Some bishops, however, worried at the time that the U.S. bishops would look like a single issue group. They pressed for another document and came up with one called "Political Responsibility: Reflections on an Election Year."

This document was endorsed by the bishops in May 1976 and it expressed their concern that Catholics respond to a longer list of moral issues. The document stated that it wanted "to call attention to the moral and religious dimensions of secular issues, to keep alive the values of the Gospel as a norm for social and political life, and to point out the demands of the Christian faith for a just transformation of society."

It specifically stated that the bishops "do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc" and that they would not "instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing candidates."

"The Pastoral Plan" and the "Political Responsibility" statements, taken together, presented the bishops with a political dilemma, one that has echoed through U.S. elections since. On the one hand they wanted to express their moral outrage to stop the killing of unborn life, seen as a primary issue beyond compromise. On the other, they wanted to be clear that Catholics need to weigh other moral teachings that deal with matters of life in contemporary society when they cast their ballots.

Catholic teaching holds that human life is sacred and the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent life is always a gravely immoral act. The bishops have never flinched from expressing this teaching. The principle involved has since been applied to other moral issues such as euthanasia and stem cell research.

While the bishops have been clear on the principle, what has been less clear and divisive within the political arena is how Catholic politicians and Catholic voters should react when faced with imperfect choices regarding candidates and political strategies.

Critics of the bishops' approach to outlaw abortion, starting with overturning the 1973 Supreme Court ruling, argue that their decades' long campaign to reverse *Roe* has painted them primarily as politicians, saddled with one political party, while doing little to stop abortions or lower the abortion rate.

These critics have argued that the "anti-abortion" and often conservative politicians bishops have implicitly and sometimes explicitly supported have been less than sympathetic to programs that assist pregnant women and support mothers faced with the choice of having an abortion.

Catholic politicians argue that the issue gets even more complex.

Professing to accept Catholic teachings on the evil of abortion, Pelosi and Biden, for example, have argued "unpersuasively to the U.S. bishops" that politics is the art of what is possible and that in a democracy they are required to weigh conflicting values and work, as they see it, for the wider common good. This could mean, they say, moving to reduce abortions while not outlawing them.

Catholic Democrats coming out of last month's convention hailed statements in their platform urging just that: work to reduce abortions and to support women and pregnant mothers. The same language was stricken from the Republican Party platform as a sign of weakness in efforts to make abortions illegal.

Every four years the political/abortion issue raises its head as the country faces a national election. Last November, in preparation for this year's elections, the bishops took up the issue once again. After an extended process of consultation and evaluation, the bishops voted to approve a document entitled "Faithful Citizenship," the latest stepchild of the bishops' initial 1976 statement.

"Faithful Citizenship" once again reflects the twin and, to some, sometimes competing strategies, of the bishops. Like U.S. politics itself, the document was the product of a voting process. It was passed by 98 percent of the bishops after amendments aimed at further strengthening anti-abortion language were narrowly voted down.

"Faithful Citizenship," while not compromising on the moral absolute of the evil of abortion, offers wording that places abortion in a wider social and political setting.

At one point it states: "Sometimes morally flawed laws already exist. In this situation, the process of framing legislation to protect life is subject to prudential judgment and 'the art of the possible.' At times this process may restore justice only partially or gradually."

This wording stems from Pope John Paul II, who wrote in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* that when a government official who fully opposes abortion cannot succeed in completely overturning a pro-abortion law, he or she may work to improve protection for unborn human life, "limiting the harm done by such a law" and lessening its negative impact as much as possible.

Chris Korzen, executive director of Catholics United, a nonpartisan organization that promotes the church's social justice message, praised the document, calling it an "important moral guide."

"There is no completely pure political approach," Korzen said, adding that both Senators Barack Obama and John McCain have supported expanding stem-cell research, one of the moral "non-negotiables," based on church teachings that life begins at conception and must be protected at all times.

While the bishops are absolutely firm on the moral issue of abortion, Catholics, including Catholic politicians, continue to be divided in their political responses. This has been the case for more than three decades, and the division is unlikely to be resolved before next November 4th when voters once again go to the polls.

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