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Catholic views divided on election's meaning

NCR Staff | Nov. 5, 2008

The Obama presidency will provoke "a church in resistance" -- with the U.S. bishops and priests in the pulpit battling the new administration?s pro-abortion rights agenda at every turn. Or, alternatively, "the Obama moment will force all Catholics to ask whether the common good of the human family, at home and across the world, truly matters."

So say two prominent Catholic intellectuals -- one conservative, one liberal -- providing initial clues as to how American Catholics may respond to the Obama administration.

If the president-elect?s goal is to bridge old divisions, it is clear from the comments of the following Catholic notables -- thinkers, opinion makers, activists -- that the job will not be easy. Whether one is optimistic or pessimistic about an Obama administration depends on which side of the culture war battle lines one falls. Clearly those who place opposing liberal abortion laws as the overriding consideration for Catholic voters find little to applaud in an Obama victory. Those who emphasize other issues -- from war to the economy to the U.S. place in the world to a host of economic and social justice matters -- find reason for a range of hope and optimism.

Any enthusiasm, however, is tempered throughout the comments by the sober realization that the next president will face an enormous backlog of daunting problems, from two open-ended wars to a crumbling global economy.

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The salient strengths of President Obama are that he was elected by a new and broad coalition of voters ready to be energized behind visionary policies; and that he presents a new American face to the world. A weakness is that pro-Obama voters may have unrealistic expectations. They were attracted to Obama for

different reasons, and may be difficult to unite on specific solutions to health care, jobs, taxes, mortgages, and education. As president, Obama must deal quickly with the domestic economy and military commitments, and build a bipartisan administration after a divisive campaign season. In addition, he must emerge as a strong chief executive, yet send positive signals that America can and will be a constructive international partner.

Lisa Sowle Cahill
J. Donald Monan, S.J., Professor of Theology, Boston College

The first thing that I find hopeful about a Barack Obama administration is that he has said that he will be looking for Supreme Court appointments who are more open to constitutional protections in the law as it is applied to poor people and minorities.

He has remarked that he supports the death penalty for heinous crimes so that the full outrage of the community can be expressed. I?d like to have a conversation with him about that because I think it would be a short conversation. First, every murder is a heinous crime. The reality is that the experience of 30 years of executing people in this country overwhelmingly shows that ?full outrage? is felt over the murders of white people, seldom for the murder of people of color. While 50 percent of homicide victims are people of color, yet, eight out of 10 of the 1,000 plus persons executed and the 3,000 plus who occupy death row cells today killed white people. Where?s the outrage when people of color are killed?

St Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean
Anti-death penalty activist, author of*Dead Man Walking*

If President Obama holds firm to his pro-abortion commitments ? a federal Freedom of Choice Act that trumps state regulation of the abortion industry and eviscerates conscience-clause protection for pro-life health care professionals; repeal of the Hyde Amendment, thus permitting federal funding of abortions; repeal of the ?Mexico City policy,? thus releasing federal funds for foreign aid organizations that provide or promote abortion as a means of family planning ? then the Catholic church in the United States will necessarily become a church in resistance. And it will be very interesting to see what Professors Douglas Kmiec, M. Cathleen Keveny, and Nicholas Cafardi contribute to that resistance. [Kmiec, Keveny and Cafardi, strong opponents of abortion, supported Obama, claiming his program for reducing abortions would be more effective than continue to fight for a legal abortion ban.]

George Weigel
Simon Chair in Catholic Studies, Ethics and Public Policy Center

Sen. Obama?s election holds out much promise. The surge in voter registrations, engagement of young people, and use of the Internet indicate that this presidency could engage people in the process of governing in new ways. He will chart an economic course that acknowledges the U.S. as integrated into the world economy, and there is a real chance for health care reform. I worry that his administration might believe that military power can create peace. This isn?t possible. I hope the transition team acknowledges that Candidate Obama was right [in believing that] talking with people we disagree with is the mature way to resolve

conflict.
Sister of Social Service Simone Campbell
NETWORK executive director

The priority issue of social justice in this election, as expressed by Catholic social doctrine at every level of teaching authority, is the definition of human life and the legal protection of the innocent. Sen. Obama is on the extreme edge of pro-abortion policy and, despite his changes on many issues, there is every reason to believe he will advance that policy, including, as he has promised, support for the Freedom of Choice Act that would more deeply entrench Roe v. Wade, supply federal funding for abortions, and eliminate existing state regulations of abortion such as informed consent and parental notification. The stark contrast with the position of Sen. McCain is clear beyond reasonable dispute. As for questions such as national security, economic recovery, educational reform, and the effective alleviation of poverty, we can only speculate about what either would do as president based on their records. Sen. Obama?s record is virtually nonexistent; Sen. McCain?s is long and eminently debatable.
Fr. Richard John Neuhaus
Editor,*First Things*

Dramatic expectations for American renewal across the world that will accompany an Obama administration will inspire many American Catholics. The Obama moment will force all Catholics to ask whether the common good of the human family, at home and across the world, truly matters. An invitation to turn away from multiple culture wars and share responsibility with others will expose the irresponsible self-righteousness of many so-called conservative Catholics, who act as if our church had nothing to do with creating the many problems facing our country and the human family. It would also expose the remarkable retreat from responsibility of the vast majority of bishops, priests, church professionals and lay leaders, who allowed a handful of ecclesiastical restorationists to reshape the self-understanding, pastoral policies and public presence of the American Catholic church. It might even bring an increase in subscriptions to NCR.
David O?Brien
Recently retired historian and Loyola Professor of Catholic Studies Emeritus, College of the Holy Cross

Barack Obama signaled at the convention and during the platform drafting process that he is serious about working with pro-life Democrats to reduce the abortion rate in America. We are optimistic that he will live up to his word and support immediate passage of the Pregnant Women Support Act in the new Congress. Additionally, we are hopeful that his presidency will address all life issues including global poverty, ending human trafficking, providing affordable health care, preventing needless deaths from unjust wars, and promoting other issues that we deem important.
Kristen Day
Executive director, Democrats for Life of America

The most important effect of the Obama victory is the symbolic and very real reality that a black person (more accurately: a mixed race person) has become president of the United States. In international affairs Obama will replace American unilateralism with recognition of our interdependent world, although I fear he is too optimistic about our efforts in Afghanistan. On the domestic scene, recognition of the needs of justice and not the free market will bring about significant changes in government regulation, taxes, and health care. Unfortunately, the fallout from the economic crisis will greatly restrict what the new administration can do.
Fr. Charles Curran
Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values, Southern Methodist University

The American voters have elected the most liberal president and Congress since 1964, but when they take office in January they will find no money in the treasury. The country needs government spending to stimulate the economy, but the Bush administration put the country so far in hock that deficit spending and borrowing will have to be limited. The country is in for a long recession. People have to pay down personal debt and the government will have to deal with its debts once the economy starts growing again. This is the morning-after hangover from a decade of greed and foolishness. There are no easy and quick solutions.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese
Senior fellow,Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University

Just as he won over a majority of Catholics, President Obama will inspire hope for our divided nation that the vast majority of the American people will embrace. Hope, and the confidence he instills, will provide a basis for his leadership, and his repeated reminder for personal and social responsibility as our bothers? and sisters? keepers will change how we ? Americans and Catholics alike ? see ourselves. He will call us together ? building consensus ? to address the most daunting set of issues in generations with the belief that we can, and must, address them for the common good.

Steve Krueger
National Director, Catholic Democrats

A new era of progressive change is dawning in the United States. ?Camp Hope: Countdown Toward Change,? a 20-day presence near President-elect Obama?s home, (Jan. 1 to Jan. 20), will make visible a groundswell of support for changes the Obama administration can initiate, changes he envisioned on the campaign trail. After taking office, he could issue an executive order to close Guantánamo. As commander-in-chief, he could direct the Pentagon to reduce overall levels of U.S. military in Iraq by no fewer than 5,000 military personnel per month and immediately end combat operations. He could suspend deportations of undocumented people and end raids of their workplaces. He could take all nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert, explore policy proposals for full employment and universal health coverage, declare a 90 day moratorium on housing foreclosures, and submit the Kyoto Protocols to Congress for ratification. To learn more about Camp Hope, please visit www.camphope2009.org.

Kathy Kelly
Co-coordinator, Voices for Creative Nonviolence

President Obama will restore the expectation of an American government capable of doing great things, the sense of promise that motivated Roosevelt?s New Deal, Kennedy?s New Frontier and Johnson?s Great Society. In doing so, he will draw back to government service dedicated young women and men who believe in government and in the imperative of improving the lives of all Americans. Unfortunately, an Obama administration will fuel the fires of a Fox-addled Republican base that will never accept his legitimacy as an American let alone as president and thus further coarsen public discourse.

John Olinger
Washington lobbyist

When my mind begins its musings on what an Obama presidency would establish I begin with the image of Joseph, after long years of slavery, exile and ascension to the highest realms of influence in the court of Pharaoh, looking upon his desperate and frightened brothers. In his heart he had great pity, we are told. What I have seen in Obama?s eyes and observed in his demeanor, for the last several years, has been thoughtfulness, gentleness and the absolute focus of a supremely confident man.

His strengths as a constitutional scholar will help him place a wide range of women and men in positions of authority throughout the federal judiciary. We have been in a drought in this area. His self-confidence will not be confused with the macho arrogance of the last decade of presidential interventions. His ego is strong enough for him to have a genuine and unforced sense of humor, bolstered and confirmed by his family and friends. That humor alone will save him from himself.

Jesuit Fr. Joseph A. Brown
Director, Black American Studies program at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, author of *Accidental Grace and Sweet, Sweet Spirit*

A person of color ? for the first time ? elected to the highest position in the land is historic and will transform how the international community views the U.S. I believe that an Obama presidency will give us more access to the White House. Considering our Latin American neighbors, I pray that Obama will improve our policy toward the region. Many of his statements on Latin America have failed to recognize the reality of many of our friends in Latin America. My hope is that Obama will send a positive human rights message to Latin America by closing the School of the Americas.

Eric Lecompte
SOA Watch, National Coordinator
Pax Christi USA, former chair and ambassador of peace

Nov. 4, 2008, will go down in history, globally and nationally. Barack Obama, a black man, will be president. The people of the U.S. overcame centuries of racial fears to do this. The doors are now open to serious dialogue on race, class and gender issues. We voted for our joint rather than individual futures so a national health program, the reclamation of jobs and industries in the U.S., the expansion rather than curtailing of education are viable expectations. The promise of America has finally come to fruition and a government of, by, and for all the people is now achievable.

Diana Hayes
Theology professor, Georgetown University

?It is a sobering thing,? FDR once owned, ?to be a servant to a great cause.? Indeed, the presidency properly inspires not the intoxicating self-assertion of ?deciders,? but rather ? the sobering prudence of stewardship.

Stewardship transcends partisanship and ideology. It gives the lie to both the craven pursuit of reelection and the confusion of private interests with the common good.

Much there is for faithful Catholics to give pause about what is to come. Accountability for promises to reduce abortion is demanded.

But Obama comes to office understanding Roosevelt?s humbling confession and the vision of stewardship it invokes. Given recent presidents, this is no small thing. More than any details of policy, it is this vision that offers hope for a better America.

Stephen Schneck
Board of directors, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good
Director, Life Cycle Institute, The Catholic University of America

As a student of Latino politics in the United States, I can attest that Latinos are focused on all the key issues that concern other Americans: the economy, health care, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, among others. As a populist, Sen. Obama will address the economic crisis in a humane way and keep in mind the large majority of Americans who are hurting. I also believe that Sen. Obama will once and for all bring some closure to the war in Iraq by bringing our combat troop home. I also believe that he will learn from the Iraq fiasco and have a more realistic and tempered policy toward Afghanistan. Finally, although little discussed in the campaign, immigration reform including the Dream Act will stand a better chance of passing in an Obama administration.

Mario T. García
Professor of Chicano Studies and History, University of California, Santa Barbara.

We have a new president who envisions us as an inclusive community committed to the common good of all. Unless Congress gets its houses in order, the president may face a gridlock and/or obstacles to his desire to move us by legislation into a future where the needs, rights and responsibilities of all citizens are recognized and addressed.

We need to realize more fully the meaning of ?E Pluribus Unam? [Out of Many One] in the 21st century. Both Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI have called us to the see the Church as a People of God called into communion with the Triune God, one another and all creation because of God. Now our nation calls its citizens to recognize our common humanity within a nation and world enriched with legitimate gender, cultural, ethnic-racial, economic, religious and national diversity. To do this we will have to change our self-interested and self-centered views of reality and begin to think and act locally and globally with a consistent ethic of life concerned about all peoples who are citizens both of our nation and a world community [communion].

Dominican Sr. Jamie T. Phelps
Director and Katharine Drexel Professor of Systematic Theology
The Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University of Louisiana

The election of Barack Obama is a tragedy because of the gap between what he claimed to embody and what his few unscripted utterances, and his votes and associations indicate him to be. He campaigned as a compassionate healer. But he rose politically as an opportunist, associating with any who could forward his career. He voted as an abortion-extremist, opposing even a law to save helpless infants, born alive after botched abortions. He demeaned the economically disadvantaged and their religion, while pandering to the rich. President-elect Obama is determined to undo 35 years of pro-life work, and to pack the Supreme Court with abortion supporters. On other social justice issues important to Catholics, we really have no idea what a man with this history will promote, other than his own self-interest.

Helen Alvare
Associate professor, George Mason University School of Law

One of the main positive effects of an Obama win will be what it will mean for the psyche of

African-Americans, especially the young. His achievement of the nation?s highest office through grit, perseverance and intelligence is an example to all black youth of what is possible, even in the face of the continued headwinds of racial resistance. His election will be an inspiration to black youth to bring their ?A game? to the table of American life.

Yet, a negative side effect of this historic event will be a premature celebration of the demise of racism in the U.S. Many will state that a black president means that we have finally turned the page on our ugly racial past. Without at all diminishing the seismic significance of this event, we cannot forget how race and racism has dogged and framed Obama?s candidacy from its beginning ? with its most blatant effects shown among some segments of the Catholic population. Race still remains a national obsession, a wound deeply entrenched in the national consciousness.

A hope that I have for an Obama administration is that it not forget the poor. The rhetoric of both campaigns has focused on the fortunes of the middle class. But there are pockets of entrenched and trans-generational poverty in our country that are a national disgrace. I hope that Obama?s leadership and charisma can inspire us to wage a war on poverty for the 21st century, so that all can share in the blessings of the common good.

Bryan Massingale
Associate professor, theology, Marquette University

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(**Editor's Note:** Read more comments an analysis of President-elect Barack Obama's election victory in the Nov. 14 print issue of *National Catholic Reporter*.

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