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USCCB & The 111th Congress

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 21, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

As the 111th Congress comes to a close, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has to ask if their current methods for trying to influence the nation?s political system are working. And if they are honest, they will admit the answer is ?no? and begin re-thinking how they can help build up a more just society.

Just this past Saturday, Republican senators, joined by a handful of conservative Democrats, blocked consideration of the DREAM Act. The bishops lobbied for the measure but there was nothing like the effort they expended on behalf of the Stupak Amendment-language on restricting abortion funding last year. In the event, they lost that vote too. Those were the two biggest issues on which the bishops weighed in this year and they lost both.

Conversely, gay rights groups, who represent perhaps 4 percent of the population, just muscled the repeal of Don?t Ask; Don?t Tell through the U.S. Senate. Why did they succeed on their signature issue where the USCCB failed on its two signature issues? Two reasons, one of which is pertinent to the USCCB?s efforts going forward. Gays have made themselves an indispensable part of the fundraising apparatus of the Democratic Party. Indeed, as the influence of the party structure has declined, the influence of fundraisers has increased. So, the leaders of the congressional campaign committees could go to their members and say, ?Don?t come crying to us for money if you vote this thing down.? There is no way the Church can or should mimic the influence that comes with such fundraising prowess.

But, gay rights groups did something else. They shifted the debate from the language of entitlement (?We have a right to serve?) to a focus on the brave men and women who had already served in combat, already been decorated for their valor, already proven their ability as soldiers, and still got tossed because they were gay. The more I study American politics, the more I realize that the American people are not particularly ideological, they like problem-solvers, but they have one trait that is defining and apparently indelible. They really value fairness. The extremes may embrace ideological orthodoxies, with the left usually invoking the abstract language of rights and autonomy and the right invoking some version of the politics of resentment, but most people in the middle, the people who decide elections, they respond to non-ideological presentations of an issue, preferably highly personalized, and that plays to this sense of fair play. That is why DADT got 65 votes in the Senate last Saturday. It seemed unfair to expect men and women who were risking their lives for the country to lie about who they were.

The USCCB must look at the incoming Congress with mixed feelings at best. If the USCCB had hoped that the DREAM Act would be a step towards comprehensive immigration reform, the failure to invoke cloture in the Senate means that both are dead for the next two years. But, the USCCB can and should encourage voter registration drives at their parishes, especially at parishes that serve Latinos. If Latinos voted in numbers commensurate with their share of the population, the DREAM Act would have passed for two reasons: Democrats would be terrified of not delivering for a large and growing part of their electoral base and Republicans in states like Florida, Texas and Arizona would be terrified of voting against a measure that delivered justice to Latinos. More importantly, the bishops need to take a step back and figure out how to

change the debate. We need to find the immigration equivalents of the decorated gay veterans, those men and women who have already given to this country and whose forced deportation would strike middle America as unfair. We need to put a face on our agenda.

The other issue that looms in front of the bishops is what to do with the health care law that they opposed and which the GOP is committed to repealing. Surely the USCCB recognizes that while they can and should support efforts to get the abortion restriction language they desire, they must resist the efforts to repeal the law or they can kiss good-bye any chance at seeing health care reform attempted again for more than a generation. And, the bishops at the USCCB must ask tough questions of those who brief them: Can anyone in America point to a federally funded abortion that has occurred since the passage of the health care law? Of course not. The bishops and the National Right-to-Life Committee opposed the health care law because of a series of worst case scenarios that have not come to pass. Someone should acknowledge that fact.

Of course, the biggest lesson of the past Congress ? and for several Congresses now ? is that political orthodoxy trumps religious orthodoxy every time. The USCCB and individual bishops in their diocese need to take several steps back and catechize about the Church?s teachings on justice, explain the linkage between our commitment to social justice and our commitment to the unborn, teach our people how all of our moral teachings flow from our doctrinal teachings and so, violence to any one part of the social justice teachings does violence to the whole. The USCCB has done great work over the years, starting with Msgr. John A. Ryan in 1919, advocating on behalf of social justice in our country. But, the bishops need to recognize how the political process takes our social justice teachings and coverts them for its own ends. The bishops must teach how they all hang together in our Catholic faith. In this regard, Archbishop Timothy Dolan?s focus on ?getting back to basics? is spot-on. It is a scandal when Catholic legislators vote against a pro-life position and it is a scandal when a Catholic legislator votes against a social justice position because social justice is pro-life and pro-life concerns are a matter of social justice, and the Church embraces both, in the final analysis, because the tomb was empty on Easter morning. Until we can deliver votes the way the gay community can deliver funds, the USCCB will not be able to affect the partisan dynamics on Capitol Hill.

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