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Editorial: Essay on Pope Francis offers way to re-enter public discourse

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

Pope Francis' relentless emphasis on the poor and his insistence that the church become a church of the poor "demand," in the words of a U.S. bishop, "a transformation of the existing Catholic political conversation in our nation."

Auxiliary Bishop Robert McElroy of San Francisco, in an important essay in the Oct. 14 issue of *America* magazine, outlines a compelling argument for recalibrating the church's involvement in the public square and the way it approaches issues important to Catholics.

McElroy's piece is perhaps as much an indication of the kind of space that Francis has opened up for discussion of issues as it is a long-overdue assessment from within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that the bishops are in need of a deeper and more consistent framework for discussing the common good than has been the case in recent years.

The transformation McElroy envisions is built on three considerations: "prioritizing the issue of poverty, focusing not only on intrinsic evils but also on structural sin, and acting with prudence when applying Catholic moral principles to specific legal enactments."

That framework grows from what he perceives as a papal call to three levels of conversion: individual, cultural and structural reform in the world.

Francis, writes McElroy, speaks "powerfully to each of us about how we let patterns of materialism captivate our lives and distort our humanity." The pope disarmingly makes us "deeply uncomfortable" in a way that allows us to "recognize and confront the alienation from our own humanity that occurs when

we seek happiness in objects rather than in relationship with God and others," McElroy writes.

He writes that the pope also seeks conversion from "the culture of comfort that makes us think only of ourselves; the culture of waste that seizes the gifts of the created order only to savor them for a moment and then discard them; and the culture of indifference that desensitizes us to the suffering of others, no matter how intense, no matter how sustained."

And finally, the pope seeks a global transformation -- in Francis' words, "a new stimulus to international activity on behalf of the poor, inspired by something more than mere goodwill, or, worse, promises which all too often have not been kept."

To be a "church for the poor," McElroy argues, the church in the United States "must elevate the issue of poverty to the very top of its political agenda, establishing poverty alongside abortion as the pre-eminent moral issues the Catholic community pursues at this moment in our nation's history."

Each of those issues, poverty and abortion, "constitute an assault on the very core of the dignity of the human person," McElroy writes.

The transformation of the political conversation must involve a "renewed focus on structural sin," which in many ways, he writes, "is actually more relevant" to the pursuit of the common good, "than sins of intrinsic evil."

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While intrinsically evil acts "are always and everywhere wrong," he writes, not all intrinsically evil acts (think adultery or blasphemy) "lie within the jurisdiction of government." The imbalance in recent years, according to McElroy, occurred when issues were broadly advanced in the political sphere on the basis of their intrinsic evil with the implicit reasoning that "intrinsically evil acts automatically have priority in the public order over all other issues of grave evil, like poverty, war, unjust immigration laws and the lack of restorative justice in the criminal justice system. This has the effect of labeling these other crucial issues of Catholic social teaching 'optional' in the minds of many Catholics."

Finally, such a transformation would also require rethinking the role of prudence, "one of the most misused elements" in Catholic political conversation in recent years, McElroy says. He sees a flaw in separating issues of "intrinsic evil," for which only one political path is possible, from other evils such as war and poverty or immigration, which are viewed as wide open for interpretation, or "prudential judgment."

"The truth is that prudence is a necessary element of any effort to advance the common good through governmental action," he writes. There is no single, absolute strategy that works to translate "the original moral principle" into law or administrative action.

Characterizing the essay by reflecting its highlights does it an injustice. It is a sophisticated and nuanced invitation to a discussion that has been glaringly lacking among U.S. bishops. It is a timely discussion for the bishops, whose ventures into the larger political discussion in recent years have unfortunately been dominated too often by the most extreme elements using language and advancing positions that end up aligning the conference with unreasonable positions from which there was little room to escape. The result has been a conference with diminishing credibility that is largely ineffective in achieving its goals in the public arena.

McElroy's approach offers a way for the church to re-enter public discourse with a full-throated defense of the common good that rises above bitter partisan divisions.

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