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

'U.S. bishops damaging rich Catholic faith tradition'

Lisa Sowell Cahill | Oct. 16, 2008

Lisa Sowle Cahill (CNS photo)

Commentary

The Catholic church has a problem on its hands. Just weeks before the presidential election, a few bishops and prelates have come dangerously close to making implicit political endorsements by telling Catholics that abortion trumps all other moral issues and lashing out against the Democratic Party.

For those who support an essential role for faith in public life, this is a disturbing trend for both religion and democracy.

In Scranton, Pa., a blue-collar bellwether for Catholic swing voters, Bishop Joseph Martino ordered priests to read a letter at all Sunday Masses that excoriated pro-choice candidates for supporting "homicide" and named abortion as the most important issue for Catholic voters. Other grave threats to the sanctity of life such as war, torture, racism and the silent genocide of poverty that kills 30,000 children every day around the world were downplayed.

Former St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke recently called the Democrats a "**party of death** [1]" from his new post as head of the Vatican's highest court. The president of the AFL-CIO in Missouri was so fed up with partisanship from the pulpit that he stormed out of a Mass recently after the priest invoked Hitler's name in condemning pro-choice Democrats.

Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston has suggested in the past that Catholic support for the Democratic Party "borders on scandal," and a few weeks ago publicly praised Gov. Sarah Palin's Down syndrome child as the "star" of the political conventions at a rally on Boston Common.

(Read related Open Letter by Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, a clinical psychologist, to her bishop and clergy of the diocese of Charlotte, North Carolina.) [2].

Abortion is a moral tragedy for Catholics and many Americans. But when the Catholic church is perceived to be cheerleaders for one political party a rich faith tradition is badly damaged and loses its prophetic voice. Bishops should correct Catholic politicians who misrepresent Catholic teaching on life and justice issues in public

interviews.

Religious leaders offer an important contribution when they address the values at stake in our political decisions and play a critical role in challenging the narrow ideologies of both parties. People of faith should never be asked to check their religious beliefs at the voting booth. But when clergy mistake their role as pastors and spiritual teachers by making tacit endorsements, a tenuous line has been crossed.

The Catholic church has a long tradition of speaking about the perils of preemptive war, the obligation to pay workers living wages and the dangers of unfettered free-market capitalism. Franklin D. Roosevelt drew heavily from Catholic social thought in shaping his New Deal agenda, which advanced minimum wages, labor standards and economic policies that challenged monopolistic concentrations of wealth.

U.S. bishops issued influential statements in the 1980s challenging Cold War nuclear proliferation. In our own era, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops warns against unjust war, promotes the dignity of all immigrants, recognizes health care as a human right and calls for an end to capital punishment. Along with abortion, the U.S. bishops' election year statement also says racism is an intrinsic evil and identifies torture and the targeting of noncombatants as acts that can never be justified.

The bishops follow the late Pope John Paul II in promoting "the art of the possible" and recognize a variety of approaches to build a culture of life. In fact, research shows that abortion rates fall dramatically when pregnant women have economic and social supports that offer real choices.

At a time of profound economic crisis, understanding the connection between poverty and abortion takes on even greater urgency. Both Democrats and Republicans can support common ground efforts to prevent unintended pregnancies and help make it easier for women and families to choose life. Pro-life and pro-choice members of Congress have supported the "Pregnant Women Support Act" and other legislative efforts to do just this by expanding health-care services for low-income women, beefing up adoption programs and addressing the root causes of why women have abortions.

Catholics are the quintessential swing voters and have picked the winner of the popular vote in the last nine presidential elections. In a few weeks, Catholic voters in several battleground states may once again be the decisive factor in this election. Catholic clergy should reaffirm their essential role as moral leaders, and leave partisanship behind.

Lisa Sowle Cahill is a professor of theology at Boston College and a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/19/2014 - 09:27*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/us-bishops-damaging-rich-catholic-faith-tradition

Links:
[1] http://ncronline3.org/drupal/?q=node/2054
[2] http://ncronline3.org/drupal/?q=node/2213