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

Stupak gives a lesson for the church

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 4, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Over at *The Atlanti*c, they have an interview [1] with former Congressman Bart Stupak of Michigan, the pro-life Democrat who was at the heart of the negotiations over the final language on abortion in last year?s health care reform bill.

There are many interesting parts to the interview, but this passage jumped out at me:

> *Stupak*: But, to be honest with you, I'd been working with some of the Senate Republicans on trying to find some way to do a technical corrections bill. And actually, truth be known, the Republican leadership in the Senate pulled the rug out on me on that on Thursday night, the Thursday before that Monday [when the final vote occurred]. Most people don't realize that.
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> Anyways, long story short, I always thought we would have some statutory language. It wasn't until Thursday before the vote that when the Republican leadership on the Senate side said no go ... and the reason was that it would pass.
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> *Atlantic*: Health care would have passed the Senate with Hyde language?
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> *Stupak*: Yeah. It would fly though the Senate. So they weren't interested in getting health care passed, they were interested in killing it. So every suggestion, every legislative proposal I had -- and I knew I had to get to 60 votes in the Senate -- I was led to believe up to that point in time they'd work with me. And they pulled the rug out that Thursday before. Remember, they went home that Thursday night, or that Friday night there. They weren't around that weekend when we voted on the health care bill.

What are we to make of this? Stupak may or may not be right about the prospects of his amendment passing the Senate. Indeed, many of the people in the House who voted for the bill that included the Stupak amendment said they did so only because they knew the Senate would soften that language, so even if Stupak is right about the prospects in the Senate, he might have over-stated the likelihood of his amendment making it to the President?s desk.

But the episode he recounts explains why it is mistaken for some Catholics, and some bishops, to say that abortion is the most important issue in politics: The people they are addressing, the legislators on both sides of the aisle, certainly do not see abortion as the most or the only important issue.

In this case, the Senate Republicans refused to continue pushing for the Stupak language because they were trying to kill the bill. That is how politics works and I can?t say I fault the Republicans for availing themselves of whatever strategies they wanted to employ to achieve their political objective.

Again, they are politicians and this is what politicians do. Being upset about it is like being angry with a dog for

eating the food you absent-mindedly left out.

To be clear, neither party fully embodies the social vision set forth by the Holy Father in *Caritas in Veritate*. I submit our society and our culture would be much more civilized if it was closer to that vision. My dream is not only for a Democratic Party that is committed to protecting human dignity for the unborn, I also hope for the day when we have a Republican Party that is committed to justice for the immigrant and care for the poor.

And, as I have been pointing out recently, as the electoral rolls swell with Latinos, most of whom are Catholics, the church has a solemn obligation to educate these voters and get them involved so that our political system can better reflect the vision the Holy Father set forth in his truly wonderful encyclical. Instead, after the health care fight, many, many people had the impression that the bishops had become merely an arm of the Republican Party.

I do not think that judgment is fair or accurate, but it is not entirely inaccurate either. When you climb into the political arena, you are going to end up standing on one side or the other, and the opposing side is going to cast you as partisan. That is the way it works.

There is a way for the bishops to avoid this perception of partisanship and it is one they have already tried. When they issued their peace pastoral in May 1983, they explicitly stated that those parts of the document that stated principles had greater authority (because they had greater moral certainty) than those parts of the document that applied the principles to specific policies.

Had the bishops adopted such a stance during the health care debate, they would have articulated their goals, and they might also have stated their conclusion that the eventual solution to the abortion problem -- an executive order clarifying the statutory language -- was insufficient.

But if they had only prefaced that by noting that the degree of moral authority with which they assessed the abortion language in the specific law was less than the moral authority of the Commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill," they would not have appeared as partisan, and they would not have been in the awkward position of having to explain how a difference in civil legal interpretation was subject to their apostolic authority in faith and morals.

As regular readers know, I believe the church can and should be involved in the political life of the nation. I believe the bishops must proclaim the Gospel to the whole of our lives.

The separation of church and state is a juridical arrangement that we all properly honor, but it is not an invitation to the separation of religion from politics, still less from culture. But the USCCB must find ways to avoid getting too chummy with politicians of either party whose goals and methods are not their own. That is the lesson from Stupak?s account.

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[1] http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/03/bart-stupak-a-year-after-health-care-getting-bitched-out-in-airports-how-the-deal-went-down-and-more/72938/