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Editorial: The new Catholic moment

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Translating this motherhood-and-apple-pie sentiment into action presents challenges to those for whom activism is a natural outgrowth of faith, to bishops and clergy charged with teaching and pastoring the faithful, and to those in government at every level -- from the local PTA to the corridors of Congress.

Twenty-plus years ago, then-Lutheran pastor Richard Neuhaus proclaimed the onset of "the Catholic moment." Neuhaus, now a New York archdiocesan priest, argued that the U.S. Catholic church was uniquely positioned to influence public life in an unprecedented manner. Neuhaus, it seems, was premature, and the conservative cultural agenda he desired went, at best, only partially fulfilled. Nonetheless, he was on to something.

Today, American Catholics are among the most highly educated members of our society. They lead in the corporate world, the professions, academia, the nonprofit sector and the arts and sciences. Five of the nine members of the U.S. Supreme Court profess the faith, as do the vice president-elect and the Speaker of the House. In case there was any doubt, the U.S. laity -- fully American and faithfully Catholic -- has arrived.

American Catholics, of course, are hardly monolithic. That they frequently reach different conclusions on the great and small issues of the day should not surprise anyone, given the conflicting impulses of Americans generally and the fact that the church's social teaching is expressed in principles to be applied, not prescriptions to be fulfilled.

That much was evident in the recent presidential campaign, where Catholic activists in John McCain's camp argued that the Arizona senator was more likely than his opponent to take steps to curb abortion (by working to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade* and appointing judges who would make that happen), to oppose gay marriage and to confront Islamic states hostile to U.S. and Western interests.

Barack Obama's Catholic supporters, meanwhile, contended that the Illinois senator's platform would best promote human dignity by encouraging dialogue among hostile nations, by ending the Iraq war, by providing health insurance to the 40 million-plus who go without, and by creating alternatives to abortion that provide women facing a crisis pregnancy a genuine choice.

It was a fair fight. Obama ultimately carried not only the overall electorate, but a majority of Catholic voters, including a statistical tie (50 percent McCain, 49 percent Obama) among weekly Mass attendees.

Now many Catholic activists caution that Obama's promise to reduce abortions is both insufficient (because overturning *Roe*, they say, should be the priority) and untested. They are correct to raise the issues, given Obama's commitment to *Roe* and his unwavering pro-abortion-rights platform.

The nation's laws should protect the most vulnerable -- the homeless and sick, those ravaged by war, the imprisoned, the handicapped, and, not least, the unborn, whose lives are lost in a procedure second only to Lasik

surgery in frequency.

That said, in the messy democratic system under which we function, principle quickly becomes fetish. Statutes typically do not create consensus, they reflect it, which is why it took more than a century following a brutal civil war for African Americans to be granted full citizenship under law. And as President George W. Bush (who never called for overturning *Roe*) pointed out on more than one occasion, there is no national consensus to outlaw abortion.

Abortion then becomes, on the political level, a tactical question. What can I do -- as an individual citizen, an activist, an elected official, a member of the clergy, a jurist -- to mitigate this evil?

There is a growing body of evidence that seems to confirm what many intuitively believe: that a generous social safety net for the pre-born, newborns and their mothers -- prenatal care and health coverage, guaranteed income, employment and job training, daycare, housing assistance, food, education -- provides the best means to reduce the number of abortions. This presents a challenge both to Obama's pro-life supporters and to his critics.

To the new president's supporters: Are they willing to genuinely push a pro-life agenda, one that will alienate pro-choice Democrats who are a dominant force in the party?

To Obama's pro-life critics: Will they seize the opportunity to test the idea that targeted government spending is the best available means to save the unborn? Or do they ultimately place more value on their seat at the Republican Party table, where cuts in the capital-gains tax rate remain more important than reductions in the abortion rate?

Which brings us back to civic engagement.

Recently, a group of largely pro-Obama Catholics met with members of the administration's transition team. They urged immigration reform, effective international development programs, funding for the National Housing Trust Fund and other antipoverty measures, humane welfare policies, and measurable efforts to reduce the abortion rate.

A few prominent members of the American hierarchy responded defensively to this gathering, noting that the bishops are the sole representatives of American Catholics. Well, that's simply not true. Clearly, the hierarchy has an important role, primarily to teach and pastor Catholics who take what they have been taught into the political realm.

But in meeting with the Obama transition team, these laypeople were acting within their areas of expertise and competence. It is primarily the laity's role to take the Gospel values to the policymakers who ultimately enact and enforce the laws and regulations under which we are governed.

Lay Catholics -- conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats -- who engage the political process should be cited as models, praised and embraced as exemplars of the new generation of informed and educated faithful willing to test their values in the public square.

Still, whether the activist laity is embraced or perceived as a threat will not ultimately change much. American Catholics of all political persuasions should and will continue to argue for laws and policies that, in their view, move the country closer to the more perfect union the founders envisioned, the just and welcoming society the church promotes.

That is the new moment.

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