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

Editorial: Laity may differ on politics, just as bishops do

NCR Editorial Staff | Oct. 10, 2012
Editorial

It was a telling coincidence (whether providential is open to question) that in the same week that Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., declared implicitly that Catholics who vote for President Barack Obama, a pro-choice politician, risked the loss of their souls, a Pew Research Center poll showed that Obama was experiencing a surge of support among Catholics.

Sometime in the not-too-distant past, Paprocki's words would have had some shock value. But the words aren't shocking, save for their imprudence, because the public has been treated to similarly over-the-top assertions from bishops repeatedly in recent years. Catholics have become numb to the rants of culture-warrior bishops. As episcopal ultimatums fail to persuade, threats also fail to threaten.

Recall that Bishop Joseph Martino, then bishop of Scranton, Pa., was hurling thunderbolts from his episcopal throne during the last presidential election, threatening to bar candidates from Communion and comparing a vote for a pro-choice candidate to an endorsement of "homicide." Not long after that election, Martino, said to be suffering an undisclosed illness, was dispatched to teach in a seminary far west of his perch in Scranton, an overwhelmingly Catholic region that went overwhelmingly for Obama.

It has been clear for some time that U.S. bishops have been unpersuasive in making the case for any number of political positions and strategies, from abortion to the death penalty. The reasons may be many, but certainly one of them is the fact that the bishops are saddled with the hypocrisy of their own behavior in the sex abuse crisis. Their version of pick-and-choose morality in the abuse crisis, relativistic in the extreme, makes it difficult for them to pronounce as moral authorities with any credibility.

Beyond that lies the simple reality that everyone knows that bishops differ, quietly and sometimes rather publicly, on the politics of issues, even those about which they agree in principle.

What is a Catholic to think when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops puts out a statement saying that Rep. Paul Ryan's budget doesn't meet the criteria for a moral document, and weeks later his home bishop, Robert C. Morlino of Madison, Wis., gives him a pass, saying, as did Paprocki, that Ryan's social philosophy and resultant politics are a matter of "prudential judgment."

That phrase has become an indispensible part of the Catholic right lexicon, an acceptably churchy dodge for those who simply can't say, "It's OK for Catholics to disagree about politics."

The Paprockis and Morlinos make a mockery of their roles as religious leaders in a complex plural democracy, but they ultimately make life easier for Catholics in two ways. They make it clear that bishops are hardly of one mind on these matters -- even on an issue as fundamental to Christians as aiding the poor. They also open up a lot of space for voter discretion when confronting difficult issues. There are always multiple political choices to solving problems, even on matters of "intrinsic evil." If bishops can disagree on how to approach problems, why can't laypeople?

Perhaps the polls are showing that Catholics, following episcopal example, find "prudential judgment" a conveniently elastic concept.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/12/2014 - 08:39*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/editorial-laity-may-differ-politics-just-bishops-do