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Catholic voters and the presidential election

Richard McBrien | Oct. 27, 2008 Essays in Theology

Unlike another column that appears in many diocesan papers across North America, this column has never endorsed or opposed a candidate for public office. It will not break that tradition this year, nor any other year in the future.

Let two points be stated here at the outset in the clearest and most unequivocal terms: First, the official teaching of the Catholic church on the morality of abortion is not in question (see, for example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, nn. 2270-75); and second, it is morally permissible for a Catholic to vote for Senators Barack Obama and Joseph Biden for president and vice president respectively.

Needless to say, it is also morally permissible for a Catholic to vote for Senator John McCain and Governor Sarah Palin for president and vice president, or, for that matter, for such minor-party candidates as former Congressman Bob Barr and perennial candidate Ralph Nader.

Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

However, it is time to throw a yellow flag on the field to call attention to serious violations of the U. S. Catholic bishops? own stated policies not only against political endorsements but also against statements of opposition to specific candidates.

There is a relatively small, but highly vocal, band of U. S. Catholic bishops who violated this policy in 2004 and some of them, with support now from others as well, are in the process of doing so again this year.

The Catholic bishops of the United States have been absolutely clear about their policy, especially since 1987 when they added the words ?or opposing? to their quadrennial statement.

Prior to 1987 the bishops were content to insist that they did ?not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc; nor [did they] wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing candidates.?

But there are two ways of ?endorsing? candidates. One is by an outright declaration of endorse-ment. The other is by attacking your favored candidate?s opponent, as happened in the 1984 presidential campaign when certain bishops, led by at least two cardinals, publicly attacked the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, for her pro-choice views on abortion.

On the run-up to the 1988 presidential election, the Administrative Board of the bishops? conference added the words ?or opposing? after the word ?endorsing.? That addition has remained in the bishops? quadrennial statements ever since -- most recently in their statement of last November when they put the matter clearly and succinctly: ?...we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or *against whom* to vote? (n. 7, my italics).

Moreover, as important as the abortion issue clearly is, the bishops have also insisted since 1984 that Catholic voters and the bishops themselves should ?examine the positions of the candidates on the full range of issues as well as their integrity, philosophy and performance.?

Put negatively, Catholic voters and their bishops are not to pursue a one-issue course in the political realm. No single issue, including abortion, ?trumps? all others, rendering all other issues morally and politically inconsequential.

As last November?s statement by the bishops expressed it: ?The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues. ? Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates? positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace ...? (nn. 40, 41).

Those Catholics for whom abortion is in effect the only issue determining their vote in a presidential election may need a dose of realism. Even the overturning of the 1973 *Roe* v. *Wade* decision by an even more conservative U. S. Supreme Court is not going to put an end to abortions in the United States. It would simply return the matter to the states, and most of the states would continue to legalize abortion.

The only way that abortions are going to be reduced, as Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese insisted recently on his blog for *The Washington Post* (**Abortion: Rhetoric or Results** [1]), is by dealing directly with the causes that lead women to have abortions.

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The qu ndidate and which party will make abortion illegal, but which candidate and which party are more likely to *reduce* the number of abortions.

It is a matter of fact, not opinion, that abortions increased under President Ronald Reagan and peaked during both Bush Administrations. ?In contrast,? Fr. Reese points out, ?during the Clinton Administration the number of abortions fell significantly,? because legislation, which Republicans have generally opposed, dealt with abortion?s underlying causes.

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