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Editorial: Election results show we live in a new America

NCR Editorial Staff | Nov. 7, 2012

Welcome to the new America, in which a black man wins a second term as president, in which it is no longer possible to pile up enough of a lead among whites to assure victory, in which the fastest-growing minority, Latinos (overwhelmingly Catholic), vote for their most pressing interests, ignoring the warnings by some Catholic bishops that they were endangering their very souls.

President Barack Obama's impressive win, in which he captured all but two of the states he won four years ago, was accomplished with a broad coalition of minorities [1], including Hispanics, Asians, women and young voters [2].

Strategists already are marveling at the dimension and precision of the Democrats' strategy that identified those groups, persuading them both of the cause and to get out and vote, while the punditocracy focused on "independents."

According to various exit polls, Obama received more than 55 percent of the women's vote, with women making up 54 percent of the electorate. In all, the president benefited from an 18 or 19 percent gender gap. He also received [3] 70 to 75 percent of the Hispanic vote, depending on which poll one consults, and early exit polls show he also received a majority of the Catholic vote [4] by two to three points. In polling just a few days prior to the election, the Pew organization found Catholics favored Obama 52 percent to 45 percent over challenger Mitt Romney.

The results are further evidence of the browning of America, and by extension, the Catholic church. The irony, of course, is that the very group that helps the church maintain a steady bottom line when it comes to membership is the very group that probably more than any other element pushed to victory the candidate so vociferously disparaged by a fringe group of Catholic leaders.

The contrast in images tells the story. Romney's rallies and his final event in Boston on Tuesday were overwhelmingly white. Obama's rallies and his victory celebration in Chicago were a reflection of the new America, a multi-hued, multi-ethnic reality that came into sharp focus during this election season.

That new reality has implications for both civil society and the Catholic church in the United States.

The bishops clearly need to rethink their political alliance with the Republican Party and their emphasis on making abortion and gay marriage illegal as the principle marks of Catholic identity. On the first matter, the shameless pandering to Republican talking points and budget rationale by some of the bishops further compromised the already seriously damaged moral authority of the church's leadership in this country.

The self-indulgent tantrums of some bishops -- comparing the president to Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, warning Catholics that their souls are in danger should they mark their ballots for certain candidates, grossly overstating the threat to religious liberty and playing loose with such terms as "intrinsic evil [5]" and "prudential judgment" -- become public embarrassments.

The Vatican needs to take note that some of its appointees in the episcopal ranks in this country -- a minority, to be sure, but they grab the headlines with their incendiary bombast -- make it difficult for more responsible members of the hierarchy who have to regularly deal with legislators and the White House.

The insistence by Catholic officials on measuring all political actors on whether they advocate overturning Roe vs. Wade and oppose abortion in all circumstances eliminates any opportunity to more creatively deal with making abortion rarer and, ultimately, unthinkable. The polls during the last 40 years show the bishops have not only been unsuccessful in persuading anyone but the already converted to their cause; their actions have hardened the divisions and played nicely into the political agenda of the extremes.

The bishops and such allies as the Knights of Columbus have poured untold millions [6] into fighting against referendums allowing same-sex marriage and for constitutional amendments that would define marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman.

Three states approved same-sex marriage and one turned down an attempt to narrowly define marriage on Tuesday, election results that should be instructive. Again, our religious leaders are persuading no one, and the tide of young voters and the gradual march off the political stage of an aging white population should make the future clear. Same-sex marriage in the civil realm is not perceived as a threat to conventional marriage and is, furthermore, a nonissue for those who will increasingly make up the voter population.

The ultimate question is whether the bishops will continue to define themselves as a group by what they are against or by the ways in which Catholicism, in its deepest sacramental instincts and in its richest imagination, can leaven the goodness in the culture.

A superb example of that latter occurred in Massachusetts with the defeat of a proposal [7] that would have allowed euthanasia. Everyone knows the church opposes such measures, but notably in this effort, the church did not enter the public square screaming at and scolding the wider culture. Instead, as *NCR* columnist Michael Sean Winters points out [8], the church enlisted some of its most articulate lay voices to make the case, quietly engaged other interested coalitions and persuaded enough voters to overturn the measure.

If the new America means more than a political coalition that works for one party's benefit at the moment, it is because it invites us into deeper ideas, into a communitarian as well as an individualistic sense of what it means to be Americans. That perspective also compels us to acknowledge that the vast majority of those who put themselves and their lives on the line for public service are good people seeking to effect change.

What an opportunity for the church to become a sign of unity, of healing and of common purpose.

The administration and legislators on both sides of the aisle are going to need as much encouragement as possible to pursue such ends as they face immediate and enormous challenges.

First is the fiscal cliff, which will have to dealt with before Obama is sworn in for a second term.

At the same time, the billions needed to rebuild the East Coast after Hurricane Sandy will require an infusion of federal money. The long overdue broad and deep conversation about the "new normal" in climate change and what it portends for the future in terms of infrastructure and other steps to ameliorate global warming will

require sober and non-ideological discussions. The reality of what's happening is fast catching up to the science that has been documenting climate change for years.

Our religious leaders and those who work for them could become quiet but forceful advocates for the kind of across-the-aisle cooperation that will be essential to tackling such matters as tax and budget reform, comprehensive immigration reform and increasingly urgent international questions, not least the growing use of drone warfare.

The people have spoken. The exhausting process of choosing America's top leaders has come to an end for this cycle. We are fortunate to live in a place where this regularly occurs without bloodshed. Now it is time to pitch in and do something worthy of that inspiring legacy.

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