NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The US bishops and abortion law

Richard McBrien | Jun. 21, 2010 Essays in Theology

Late this year, Georgetown University Press will publish a new book by Fr. Charles E. Curran, who is widely regarded as the leading Catholic moral theologian in the United States and one of the Catholic church's most distinguished moral theologians worldwide.

Curran is currently the Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University and a priest of the diocese of Rochester, N.Y.

Curran's new book is titled *The Social Mission of the U.S. Catholic Church: A Theological Perspective*. *The eighth and final chapter, "The U.S. Bishops and Abortion," is unusually insightful, and I am indebted to it for this and next week's columns.*

Professor Curran notes that the U.S. bishops' involvement with abortion law changed dramatically after the U.S. Supreme Court's historic *Roe*v. *Wade* decision in January 1973. At their annual meeting the following November, the bishops expressed strong support for a constitutional amendment to protect the life of the unborn.

Some bishops feared that this new emphasis on abortion and the call for organized political activity in each congressional district would make the Catholic church look like a single-issue voice, while subordinating other issues involving human rights and social justice.

Every four years since 1976, however, the bishops have issued a statement reminding Catholics that, while the abortion issue is of great moral importance, it is not the only life issue about which Catholics should be concerned when entering the voting booth.

The bishops have been careful to insist that they do not presume to instruct Catholics on how to vote. After the 1984 election, when a pair of leading cardinals were publicly critical of Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic candidate for vice president and a Catholic with a pro-choice voting record, the bishops modified their quadrennial statement to include the words "or opposing."

Thus, the bishops neither endorse *nor oppose* candidates for the presidency and vice presidency. The opposition of these two cardinals and of other bishops to the Ferraro candidacy was viewed by some as equivalent to an endorsement of the Republican ticket.

In 1976, the first presidential election since the *Roe*v. *Wade* decision, the then-president of the bishops' conference, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin, elevated the abortion issue to such a central place that many concluded that the bishops were supporting the candidacy of Gerald Ford, the Republican, over Jimmy Carter, the Democrat.

Bernardin not only backed away from this impression, but in due course he developed what he called a consistent-ethic-of-life approach to abortion and related moral issues.

For several years thereafter the bishops endorsed now-Cardinal Bernardin's consistent-ethic-of-life framework, that is, until 1989 when they unanimously passed a resolution making abortion a moral issue of the highest priority. When Cardinal Bernardin died in 1996, the consistent-ethic-of-life approach died with him, according to Charles Curran.

Under the impact of Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium vitae*, the bishops in 1998 applied papal teaching to the U.S. scene, calling abortion and also euthanasia preeminent threats to human dignity.

But the bishops went even further than that. They reinterpreted the consistent-ethic-of-life principle in a way that differed from Cardinal Bernardin's original idea.

While opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to other life-issues, the bishops pointed out, neither can being "right" on these other issues excuse a wrong choice on abortion and euthanasia.

Around the same time, the bishops turned their increased attention to Catholic politicians, almost all Democrats, with a pro-choice voting record. Some bishops denied these public figures the right to speak in Catholic venues or to receive awards from Catholic organizations, and some went so far as to threaten them with exclusion from Holy Communion.

The drift away from Cardinal Bernardin's consistent-ethic-of-life approach and toward at least indirect support of the Republican Party's political agenda accelerated as the composition of the American hierarchy became more conservative, thanks to the appointments of John Paul II.

This trend reached a fever-pitch during the 2004 presidential campaign when the Democrats nominated Senator John Kerry, a Catholic, for president. There were bishops who claimed it would be a mortal sin for a Catholic to vote for him.

Even though the Democratic candidate in 2008, Senator Barack Obama, was not a Catholic, the same drumbeat of opposition continued against the Democratic Party.

The statement issued by the bishops before that election differed markedly from their previous statements issued every four years since 1976.

Abortion was portrayed as an intrinsically evil act that can never be justified. Some bishops took this to mean that abortion "trumps" all other moral issues.

The bishops were well on the way to making the abortion issue a litmus test for Catholics.

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