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Editorial: Extreme voices lead to politicized church

NCR Editorial Staff | Nov. 6, 2012

When the bishops of the United States gather later this month in Baltimore for their fall meeting, they ought to take some time to ponder a simple question: Were their words and actions during the recent election season the kind of discourse that informs and persuades or did they contribute to the partisan shrillness that we hope our teachers are educating youngsters to rise above as they mature into voting citizens?

We do not yet know the outcome of the national election, but the results for the church are already well-known -- no polls necessary here. The activity of the loudest and most extreme voices in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have left us the most politicized and divided church in recent memory. They have not only done a disservice to the cause of unity, they haven't done much to advance the causes they so stridently champion.

Those members of the hierarchy -- and we're led to believe they are in the majority -- who bristle when the conference is characterized by its most extreme elements need to overcome their reticence and the unspoken rule that bishops don't argue in public. They need to let their brother bishops know that outlandish pronouncements and empty threats further diminish the hierarchy's already compromised authority.

Not one episcopal voice was raised in objection to the slanderous and absurd claims of Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, who last April compared President Barack Obama to Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Not one openly questioned the wisdom of the extreme partisan fight against health care reform, a fight, as it turns out, that was waged on the false claim that the reform would lead to federal dollars used to procure abortion. It didn't and it won't. Not one episcopal voice questioned the validity of trumped-up threats to religious liberty or of the ill-conceived "Fortnight for Freedom," which turned out to be a fortnight-long seminar on how not to organize a campaign.

The bishops are so beholden to the huge sums of money dumped on them by the Knights of Columbus (see story [1]) that they can't imagine pushing back against the political agenda of an organization led by a longtime, high-level Republican operative. And who will raise a voice asking for some prudence when the likes of Bishop Thomas Paprocki threatens "the eternal salvation" of a person's soul over a decision to vote for a given candidate who may not conform to all of the church's positions? Bishop David Ricken is another who has neatly carved out the nonnegotiables of political decision-making along thinly disguised partisan lines with a similar threat that a vote for the wrong candidate could "put your soul in jeopardy."

What will it take to make them aware that they are preaching to a small choir already convinced of their narrow and partisan view of politics while further alienating the rest?

A bumbling approach to politics is bad enough -- and some of the bishops come off as old-time ward heelers, and incompetent ones at that. Worse, however, is that those who are permitted by dint of volume and extremist language to fashion the Catholic story in the public square actually do more harm than good to the causes they espouse. Abortion is a prime example.

For decades now, the polls have shown almost the same result year in and year out. There is a small portion of

the electorate at one end of the abortion debate that wants abortion available always and without restriction. There is a small minority at the other end of the spectrum that wants to prohibit abortion in every instance, confer citizenship and property rights on fertilized eggs the moment of conception and who will allow no exceptions even in the case of rape and threats to the health of the mother.

Between those extremes -- for whom the issue of abortion is a welcome and perennial source of votes and fundraising -- lie the vast majority of people, who express ambivalence but are waiting to be persuaded of some reasonable approach to diminishing the number of abortions. They would consider placing both reasonable restrictions on the practice as well as reasonable exceptions to those restrictions. They are the people who correctly wonder how the culture can leap from the reality that science has established -- that nature itself dispenses with a high percentage of fertilized eggs, a loss that is not sacramentalized or given any official civic status -- to criminalizing a similar act when done by humans. They are the ones who may wonder if we know the mind of God so well as to be convinced beyond doubt that such a God would require a rape victim to carry a pregnancy to term or not allow an abortion in a case where mother and child would both die as a result of continuing a pregnancy. They wonder, should the law be overturned, who the criminals will be and who will be prosecuted and jailed.

At this point, the bishops can't begin to speak to that broad swath of the population. An intelligent conversation about abortion can't be conducted. The absolutes that bishops have transferred to a political program won't allow them to entertain questions except in private, and then always wary that they'll be outed as "soft" on right-to-life issues.

The results of the recent survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (see story [2]) tell us that the majority of Catholics -- even those coveted weekly-Mass-attending Catholics -- want the bishops to broaden their political focus to a wider range of social justice issues.

The bishops have become adjuncts to and enablers of those who politically benefit from the grinding polarities surrounding the abortion issue. They have been complicit in narrowing "life issues" politics to a single approach to a single issue. Experience should inform them by this point that their efforts are largely wasted. Election cycle after election cycle they've had their pockets picked of political capital only to arrive home empty-handed.

During the recent Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization in Rome, several bishops (none from this country) spoke of the need for a new sense of humility if the church hoped to engage the wider cultures. If the recent data gathered in the United States showing increasing numbers of people walking away from organized religion is at all instructive, then it is clear that fewer and fewer people are listening to religious leaders in general and bishops in particular. The Catholic church, while maintaining a stable membership number thanks to immigrants, was the biggest loser of adherents among mainline denominations. The old pomposity, the decrees from on high and threats intended to induce fear no longer work. It is time to ask what kind of evangelization, as well as political discourse, might work.

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