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# The morality of our votes

Richard McBrien | Dec. 8, 2008 Essays in Theology

Last month, a pastor in South Carolina announced to his parishioners that, if they had voted for Barack Obama in the recent presidential election, they should not present themselves for Holy Communion until after they had repented and sought forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.

The administrator of the diocese promptly ?repudiated? the action taken by the priest (see **Diocese: Priest wrong in Obama condemnation** [1]). The story attracted the attention of the national and international media.

One suspects that there were several instances of this type of pastoral behavior in other parts of the country, given the highly charged nature of the abortion issue for many Catholics, including clergy.

**Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien**

One could say, in fact, that pastors like the one in South Carolina were only following the example of some of the nation?s bishops, including the one who, before the election, had explicitly warned Catholics in his border-state diocese that, if they were intending to vote for the Democratic ticket, they would be putting their eternal salvation at risk.

This bishop who had darkly threatened grave consequences for Catholics who dared to vote for Senators Obama and Joseph Biden was himself defeated in a head-to-head contest at last month?s semi-annual meeting of the U.S. bishops in Baltimore.

At stake was the **chairmanship of the bishops? Committee on Communications** [2]. The winning candidate was an auxiliary bishop on the West Coast, who had spoken out during the campaign against single-issue voting.

The vote, by a margin of 129-97, may have reflected the thinking of the majority of bishops, who were unhappy with the political tone set by a minority of their brother bishops but who had chosen not to challenge them publicly.

Their silence, however, left many Catholics without proper guidance. They had been led to believe by the vocal minority of bishops that a vote for the Democratic candidates was a vote for abortion and, therefore, mortally sinful.

But post-election surveys disclosed that a majority of Catholic voters thought otherwise and voted for the Obama-Biden ticket by a margin of 54 percent to 45 percent. The margin was even greater for Hispanic voters, most of whom are Catholic. They voted Democratic by more than 2 to 1: 67 percent to 31 percent.

For such voters, the economy, not abortion, was the major consideration. One might even suggest that this year

the economy ?trumped? abortion -- to use a verb that some bishops had employed in 2004 and again this year to indicate that abortion is the only issue that should have mattered to Catholic voters and that their only moral choice was to have voted Republican.

One Catholic undergraduate student in a major Catholic university agreed, but with a significant difference. A Catholic, he argued, could indeed have voted in last month?s election on the basis of the abortion issue alone. But mortal sin was not a legitimate consideration.

Here we have a more nuanced position -- one that views abortion as the overriding moral issue in determining a Catholic?s vote, but one that rejects at the same time the claim that a vote for a pro-choice candidate is mortally sinful.

Whether he realized it or not, this student was much closer to the views of the majority of bishops in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

For such bishops, abortion is indeed a moral issue of the highest importance. In their judgment, no Catholic can in good conscience regard abortion as simply one of the many moral issues to be taken into account prior to voting.

That is not what the ?consistent ethic of life? approach means. It is not a flattening out of all life issues. Some are indeed of greater moral gravity than others.

Nevertheless, as the victorious West Coast auxiliary bishop had argued during the presiden-tial campaign, there *are* other life issues besides abortion that have to be taken into consideration. The bishop had mentioned by way of example ?racism, torture, genocide, immigration, war, and the impact of the economic downturn.?

The student also stood with the majority of U.S. Catholic bishops, all of whom are firmly anti-abortion, in resisting the temptation to politicize the Eucharist or to allow it to become a ?battleground.?

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Catholics were unfamiliar with the actual teachings and policies of the bishops? confere[illegible]ed with threats and warnings from individual bishops and priests.

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To be sure, some of these bishops would like to revoke or substantially modify those teachings and policies before another election cycle is upon us. But unless and until they succeed in doing so, the clear teachings and policies of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops remain in force.

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