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The U.S. bishops react to the election

Richard McBrien | Dec. 1, 2008 Essays in Theology

As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops? semi-annual meeting in Baltimore moved toward final adjournment last month, Cardinal Francis George, archbishop of Chicago and conference president, was commissioned by his brother bishops to draft a statement on behalf of the entire Conference, expressing the bishops? hopes and fears about the incoming Obama administration.

Cardinal George did so, and the conference approved the statement in executive session the next day.

Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

As anyone who has read the statement by now already knows, it begins on a positive note, referring to Barack Obama?s election as marking an ?historic transition? and pledging coopera-tion with his administration on issues designed to advance the common good of the whole nation.

The bishops pledged to work on behalf of economic justice and opportunity for all, for the reform of immigration laws while looking out for the legitimate interests of the undocumented, in providing for improvements in education and developing an adequate health-care system for all, and for the safeguarding of religious freedom and the fostering of peace at home and abroad.

The great bulk of the statement, however, focused on the abortion issue and expressed particular concern about the possible passage in the next Congress of the Freedom of Choice Act which, according to the bishops, would compel Catholic hospitals and Catholic medical personnel to violate their consciences on this most sensitive of moral issues.

The bishops, Cardinal George wrote, are ?single-minded? about the abortion issue ?because they are, first of all, single-hearted.?

The beginning of the next paragraph, however, is crucial for understanding the bishops? current credibility problem. ?The recent election,? Cardinal George continued, ?was principally decided out of concern for the economy, for the loss of jobs and homes and financial security for families, here and around the world.? So far, so good.

But in the next sentence, he wrote that ?If the election is misinterpreted ideologically as a referendum on abortion, the unity desired by President-elect Obama and all Americans at this moment of crisis will be impossible to achieve.?

Abortion, however, never made it to the electorate?s radar-screen. It wasn?t in the running as an issue uppermost in voters? minds -- except for those Catholics who took seriously the threats of their bishops that a vote for Obama would be tantamount to a vote for abortion and, therefore, mortally sinful.

So if anyone made the presidential election ?a referendum on abortion,? the bishops should look into the proverbial mirror. They will see the faces of fellow bishops who, for all practical purposes, endorsed the McCain-Palin ticket or who openly opposed the Obama-Biden ticket because of abortion, going so far as to declare that Catholics could not vote Democratic without risking the salvation of their souls.

As is clear from the polling, most Catholics (53 percent or 54 percent) ignored their bishops? warnings and voted for Obama. An even higher percentage of Hispanic voters (66 percent), most of whom are Catholic, also voted for Obama.

No one should gloat over the bishops? poor performance in the recent election, but it was they, not the Democrats, who transformed it into a ?referendum on abortion.? The conference will have to deal with those bishops in its own good time and manner.

As for the related issue of threatening to deny Holy Communion to Catholic politicians who happen to be pro-choice (but not pro-abortion -- a distinction many Catholics, including bishops, find difficult to accept), the majority of bishops seem to stand with Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston and Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., both staunchly anti-abortion, in opposing what other bishops have called the ?politicizing of the Eucharist.?

Denying Communion to Catholics is tantamount to excommunicating them from the church, which is the most severe spiritual penalty that the church can impose on anyone. Archbishop Wuerl has said that he will not refuse to give Communion to Vice President Biden, and Cardinal O?Malley told *The Boston Globe* that most bishops do not want to make ?a battleground out of the Eucharist.?

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ops? Committee on Pro-life Activities was inclined in that direction, but after what se ?tense? discussions, the statement was softened. The softening did not placate bishops like Joseph Martino of Scranton, who continued to make threats about denying Communion to Vice President-elect Joseph Biden, a Scranton native.
One of the conference?s wise men is Bishop Blase Cupich of Rapid City, South Dakota, who had earlier called it sinful to vote against Barack Obama because of his race, and who, at the Baltimore meeting, warned against a ?prophecy of denunciation? that may only widen the gap between the bishops and their people.

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