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In search of nonpartisan moral leadership

Morna Murray | Nov. 19, 2012 NCR Today

I am no theologian. I am a mother, wife, children's advocate, policy non-wonk (yes, I can translate public policy and legislation into plain English!), and my Labrador's walker, in various orders on any given day. I so admire my theologian friends, who understand the writings and actions of the church and can explain them to the rest of us. I don't have that kind of understanding or training.

What I can do is speak for children, particularly children living in poverty, children with special needs, children who are hungry, children without health care, children raising their siblings, children in violent neighborhoods growing up with post-traumatic stress disorder as a norm, children who need one caring adult to make it to adulthood. That's my calling, and I'm grateful. I understand it to be in keeping with my faith. I've learned, as taught by many wise and wonderful bosses, including Marian Wright Edelman [1], that "we are it. It is up to us."

I also believe that standing up for children is just as necessary as interpreting the various teachings and statements of the church. After all, who is the church? The best priests I know (and I admit "the best priests I know" is highly subjective) say it us, the laity. So we need our theologians for sure, and they do lots more than just explain -- they have been heroic leaders. I will refer to my friend Michael Sean Winters' blog to describe the critical content and context of a powerful piece written by a group of theologians and academics, "On All of Our Shoulders [2]." But we also need the regular folks who can say in their own language, "Hey, church, don't forget about this ... or that!"

On Nov. 9, I asked [3] the bishops where their voices were on children. Where was their vast political influence on Capitol Hill and in the pulpit on low-income children? I'd so love to have an answer. And I ask others to join me in that question. But I have other post-election questions, too. I don't think I'm overly focusing on this issue -- the church has made it an issue in terms of this election and others. It's time to stop rolling our eyes and speak up.

Here's an example I found difficult to believe. On Oct. 29, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia put out a statement on Hurricane Sandy [4]. In the very first sentences, the archbishop states:

> Every election year Americans argue about the scale and role of government. This year is no different. In Catholic thought, government has an important but carefully limited role, with a special stress on local accountability and ensuring public safety.

Wait a minute. Catholics believe in a carefully limited role in government, with a special stress on local accountability, etc.? Can my friends who are theologians explain this to me, because I never got that memo. The archbishop went on to praise the response of the state of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia's mayor, Michael Nutter, and the various governors and mayors of the tri-state area. But not a word about FEMA, the president's assistance in declaring states of emergency in order to free up critical federal funding for rescue and rebuilding efforts in devastated areas that resulted in the deaths of at least 121 (in the most recent account [5] I can find). The very last sentence of his statement is the only reference to those affected by the devastating storm.

I know there are many who feel bitter and resentful toward the bishops for what appear to be Republican-leaning (to put it lightly) messages, not to mention hypocrisy in terms of moral pronouncements when they have plenty to atone for in their own history. I can honestly say I am not being bitter when I ask, "What are you thinking?" We have a prominent archbishop who puts out a blatantly political statement as a mega-storm is taking over the East Coast and the presidential election is a week away. In my opinion, that's just plain wrong. I cannot imagine Jesus (or Buddha or Mohammad or Mother Teresa or any of the world's greatest spiritual leaders) issuing a politically partisan message at the outset of a superstorm. The archbishop is charged with shepherding his people, not issuing thinly veiled and oddly timed partisan messages. At least, that's my understanding.

So again, I'm no theologian. But something seems very out of whack. I'm an advocate for children. But that includes pretty much everything we have in front of us right now, from tax breaks for millionaires to climate change to immigration to the deficit to the safety net, among others. It all affects children. Shouldn't the church be a leader in developing real, common-sense and compassionate solutions on these issues as we begin a second term on which the electorate has very clearly spoken, including the majority of Catholics who voted for President Barack Obama?

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