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The disconnect between bishops and other Catholics

Richard McBrien | Jan. 9, 2012 Essays in Theology

The U.S. Catholic bishops have produced a new introduction to their 2007 document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." The full text of the new introduction is available in *Origins*, Oct. 13, 2011, vol. 41, no. 19. The original document is also available in *Origins*, Nov. 29, 2007, vol. 37, no. 25.

The new introduction reminds Catholics that some moral issues "involve the clear obligation to oppose intrinsic evils which can never be justified," while others "require action to pursue justice and promote the common good."

The bishops point out that their quadrennial statements, on the run-up to every U.S. presidential election for almost 35 years, have "at times been misused to present an incomplete or distorted view of the demands of faith in politics" but remain "a faithful and challenging call to discipleship in the world of politics."

Some Catholics who have actually read the 2007 document would take issue with the assumption behind the bishops' characterization of the response to their statement, namely, that it has at times been misused by progressive Catholics, who present "an incomplete or distorted" understanding of the demands of faith in the political order.

Actually, the record of the previous campaign shows that, if anyone presented "an incomplete or distorted" interpretation of the document, it was the traditionalist Catholics, especially in the hierarchy itself.

One thinks of the then-archbishop of Denver, now the archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, who argued that, because the church's teaching on abortion involves an intrinsic evil, abortion "trumps" all other moral issues, especially those that touch on Catholic social teaching.

Therefore, the abortion issue is the only moral touchstone for Catholic politicians. If they are "wrong" on abortion (for example, they have supported or voted for funding for abortion), their views on the whole range of Catholic social doctrines are of no account.

And conversely, if Catholic politicians are "right" on abortion and "wrong" on a whole range of social justice issues, they are to be given a free pass, so to speak.

That is why so many theologically conservative bishops supported the Republican ticket in November 2008, some even going so far as to insist that Catholics who voted Democratic would have committed a serious sin and even endangered their eternal salvation.

It also explains the opposition of about 80 bishops (or fewer, depending upon a number of variable factors) to the University of Notre Dame's inviting President Barack Obama to give the Commencement address in 2009 and to receive an honorary degree.

In last week's column, I cited Albany's Bishop Howard Hubbard's October message on the "Failings of the Church" in his diocesan paper, *The Evangelist*

[1]. He acknowledged in that column that some Catholics disagree with the hierarchy's teachings on a variety of moral issues.

This is confirmed in a recent survey of U.S. Catholics, commissioned by the *National Catholic Reporter* and published in its Oct. 28-Nov. 10, 2011, issue [2].

On the matter of Catholic attitudes toward the credibility of the bishops' teachings, the survey found that relatively few Catholics look to church leaders as the sole moral arbiters.

This is particularly true with regard to official teachings on such issues as divorce and remarriage, abortion, nonmarital sex, homosexuality and contraception.

More than of half of those surveyed say that individuals, not the hierarchy, are best equipped to make moral decisions on these matters. When it comes to contraception, however, the percentage rises to two-thirds.

On issues other than divorce and remarriage and contraception (where the percentage of dissidents is roughly the same today as it was 25 years ago), the share of Catholics who look solely to church leaders for guidance on matters of right and wrong has declined.

Those who attend Mass every week are more inclined to look to the hierarchy for guidance, but not by much.

Indeed, half of the oldest generation of Catholics believes individuals themselves are the proper locus of moral authority, even on such issues as abortion.

In summary, on most of the issues the survey asked about, majorities of Catholics said the locus of moral authority rests with individuals, not the bishops, but after taking church teachings into account.

Given the findings of this latest survey, it is clear that relatively few Catholics look to the bishops themselves as the sole source of guidance on moral issues.t

It would have been useful to know how many Catholics actually read the teaching documents produced by the bishops, whether this "new introduction" or the original statement itself.

There is an evident disconnect between what the bishops *think* is happening "out there," and what is actually going on.

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