NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pope gives new twist to pro-life rhetoric

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 26, 2012 NCR Today

Especially in the West, Catholic politicians who don?t vote in accord with official church teaching on contentious issues such as abortion and gay marriage often distinguish between their private beliefs and their public roles. I may privately oppose these things, they argue, but I can?t impose those convictions on a pluralistic culture.

As a result, rejection of this private/public distinction has become a staple of Catholic pro-life rhetoric. The argument is usually that it's at best inconsistent, and at worst a form of cowardice, to espouse one position in church and another in the halls of Congress.

Pro-lifers often cite a famous remark by St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei: ?Have you ever bothered to think how absurd it is to leave one?s Catholicism aside on entering a university, or a professional association, or a scholarly meeting, or Congress, as if you were checking your hat at the door??

tPope Benedict XVI has echoed that position during his current trip to Mexico, which is his first to Spanish-speaking Latin America. Aboard the papal plane on Friday, he too took a swipe at those who try to drive a wedge between private and public ethics ? pointedly calling it a form of ?schizophrenia.?

t?One sees in Latin America, and also elsewhere, among many Catholics a certain schizophrenia between individual and public morality,? Benedict said.

?Personally, in the individual sphere, they?re Catholics, believers. But in public life they follow other paths that don?t correspond to the great values of the Gospel which are necessary for the foundation of a just society. It?s essential to educate people in order to overcome this schizophrenia, educating not only about individual morality but also public morality.?

The pope partly may have had the culture wars in mind, especially given that a number of Catholic legislators in Mexico City have in recent years voted to legalize both first trimester abortion and same-sex unions.

Yet what?s most striking about the pope?s comment is the very different context in which it arose.

Benedict XVI was asked by a famous Mexican journalist not about abortion or gay rights, but rather the strong contrast between rich and poor across the continent and whether the Catholic church was doing enough to promote social justice.

?Naturally the church must always ask itself if it?s doing enough on behalf of social justice in this great continent,? Benedict said in reply. ?This is a question of conscience which we must always ask ourselves.?

The church is not a political party, Benedict said, but it is a moral force, and because politics is supposed to be a moral enterprise the church always has something to contribute to political life. The pope said the church?s first duty must be to form consciences, imparting a strong sense of moral responsibility both at the personal and the

public levels ? and it?s that second level, he said, ?where perhaps the problem lies.?

That was the lead-in to Benedict?s strong denunciation of political ?schizophrenia? and his insistence that the ?great values of the Gospel? must be the basis of a just society.

In other words, Benedict took a staple of Western pro-life rhetoric, which is the need for coherence between a Catholic?s private beliefs and public positions, and gave it a far broader spin.

The need for coherence, the pope suggested, doesn?t end with the culture wars, but also applies to other questions of social justice ? including, in the first instance, solidarity with the poor and efforts to overcome glaring inequalities.

It remains to be seen if that papal twist will cut any ice in political life, either in Mexico or anywhere else. Nonetheless, it?s a striking bit of subtext to Benedict?s Latin American swing.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/05/2015 - 02:26*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-gives-new-twist-pro-life-rhetoric