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

Phoenix bishop's response to hospital ignites questions of authority, identity

Tom Roberts | Jan. 14, 2011

When Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmsted issued his Dec. 21 decree that St. Joseph?s Hospital and Medical Center ?no longer qualifies as a Catholic entity,? he intended to establish what he felt the hospital had previously refused to accept: that he was the diocese?s sole arbiter of both the truth about a clinical procedure and about an institution?s Catholic identity.

Few would dispute the right of Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmsted to make such a dramatic pronouncement. That seems to be where the certainty ends. His actions raise anew a host of questions that bubble constantly just below the surface of the debate about who determines what is Catholic and how a bishop?s authority is exercised.

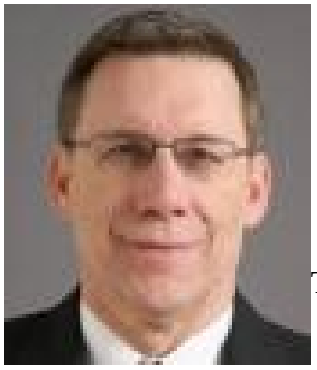
For conservatives such as George Weigel, Olmsted ?has become an important leader? in holding the line against the further erosion of Catholic identity -- those elements that clearly demonstrate an institution?s adherence to Catholic teaching -- in the wider culture. Weigel, distinguished scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, wrote on the Web site of *First Things* magazine Jan. 5 that the Catholic identity debate reaches its hottest point when it involves health care institutions ?that call themselves ?Catholic? but which have acquiesced to practices approved by an increasingly aggressive secular culture -- and to the lure of government dollars.?

The debate about Catholic identity and, perforce, the authority of bishops, is often cast as a struggle between the forces of orthodoxy holding out against a hostile and increasingly secularized culture.

However, the most heated debates in recent years -- over withholding Communion from politicians who disagree with the bishops? strategy on abortion; the University of Notre Dame?s invitation to President Obama; health care reform; and even the Vatican investigation of women religious, to name a few -- have pitted Catholics of different views against one another. While Catholics might agree that streams in contemporary culture are corrosive of religious belief, they have evinced widely differing views on how such forces should be engaged.

Are strong declarations of belief and doctrine the answer? Is it best to draw clear lines, delineating who?s with you and who?s against? Is it preferable to soften the rhetoric and try to persuade? Is there wisdom in the wider

culture that communities of faith can employ in their own arguments?

 Theologian Richard Gaillardetz, who teaches Catholic studies at the University of Toledo, Ohio, said that to some extent he shares the bishops? concern that ?both individual Catholics and Catholic institutions are losing their moorings in the Catholic tradition and failing in their responsibility to apply the Gospel to contemporary issues.? Catholic individuals and institutions face unique challenges today, he said in a phone interview, ?regarding how to best hand on our Catholic faith and how to live it with integrity in a postmodern world.?

He thinks, however, that the bishops are targeting the wrong influences and employing the wrong strategy by believing ?that they have to hold the line or that Catholicism will roll down the slippery slope of relativism. My larger difficulty with this is that I think it?s a strategy that?s doomed to failure.?

Deregulation of religion

Gaillardetz cited Canadian sociologist David Lyon?s analysis in his book *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, in which he speaks of the ?deregulation of religion,? or, as Gaillardetz put it, ?the ?tendency we have in the postmodern world to be religious but on our own terms, to define for ourselves what matters and what does not matter in questions of religious belief and practice.?

It is similar, he said, to what Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve ?refers to as ?detraditionalization.? Again, not a lessening of the fervor of religious belief but questions about how much we have to align our belief with a larger religious tradition.?

It is these ?larger reconfigurations of religion in the postmodern world,? that the bishops are reacting against, he believes, and some have chosen to respond by attempting to reassert their episcopal authority more forcefully. ?They shout louder, as it were, hoping thereby to counteract those cultural currents and reestablish their authority.?

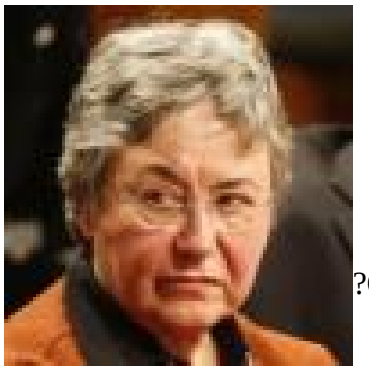
If the bishops are failing to convince the wider culture, there is evidence, too, that their decrees and protestations are not widely persuasive within the Catholic community, and even among some of their peers.

The most obvious public disagreement among bishops occurs on the question of using the Eucharist as a political sanction. In the course of several election cycles, it became clear that the majority of bishops were not joining the most ardent calls for sanctions. And notable among the majority are bishops heading major sees in states represented by high-profile Catholic politicians who did not seek overturn of liberal abortion laws.

Notre Dame, for its part, defended its 2009 invitation to Obama and was supported by most of the Catholic academic community. The Catholic Health Association, under the leadership of Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, and Catholic sisters represented by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious strongly supported last year?s health care reform legislation, disagreeing with the bishops? judgment that the new law would allow federal funding of abortion.

Keehan and the Catholic Health Association also supported St. Joseph?s Hospital after Olmsted declared it not a Catholic institution. Mercy Sr. Margaret Mary McBride, a member of the hospital?s ethics committee, was excommunicated but remains a member in good standing of her order. And hospital officials say St. Joseph?s will go on functioning as it always has, while acceding to the bishop?s order that the Eucharist be removed from the chapel and that Mass not be celebrated at the hospital.

What does it mean, then, when a bishop (or bishops) draws a line in the sand, only to have it washed away beneath a tide of Catholic expert analysis or the consciences of faithful Catholics or other recognized Catholic leaders who come to different conclusions?



?Once upon a time nuns, no matter what they thought of their bishops, would probably be willing to go along? with pronouncements even if they disagreed with them, said Margaret Steinfels, codirector of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University in New York. At least, she said, ?they would not go public on these matters. And now, they?re willing to.?

Keehan, on the health care debate, ?is absolutely right, and I suspect she has a vast number of Catholics agreeing with her,? Steinfels told *NCR* in an interview.

Different kinds of authority

That debate and the one surrounding the hospital controversy in Phoenix demonstrate ?the fact that there are many different kinds of authority or credibility,? she said. ?If the bishop is merely asserting a juridical authority here, claiming that church teaching has been violated, Sr. McBride has all sorts of other kinds of authority? validating her view, said Steinfels. ?She has the opinion of the medical professionals who say this was necessary to save the life of the mother.?

The pregnant mother of four who was dying also brought an authority to the situation, she said. ?A lot of people,? said Steinfels, ?think that bishops haven?t the foggiest idea of what it means to be pregnant, or to be pregnant and sick, or to be pregnant and dying. I?m not opposed to juridical authority. After all, we depend on it in many ways, either in the state or in the church.? But, she said, people today weigh against juridical authority ?many other types of authority or ideas about what should have happened, and the bishop?s authority has been found wanting.?

Such open debates and disagreements, she said, might signal a crisis of authority, ?but I think what we?re seeing is the evolution of an adult church.?

?I think there is an evolution of how the Catholic church sees itself, how Catholics who are faithful members of this community see their relationship to it and their obligations to it and, obviously, this is evolving in fits and starts.

?I suppose all evolutions have a certain number of dead ends,? she said, ?and I guess I?m kind of hoping that the current episcopal turn is going to be a dead end because I don?t think it?s going to work. I think we need

bishops who are prepared to listen to people and to consult with them, and not necessarily to agree with them, but to deploy a certain power of persuasion rather than marching orders. I just don?t think the marching-order model is going to work anymore.?

Dangers to Catholic unity exist on both sides of the debate, said David Gibson, religion writer for Politics Daily Web site and author of *The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle With the Modern World*. On the one hand, giving all authority to bishops on all questions is a ?logic that can come back to bite you? when one is led in conscience to disagree with an episcopal proclamation. That is especially a problem among conservatives, he said, ?who tend to hold up the bishop as the arbiter of all things.? Conservatives, for instance, often have deep disagreements with bishops and even popes over such matters as war and peace, application of the death penalty, and critiques of capitalism.

On the other hand, he said, open debate and dissent raises the issue of remaining ?institutionally in communion with the church. There is a danger that people conclude that everyone can decide for themselves what it means to be Catholic.?

On the Phoenix matter, he said, ?To a degree, I think Olmsted is to the bishops? conference what the tea party is to the Republican Party -- a bit of an outlier, and there are probably a lot of bishops who aren?t going to criticize him publicly but are just holding their breath hoping they don?t have to go down that same path.?

Olmsted?s actions, he said, begin to raise a larger question: ?Can the church be part of the fabric of American society or is it going to be an enclave? on the order of the Amish or ultra-orthodox Jewish groups? If it becomes an enclave separated from the larger culture, he asks, can it run credible hospitals or universities?

Weigel, in his *First Things* article, said the battle over protecting the ?integrity of the Catholic ?brand? ? has been going on for decades ?and could take some interesting turns in the years ahead.? He makes a comparison with racially segregated Catholic institutions of the 1950s and 1960s that, he said, were brought into conformance ?with the church?s teaching on human dignity? by courageous bishops. In the same way, courageous bishops need to step up today to defend Catholic identity. He gives ?full marks? to Cardinal Francis George of Chicago ?for putting the issue of Catholic identity on the bishops? plates? during his recent tenure as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and ?full marks to Bishop Olmsted for giving that new commitment real teeth.?

Many historians would argue that in the era when Catholic and other institutions became integrated, with notable exceptions, it was the wider secular culture and black churches, not the Catholic hierarchy, that led the way on civil rights.

If a similar example exists in the wider culture regarding today?s increasingly complex medical ethics issues, it hasn?t yet surfaced. Still, Gaillardetz believes that any ?authentic exercise of authority? by church leaders ?has to recall our long-standing tradition in the Catholic church of distinguishing between a compelling and doctrinally binding moral vision and the difficult issues of concrete application. At the level of concrete application, we?re often talking about prudential judgments about which Catholics likely disagree. I think authority is most effective when it?s willing to be real clear about those distinctions.?

In trying to counteract social currents they see as a challenge to faith, Gaillardetz said, too often the bishops ?have chosen to reassert their authority on matters of great moral complexity and specificity.?

?Whatever one thinks of the decision of Sr. McBride and St. Joseph Hospital, these people were facing a tragic moral situation and one that?s haunted Catholic casuists for decades. And the same thing to some extent is true of the health care legislation issue.? The legislation, he said, was ?extraordinarily complex? and the bishops fashioned their position on the advice of a ?very small group of legal consultants.?

In the end, he said, the tragedy is that such questions and issues don?t have to become confrontations and power struggles. ?This is not a question of authority or no authority. This is a question of how you appropriately exercise authority and exercise it effectively in a postmodern world.? Aspects of the deregulation or ?detraditionalization? of religion are troubling, he said, ?and bishops should rightly be addressing the issues, but not by simply shouting louder or drawing arbitrary lines in the sand.? What?s needed, he said, is ?a different vision for exercising episcopal leadership in the church today, and we?re not seeing that being played out.?

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

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- **Withdrawal of Catholic status impacted hospitals' operations little** [5], by Dan Morris-Young
- **Phoenix hospital still belongs to Catholic Health Association** [6], by Jerry Filteau
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- **Catholic Health Association backs Phoenix hospital** [9], Dec. 22
- **Phoenix bishop removes hospital's Catholic status** [10], Dec. 21
- **Phoenix bishop gives ultimatum to hospital** [11], Dec. 16 and 17.
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