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Editorial: Is the 'culture-warrior' model for archbishops the right one?

NCR Editorial Staff | Aug. 13, 2012

How should bishops conduct themselves in the public square? The question is especially urgent today when so many divisive issues, including contraception mandates and same-sex marriage, complicate the nation's politics. Economic concerns still dominate the public's interest, but it is these hot-button issues that get people's blood pressure rising.
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The question is urgent for another reason, too. As John Allen demonstrates in his article [1], the recent appointments of three gung-ho new archbishops -- Baltimore's William Lori, Denver's Samuel Aquila and San Francisco's Salvatore Cordileone -- could signal a trend in episcopal appointments. "In the teeth of a perceived war on religion in America, the church is sending clear signals that it has no intention of backing down," Allen writes.

NCR does not believe the church should "back down." The church's involvement in the public square is vital. The church's voice has been raised consistently on behalf of the poor and the marginalized, the undocumented and the unborn. The question is whether the "culture-warrior" model of the new trio of archbishops is the right model for such involvement.

Recently, three other American bishops evidenced a different approach. Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, penned an essay on Catholics' political involvement that does not adopt a cultural-warrior mode but instead challenges serious Catholics to ask themselves whether they are willing to wink at the ways our chosen political parties fail to grasp and enflesh the robust moral vision of the church.

Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Wash., wrote a letter to all Catholics in his diocese on the issue of same sex-marriage. Without vitriol, without mischaracterizing the positions of those who disagree, with a presumption of good faith, Cupich set forth the teachings of the church clearly but not obnoxiously, and affirmed the innate human dignity of all people, including gay men and women. We disagree with his conclusion, but not his approach.

Certain conservative Catholic commentators are vilifying New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan because he invited President Barack Obama to the annual Al Smith Dinner. The critics say the invitation will cause scandal. Dolan has never been shy about his opposition to abortion, nor his opposition to the Obama administration's Health and Human Services contraception mandate. No one will mistake the president's appearance at the dinner as an endorsement by Dolan. The scandal would be if Dolan had caved to the critics and treated the president as if he were "untouchable." There are some powerful parables about lepers in the Gospels, all of which indicate the Lord Jesus considered no one untouchable.

The most disturbing part of Allen's report is the obvious influence of Cardinal Raymond Burke in the decisions to appoint bishops in the cultural-warrior mode. Why anyone in Rome would consider Burke an informed analyst of American culture befuddles us. It is well-known that his antics during the 2004 presidential race led

then-nuncio Archbishop Pietro Sambi to try, successfully, to get him "kicked upstairs," transferred to a post in Rome.

But it is less his views of John Kerry that should give the Vatican pause in soliciting his advice than Burke's repeated and imprudent attacks on brother bishops. After Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley presided at the funeral of Sen. Edward Kennedy, Burke said O'Malley was acting "at the behest of the father of lies." In 2009, Burke gave an interview to anti-abortion extremist Randall Terry, in which Burke insulted Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl because he did not deny Communion to pro-choice politicians. Burke later apologized, saying he did not know the videotape would go public. So he wasn't sorry that he suggested Wuerl was not doing his job and was, in fact, causing "scandal," he was only sorry the videotape went public.

Burke is the last person the Vatican should look to for advice on what kinds of bishops are needed in the United States today.

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