

The U.S. bishops and unions revisited

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Judging by the positive reaction to my recent column on "Bishops and the assault on unions," I would say that the U.S. Catholic bishops have a serious credibility problem with their own people -- those still active members of the Church.

So many cited the bishops' seeming obsession with sexually-related issues while giving too little attention, or none at all, to matters of social justice and the social teachings of the Church.

Many others criticized the employment practices that are operative in their own dioceses.

A remarkably high number chastised the bishops for their overt political partisanship. The bishops are, according to many Catholics, apologists for the Republican Party.

This is in striking contrast to the time, some 40 or 50 years ago, when bishops took pride in the fact that their episcopal colleagues were raised in working-class families. Most of the bishops of that time were probably Democrats, but they rarely expressed any partisan sentiments one way or the other.

Democrats controlled the White House through more than three terms of Franklin D. Roosevelt and almost two terms of Harry Truman (one in completion of FDR's fourth term and the other as the result of the 1948 election).

This was before the election in 1952 of a moderate Republican, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, followed by eight more years of Democrats in the Presidency: John F. Kennedy, the first and only Catholic President, and Lyndon Baines Johnson, who succeeded President Kennedy after his assassination and who was elected in his own right by a landslide in 1964.

This was before the rise of the religious right and the event that changed the complexion of American politics ever since.

That event, of course, was the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision which brought the abortion issue to the center of the country's attention. It was also the decision which awakened the sleeping giants of the fundamentalist, evangelical and Pentecostalist segments of U.S. Protestantism.

Previously they had been among American Christianity's strongest opponents of political involvement by the churches. But the abortion decision changed all that. It was in this new context that the late Rev. Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" was formed.

Although the "Moral Majority" as a distinct organization has passed out of existence, its heirs are still around and with much greater political clout, even in the halls of Congress. They are the "Tea Party" folks.

Although not a formal party, they are camped for now under the tent of the Republican Party, but without sacrificing their own independence from the Republican leadership.

This is much to the chagrin of House Speaker John Boehner and those who are vying for the Republican nomination in 2012. It is considered the third rail of Republican politics to criticize the Tea Party, even in the mildest fashion.

On the other hand, this is not an either/or situation for the U.S. Catholic bishops. They do not have to choose between an emphasis on abortion *and* an emphasis on social justice issues.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago, once headed the U.S. bishops' Pro-Life Committee. And yet he was also a staunch advocate of the Church's social teachings.

He held both together by what he called the "consistent ethic of life," or what the media liked to refer to as the "seamless garment."

For Cardinal Bernardin there was no either/or choice for U.S. Catholics generally or for his episcopal colleagues. It was always both/and; *both* a concern for abortion and other sexually-related moral issues, *and* a concern for social justice and the social teachings of the Church.

Twentieth-century papal documents were sometimes referenced to Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum*; Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* ("forty years after" *Rerum novarum*); Paul VI's *Octogesima adveniens* ("the 80th anniversary" of *Rerum novarum*); and John Paul II's *Centesimus annus* ("the hundredth year" after *Rerum novarum*).

In each papal document, most recently in Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate* ("Love in truth"), popes have spoken of the "repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights."

These associations or labor unions "must therefore be honored today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level" (n. 25).

Msgr. George Higgins and Cardinal Bernardin alike would be appalled at our current bishops' failure -- in Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey and elsewhere -- to defend the rights of workers, whether in the public or private sectors, to unionize and to bargain collectively.

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