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Praying for wisdom in the presidential race

Phyllis Zagano | Sep. 26, 2012 Just Catholic

Gov. Mitt Romney prays for wisdom and understanding every night. Barack Obama sits on the Truman balcony and looks at the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial.

It's a study in contrasts. Do you think Romney will be praying on that balcony soon?

When the CBS News program "60 Minutes" spent an hour interviewing the president and the contender recently, the media's stark way of painting pictures was on full display. Romney's interviewer, Scott Pelley, looked the perfect hardball litigator, with even fewer hairs out of place than Romney. Obama's interviewer, Steve Kroft, seemed more the laid-back, slightly overweight assistant district attorney. Presenting a pictorial caricature of Republicans and Democrats, each journalist asked about the same issues.

And there are a lot of issues this time around: the economy, foreign policy, the economy, the size of government, the economy.

Oh, did I mention the economy? The interviews proceeded with few surprises, but for those listening on how each candidate would approach the problems of the poor, a clear distinction appeared. I think the bottom line is that Obama wants to adjust the tax code to raise taxes to pay for more entitlements -- a sort of national redistribution of wealth. I think Romney wants to keep present yet restrict future entitlements and create more wealth by reducing regulations and corporate taxes. More wealth would mean more tax receipts.

Obama seems to want higher income individuals to shoulder a greater proportion of the national budget. Romney seems to favor increasing means to attain wealth, which in turn would create more taxes to feed that budget.

The bottom line is true economic growth, creating wealth. More wealth means more taxes paid and fewer folks needing tax-supported entitlements.

I'm no economist, but I just can't see how Obama will be able create wealth ("stimulate the economy") while increasing both taxes and entitlements. But neither do I quite understand how Romney will maintain current entitlements without raising taxes and stifling growth. So the coming election presents the sharpest division between styles of leadership and management in a long time. It also presents an opportunity for a national reflection on how best to assist the poor.

Not a bad idea. The electorate seems agreed to a common responsibility one for another in society. The discussion is not whether but how to provide for the needy, while retaining individual freedoms (and earnings).

With government programs, the upward trajectory of entitlements -- Medicare, Medicaid, "Obamacare," food stamps and other aid programs -- is choking the life out of the national budget. Every program requires management. When the program is federal to state, there are two levels of management. The number-crunchers can give the details, but multilevel management clearly eats resources. One savings plan presented by Romney

would be by turning some program management back to the states.

As for government support of nonprofits, mandates restrict religious liberties. So nonprofit hospitals, nursing homes, schools, social service programs and the like might need to agree to constitutional liberties against their teachings in order to receive public monies.

I think the bottom line on helping the poor is to equalize the tension between public and private assistance, between government programs and nonprofits. That tension is most problematic when nonprofits mainly function as pass-throughs for government funding, concurrently accepting more government mandates.

What to do? A tax code that ensures deductions for donations could ease nonprofits' dependence on government funds. Less dependence on government funds would mean less exposure to government mandates that require services antithetical to the nonprofits' religious tenets.

Why is this important? Well, we tend to forget about former Maine Congressman James G. Blaine's failed 19th-century attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to refuse tax funds for religious schools. On the face of it, he's correct. Public taxes cannot pay for "religious schooling" that is religious indoctrination, and so far, 37 states have passed similar amendments against tax monies for religious schools. The typical drive around response gives money to the students, not to the schools.

But what about religious liberty? The religious liberty discussion is serious and it is real. Agree or disagree, I have a feeling religious liberty is underneath the number-crunching and the mind-numbing discussions about comparative advantages and spillover benefits, because the bottom-line question is: Who will help the poor?

I also have a feeling Romney's Mormon instincts are to have the religious community help the community directly.

I wonder if religious liberty is something Romney, who gave away something like $4 million last year, is praying about. I wonder if religious liberty is included in Obama's view from the Truman balcony.

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