

'Don't Let the Bishops Swing the Election ñ Again!'

Robert Blair Kaiser | Oct. 23, 2008



Commentary

I really resent the few U.S. bishops who are now engaged in a campaign to swing the election for John McCain -- as they did for George W. Bush in 2004.

Four years ago, Archbishops Charles Chaput of Denver and Raymond Burke, then of St. Louis, Mo., (Burke has just left St. Louis to take a post in the Vatican) succeeded in bringing Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) into the media mix. They requested, then disseminated, a letter from the prefect of the Vatican's Holy Office which, Vatican nuances aside, told Catholics not to vote for the dubiously Catholic Senator John Kerry, because he was "pro-abortion." (Kerry wasn't pro-abortion; he was pro-choice. There is a difference, as I will explain in a moment.)

As a result, Catholics in Ohio (for example) who voted overwhelmingly for another Catholic JFK in 1960, voted almost as overwhelmingly against another Catholic JFK in 2004. Ohio's electoral votes alone were enough to put Bush over the top. In effect, Ratzinger, a man who would soon be pope, swung an American election for a Republican who said he was "pro-life."

Ratzinger might have cited ample Catholic social teaching to point out that good Catholics in a pluralistic society need not and should not attempt to make secular civil law a carbon copy of Catholic moral law. Good Catholics can oppose abortion (as I do) and resist those who want to make it a crime (as I do) because we fear the likely consequences.

In Phoenix, where I live now, I would not like to see Sheriff Joe Arpaio's men camping out in our county's hospital hallways looking for doctors to arrest and charge with murder.

As Justice Antonin Scalia has admitted, if *Roe v. Wade* were overruled tomorrow, there would be no significant change in the U.S. abortion rate. Even President Bush realized this. After the 2004 election, he told *The New York Times*, "I fully understand our society is divided on this issue and that there will be abortions. It seems like to me that my job is to convince people to make right choices in life." He wisely made no efforts to criminalize abortion.

Readers of the *NCR* know all of this, I am sure. But if they need some ammunition to give their friends who might be worried about the warnings of Burke (and a few others), I'd like to pass on the opinion of a highly regarded Australian Jesuit, Frank Brennan, a law professor with the kind of national standing that Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray once enjoyed in the United States.

Brennan wrote in his book, *Acting On Conscience* (University of Queensland Press, 2007) that the debate in the U.S. election campaign of 2004 was "largely symbolic." He said, "The relation between religion and politics is badly out of kilter when bishops announce publicly that they would deny Communion to John Kerry, and even suggest that those who vote for him should examine their consciences. All voters should examine their consciences all the time." But shaming Catholic voters to vote against Kerry on moral grounds ?- that, he said, looked very much like a partisan political act.

Right now, we think we've caught the same U.S. bishops engaged in the same kind of partisanship. Or do they think we do not notice them stepping up their so-called pro-life campaign every four years at election time? This time, I hope Catholic voters will see through the bishops' simplistic theologizing.

Brennan found Burke writing this nonsense during the 2004 election campaign: "Of course," Burke wrote, "the end in view for the Catholic must always be the total conformity of the civil law with the moral law." Brennan called this "a theocratic hope," and he said the U.S. bishops should abandon it.

Brennan even came up with a new take on all this from Benedict XVI, who seemed to have a change in heart when he insisted in his first encyclical that it is not the church's responsibility to make its social teaching prevail in political life.

Brennan said the U.S. bishops "need to abandon the simplistic hierarchy of political wrongs, giving a preference to politicians who favour the criminalization of acts judged to be intrinsically evil while (ignoring) the direct action of those same politicians who themselves commit criminal acts, such as ... committing the nation to war without just cause."

Robert Blair Kaiser started out as a Vatican watcher in 1962 when he was covering Vatican II for Time magazine. He is the author of Cardinal Mahony: A Novel (Humble-bee Press, 2008).

Support independent reporting on important issues.



Source URL (retrieved on 06/26/2017 - 21:00): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/politics/dont-let-bishops-swing-election-%C3%B1-again>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>