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Journalists: Both Obama and Catholic bishops screwed up on health care

Jerry Filteau | Apr. 20, 2012

WASHINGTON -- Four of the nation's leading journalists on religion and politics said Tuesday that both the Obama administration and the U.S. Catholic bishops made major mistakes in the way they have addressed rules for contraceptive coverage in employee health care plans under the Affordable Health Care Act.

At a symposium at Georgetown University on religion and politics in the 2012 electoral campaigns, sponsored by the Jesuit Woodstock Theological Center, the panelists sought to assess a range of religion and politics issues in the upcoming presidential battle.

But in the question-and-answer series that followed, one of the foremost issues discussed was the politically explosive question of the bishops' response to the Obama administration's Health and Human Services regulation on contraception and related issues.

Part of that debate hinges on the administration's definition of what constitutes a religious organization that, for reasons of conscience, can decide not to follow the HHS mandate of employee health insurance coverage for contraceptive drugs, voluntary sterilization and certain morning-after contraceptive pills that are at least potentially abortifacient.

Another part of the debate is whether the leadership of the nation's Catholic bishops is really still fighting a battle over a fundamental issue of religious freedom in America or whether, after the administration's compromise on the contraceptive mandate Feb. 10, the bishops' continuing objections had moved from principled moral opposition to political partisanship.

Or, as panel moderator and *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, put it, after Feb. 10, it appeared that "some bishops didn't want to take 'yes' for an answer" when the Obama administration offered a compromise that would not require Catholic institutions to directly fund the provision of abortion, voluntary sterilization or contraceptive health care services to their employees.

On broader election-year issues, the panelists focused on what role religion might play in the 2012 presidential election.

"There is no 'Catholic vote,' and it's important," said Dionne, the panel moderator, in opening remarks. He explained that because of the large number of Catholic voters, how Catholics vote in any election is important, but because of the group's diversity, it is not possible to predict how they will vote. What is known, he said, is that in most recent national elections, whoever got the most Catholic votes also won the election.

Panelist David Gibson of Religion News Service, a former Vatican Radio correspondent, focused his remarks on religion and politics within the Republican Party.

"The religious right is not dead," he said, and it will be interesting to see how evangelicals and politically

conservative Catholics line up behind Mitt Romney, a Mormon and the presumptive Republican nominee for president.

Gibson offered an interesting contrast between the religious and political baggage of Romney and former Catholic presidential candidate Al Smith and President John F. Kennedy.

The Mormons, with only about 6 million members or 2 percent of the U.S. population, are far "less threatening than Catholics" were to mainstream American culture in the 1928 and 1960 elections, he said.

One of the things Gibson found most fascinating in the Republican primaries so far was that Catholic Republicans have tended to vote for Romney instead of Catholic candidates Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum, while more of the evangelical Republicans have tended to vote for Gingrich and Santorum rather than Romney.

Amy Sullivan, a blogger and contributor to *The New York Times*, said the behavior of evangelical Christians could be the major determining factor in the elections in November.

With Romney as the presumptive Republican candidate, she said the evangelicals' distrust of Mormons could play a distinctive role.

Evangelical voters form one-fourth of the U.S. electorate, she said, but in Republican primaries, a substantial factor in the pro-Romney vote was from non-evangelical conservatives: less than a quarter of evangelical conservatives voted for him, while almost half of conservatives who were not evangelicals did so.

Panelist Tom Roberts, editor-at-large for *NCR*, expressed concern about Catholic bishops politicizing the upcoming election.

He said Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria, Ill., in a homily April 14 [1] compared the Obama administration to Nazism and communism in its treatment of religion in the HHS mandate.

He quoted from the homily: "This fall, every practicing Catholic must vote, and must vote their Catholic consciences, or by the following fall our Catholic schools, our Catholic hospitals, our Catholic Newman Centers, all our public ministries -- only excepting our church buildings -- could easily be shut down. Because no Catholic institution, under any circumstance, can ever cooperate with the intrinsic evil of killing innocent human life in the womb."

Roberts said New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan, head of the bishops' conference, has described the HHS regulation as a fight the church did not pick but that it has to fight.

Yet there is a serious debate on whether that fight is truly on religious principles or primarily political, he said.

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