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Live From B'More: Cardinal George's Final Address as USCCB President

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 15, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

In his presidential address, Cardinal Francis George, the Archbishop of Chicago, recalled that three years ago, when he began his tenure as head of the USCCB, the Church in America was preparing for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. George also recalled the election of President Barack Obama. Irrespective of one?s political affiliation, Cardinal George noted that the election of the first African-American citizen to the presidency was a unique historical accomplishment.

On universal health care, Cardinal George noted that the bishops mostly relied on lay people to make the arguments pertaining to the debate. But, he also insisted that the bishops had an obligation to assess the moral aspects of the law, specifically those that pertain to abortion coverage. George spoke at some length about the health care bill. He asked if the current bill met the standards of the Hyde Amendment, and said it did not. To laughter from the room, he asked if only bishops were ?too sense? to understand the complicated legislation. He defended the stance taken by the USCCB in opposing the law because of it lacked the Hyde Amendment prohibitions.

Cardinal George also addressed the ecclesiological issue that emerged in the health care debate. ?Who speaks for the Church?? he asked. He said that the bishops alone have the right and duty to speak to the moral issued on behalf of the Church. ?Everything else is opinion,? George said. He called for orthodoxy and obedience as the indispensable norms of Catholic life. George concluded this portion of his address by saying the Church should not fear political isolation, but that the bishops must be concerned by the wounds to Catholic Unity the debate inflicted.

The situation facing Christians in Iraq was the last item mentioned in Cardinal George?s speech. He said the Catholic Church would always resist becoming a ?national church,? and that the bishops are charged not only with the governance of their own local churches but share responsibility for the universal Church. He labeled the threat to Christians in Iraq ?genocidal? and gave a vivid description of the recent attack on the cathedral in Baghdad. ?As bishops, as Americans, we cannot turn from this scene,? he told the assembly.

Cardinal George received a standing ovation at the conclusion of his speech, his last as President of the USCCB.

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