

What Now? Bishops' Edition

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 8, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

As the results of Tuesday's elections sink in, and bishops' secretaries double check the flight reservations for their bosses headed to Baltimore for the annual plenary meeting next Monday, the bishops themselves must survey the political landscape and ask themselves how they can best manage the always tricky fault lines between politics and religion in American culture.

First and foremost, the bishops must ask themselves how political engagement does or does not advance the lived communion of Catholics. Bishops are not called to be culture warriors, but shepherds. Bishops are not called to be political surrogates, but pastors. It is difficult enough in this increasingly secular culture to preach the Gospel without tainting that preaching with the kind of aggressive partisanship that was on display in some episcopal pulpits. To be clear, and I think this is important, there were only a handful of bishops who, in the last few weeks, crossed the line. Bishops Jenky, Morlino, Paprocki, Ricken and Sheridan were the exceptions not the rule. But, they garnered the lion's share of media attention and anyone who knew nothing about the Catholic Church except what they read in the papers would assume that these men were speaking for the whole Church. They were not. Unfortunately, there is no currently acceptable mechanism for other bishops to point this out. They are loathe to criticize one another in public. But, when the bishops go into executive session next week, and the doors to the ballroom at the Baltimore Marriott close, someone on the episcopal bench needs to stand up and make two points. First, their outbursts make it much harder for Cardinal Dolan and the other leaders of the USCCB to do their job. They have to work with whoever is elected president and you can forgive the president's advisors for wondering why they should bother talking with the bishops while some of their number are comparing him to Hitler, others warn that a vote for Obama puts one's soul in jeopardy, etc. The second question is easier: How'd that work out for you? Bishops Jenky and Paprocki are in Illinois. Bishops Morlino and Ricken are in Wisconsin. Bishop Sheridan is in Colorado. Blue states all. The people in the pews were not listening or, more likely, they thought it was none of the bishops' business to tell them, in such explicit terms, how they should cast their ballots.

The fact that same sex marriage was approved in two states, and likely a third, and that an effort to ban it was turned back in a fourth state, should also garner some attention from the bishops. This was the first time that same sex marriage has been approved at the ballot box instead of in a courtroom or a legislature. I do not believe that this represents the threat to traditional marriage that many claimed. No-fault divorce killed ideas about traditional marriage in this culture over the past fifty years. Most Americans view marriage not in sacramental terms but in contractual terms, and contracts can be broken. And, as well, many advocates of same sex marriage approach the issue in terms of simple fairness, and they are not entirely wrong. I think the issue of fairness should have been engaged ten years ago, and the leaders of the Church should have backed civil unions. But, that ship has sailed. It is true that Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington State are among the more liberal states in the country, but this issue ages out demographically. Every penny spent trying to fight same sex marriage is good money going after bad.

Looking at the exit polls, the issue that dominated this election, as most elections, was the economy. Religious Liberty was not on the list. Why is that? There are a couple of reasons. First and foremost, most people do not

actually feel any threat nor do many Catholics think the contraception mandate is a big deal. It is, in fact, a big deal. Better to say, the lack of adequate conscience exemptions is a big deal. Legal precedents are consequential things. But, the bishops, generally, listen overmuch to conservative Catholic voices. The other day, while speaking with a young friend, he asked, "Why are all Catholic intellectuals lawyers? They reduce everything to a legal question, and then to an ethical question!?" This is a very, very profound point. I will not do my whole "stop reducing religion to ethics" rant here, but it should be beyond obvious that our Catholic ethical teachings are rejected by many in this culture in part because Catholic conservatives present them as self-evident, de-link them from their source in our dogmatic teachings about the person of Christ, and from the event of the Incarnation and, just so, end up invoking their own authority, or the authority of the bishop, instead of the authority of Jesus Christ. Let's be honest here. Throughout this campaign, to a paraphrase a friend, many on the Catholic Right did not preach Christ, and Him crucified, but James Madison and him justified.

Making the Catholic community aware of the deep danger of threats to religious liberty will take time. It will also require bishops to make sure that they do not turn what is a more transcendent issue into a mere partisan talking point. Every time, not most times, but every time, a bishop mentions the HHS mandate, he should mention the anti-immigration laws in Alabama and Arizona. Every time we warn about legal encroachments that worry us, let us mention how much progress has been made on the establishment clause jurisprudence in the courts the past few decades: A few decades ago, Catholic and other Christian ministries really were expected to self-secularize themselves in order to participate in government-funded social services, and that is not the case any more. Both President George W. Bush and President Obama deserve praise for their efforts on Faith-Based initiatives. I have been writing about this for some time now, but it is really, really important that we focus on the work of the Faith-Based Office which, to my mind, can help the Catholic Left and the Catholic Right come together to better address issues like poverty, health care and education. There is a logic to the faith-based initiative, a logic our country needs, a logic that both the Left and the Right need, that gets beyond the binary choice of libertarian or big government social policies.

There are deep theological issues about religious liberty as it is conceived in America that I must leave to better theological minds than mine. There is real, hard work to be done on understanding *Dignitatis Humanae*, and the internal tensions within that text. It can't be reduced to a bumper sticker or a fortnight. And, on the PR front, whoever came up with the idea of a "fortnight" should be fired.

In Massachusetts, arguably the most liberal state in the country, voters rejected an effort to legalize physician assisted suicide. It was a stunning victory. In America, once you frame an issue as one of personal choice, you almost always win, and the proponents of euthanasia tried desperately to frame the issue as one of personal choice. In a culture that routinely provides thirty foot long aisles with nothing but hair care products, or detergent options, an argument from choice usually works. How many times during the debate about same sex marriage does one hear, "People should be able to love whomever they want." Not once? NOT ONCE! I have heard a Christian pastor denounce this idea by pointing out that as Christians we are not, in fact, permitted to love whomever we want, we are called to love everyone, even our enemies! Again, the reduction of religion to ethics is at work in our flailing and unpersuasive response.

What was different in Massachusetts? How did the opaque idea of innate human dignity trump the choice arguments of the euthanasia advocates? I think the decisive moment was Mrs. Vicki Kennedy's op-ed on the subject. She put a human face on the issue, a face the people of Massachusetts loved, the face of her late husband. She recalled that his doctors gave him four months to live and he lived sixteen months after his diagnosis. She talked about what he accomplished in those six months, especially the time spent with his family. The people of the Bay State went through those last days of the Senator's life, so Mrs. Kennedy was not only recalling her own memories, but touching the chord of memory among the entire electorate. The Church went through those days too. The Church, in the person of Cardinal Sean O'Malley, declined the advice of some pro-life zelanti who wanted the Church to deny the Senator a public funeral, and castigated the cardinal for

attending. The American Life League and that crowd should ask themselves this question: Do you think Mrs. Kennedy would have been more likely or less likely to assist the Church in defeating this euthanasia ballot if the Church had taken the advice of these zealots and denied her husband a public funeral? Mrs. Kennedy was not alone. Many on the Catholic Right have spoken of E.J. Dionne and Stephen Schneck as if they were the anti-Christ during this campaign season, but both men wrote articles opposing euthanasia that received wide distribution. The bishops in Baltimore next week also need to ask themselves this question: If we continue to ban people from Catholic campus speaking engagements because of this issue or that, if we refuse to hire anyone who ever worked for a Democrat, if we refuse to dine with the Catholic Left, how can we enlist their aid, as Cardinal O'Malley did in Boston, when we might need it?

Another, deeper question the bishops might want to ask themselves: Does not the commitment to social justice on the part of so many Catholics evidence a profound love for the Gospel? And, if those same Catholics do not share the Church's teaching on this issue or that, is that the fault of the people or their teachers? Again, it is the political class, not the intrinsic dynamics of Catholic theology, that divide our Church into social justice Catholics and pro-life Catholics, as if protecting the unborn was not itself a social justice issue and as if there were no pro-life consequences from effective government programs to assist the poor. Why, why, do we let political categories into our Church???!!!

To be clear, the Church must preach the Gospel in season and out of season. The Church is not going to change its teachings on marriage because voters in four states do not share them. The issue of religious liberty is real, but it is still remote to most people and it will take a lot of education and a lot less histrionic rhetoric if we are to successfully place that issue on the national agenda. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is gained when the Church is too heavily and too obviously engaged in partisan rancor. The bishops need to find a different way of speaking to their flocks and to the culture at large. They need to speak to more than the lawyers. They need, also, to speak to those of us on the Catholic Left who love our Church just as much as those on the Catholic Right and are tired of the suggestion that we are bad Catholics because we think the Republicans just give lip service to the pro-life cause and the Democrats actually do protect programs that assist the poor. The bishops need to take seriously the rise of libertarianism: Plenty of Republicans were on the cable shows last night suggesting that the GOP needs to downplay its commitment to the pro-life cause, calling for a conservative economic policy and libertarian social policy. Cecile Richards of Planned Parenthood was claiming credit for the President's re-election, even though the President's 11 point margin among women Tuesday was less than his 17 point margin in 2008, despite the "abortion-palooza conventions" and the non-stop concern about free contraception. Ms. Richards needs to look at the math, consult the science. It was Latinos who delivered this election to Obama, not NARAL. The bishops must see "how can one not" that the Republicans talk about their income the way pro-choice women talk about their bodies, "It's mine. You can't tell me what to do with it." The instances of policies that reflect the common good are few and they are threatened by budgetary concerns, most especially entitlement programs. Call me stupid, but I think there is an obvious, anti-libertarian, pro-human dignity, very Catholic case to be made that, yes, we believe people are entitled to decent health care and a secure retirement. Entitlement "it isn't a bad word. We also believe children are entitled to be born and that a baby is not a baby just when we want to call it so.

Most of all, the bishops need to take the long view, look less at the election results in this state or that, and consider how they are to evangelize the culture we all share. Fortunately for them, they have as the current president of the conference a historian capable of taking the long view who has just returned from a synod on the New Evangelization. It is no shocker to regular readers that I am a huge fan of Cardinal Dolan. This is his moment. His job is akin to herding cats, I know. But, if anyone can help the bishops put Tuesday's results into perspective, help chart a way forward, and most of all, put the focus on Christ in His Church, not the politics or the polls, it is Cardinal Dolan. Many of his brethren are today, like the apostles in the Gospel, disturbed by the murmurings of others. With Peter, they must say when asked, "Lord to whom would we go. You have the words of eternal life." Some of them have been going with Mr. Romney these past few months. That did not work out.

Going with Mr. Obama is not the answer either! I am not advocating quietism. If anything, I think the bishops could use a bit more Dorothy Day-style radicalism. But, they must clean themselves up after some of their number dirtied them all with imprudent political forays. They must ask deep questions about the culture they are called to evangelize.

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