NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Raising the Curtain on the USCCB Mtg: Part II

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 7, 2013 Distinctly Catholic
Fall bishops' meeting 2013

Next week?s plenary session of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will be very telling. Yes, their public agenda is a ?pre-Francis? one, but this will not be the first meeting at which the real action takes place in executive session. There, the bishops face five immediate issues that warrant their attention.

First, they must address the continued failure of some of their own to live up to the norms of the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children. It is almost impossible to state how important this is and it is beyond scandalous that we are still having this discussion eleven years after the Dallas Charter was adopted. They must understand that if they do not get this issue right, nothing else matters. The People of God will not listen to spiritual and moral guidance from those who are compromised on this issue ? nor should they. When confronted with evidence of child sex abuse, bishops must suspend the priest and call the cops. Period. The fact that this did not happen in Kansas City-St. Joseph, Newark and St. Paul ? and those are the cases we know about ? is shocking. For eleven years, the USCCB has said, yes, we made mistakes in the past but now you can trust us, now our Catholic churches and ministries are the safest places in the world for children. If bishops can flout their own rules, and give the lie to the promises made at Dallas and subsequently, why should anyone trust them or see them as shepherds?

Second, as Rocco Palmo reported, there has been discussion about setting up a 501(c) 4 to help fight legislative proposals and referenda on issues of special concern to the Church such as Physician-Assisted Suicide (PAS). Anyone can understand the frustration of not having funds to fight these important campaigns, but everyone can also understand that it is the role of the laity, not the bishops, to set up a (c) 4. Too many already think the bishops act more like politicians than pastors and setting up a PAC would only confirm that. More importantly, at a time when the Holy See is focused on transparency in it?s financial operations, the cloudy issue of funding a PAC would be a counter-sign to the pope?s promise of transparency. As well, there is the little matter of the Gospel of Matthew where we are promised, ?Blest are those who are persecuted for my sake.? If a few fat cats do not want to contribute to a campaign against PAS unless their gifts are anonymous, shame on them.

Third, the USCCB is well advised to devise a more adequate response to the Vatican?s request for parish-level consultation in advance of next year?s Synod on the Family. Some bishops have already taken appropriate steps to solicit the feedback the Vatican has requested. The Archdiocese of Detroit set up a website [1]akin to that set up by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good to solicit input. Bishop Blase Cupich has published a column in both his diocesan newspaper and webpage entitled ?Taking the Pulse of the Church, [2]? in which he outlines steps to solicit parish-level input. The USCCB needs to make sure that at the end of December, the story line is not ?some bishops take Vatican request to heart while others sit on their hands.? They should, instead, commission a nationwide survey, as well as surveys of parishes with different demographics, and that way, come the end of December, they will have real social science data. Of course, some bishops do not want to see that data: It will not exactly attest to the efficacy of episcopal leadership. But, unless we have real data, any on-line survey, however unscientific, can and will be used to fill-in the gap. Only if the USCCB commissions its own survey, one that actually reflects the questions the Vatican asked about, none of which asked if the

Church?s teachings were true, but how they were experienced and lived, will the Church in the U.S. avoid another round of bad press come December.

Fourth, the bishops need to ask each other: What happens if we lose the lawsuits against the HHS contraception mandate? I touched on that in my post yesterday.

Fifth, we are told that Archbishop Cordileone will give a report on the fight against same-sex marriage. That fight is over, of course, and I wish the bishops would just pull the plug, announce that our priests will no longer sign legal documents pertaining to civil marriage, that henceforth, if the society wants to define marriage differently from the way the Church does, so be it. If you want the sacrament of matrimony, come to us. If you want what the culture understands by marriage, go to City Hall. We believe our way is the better way but the Church can only propose, and never impose, her vision. I doubt there will be criticism of +Cordileone?s committee in public session, but in executive session, someone should ask why the USCCB did not draft a version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act that would meet our concerns about conscience protection. N.B. This time, no concerns about the conscience rights of Taco Bell, please. Many commentators on the Left vociferously, and unfairly, say that those of us who oppose same sex marriage are merely acting out of bigotry. I do not believe that is true, but what has the conference done to differentiate itself from anti-gay bigots?

Of course, the biggest issue, the Mother-Church-Of-All-Issues you might say, is Pope Francis. It was adroitly pointed out that some bishops seem to be acting like the older son in the parable of the Prodigal. It is obvious that some bishops do not like the pope. In public session, we will see two examples of how the conference is dealing with the ?Francis effect.? Both the Apostolic Nuncio and USCCB President Cardinal Timothy Dolan give speeches on opening day. Remember: Tone matters. Will the nuncio insist that bishops stop criticizing the pope, whether that criticism be blunt, like Bishop Thomas Tobin saying he is ?disappointed? Francis does not spend more time talking about abortion, or the Wizard of Oz-style of Archbishop Charles Chaput, who hides behind the curtain and publishes the emails of those who feel ?betrayed? by Pope Francis. While he is speaking, I hope Archbishop Vigano will look out at his audience and ask himself how many of the bishops strike him as Pope Francis men. Not enough. And, +Vigano will know precisely how many bishops are worried about this pontificate, as will we all, when we see the vote totals for +Chaput in the balloting for the USCCB presidency.

Cardinal Dolan needs to use his address to transition the USCCB from their almost obsessive focus on same-sex marriage and the HHS mandate to the agenda articulated by Pope Francis, how to become a poor Church for the poor. No, that is not exactly right. To be clear, the bishops? conference spends a lot of time focused on poverty issues. ?It?s often a mistake to measure the Conference by actions at their General meetings,? John Carr, who worked at the USCCB for nearly twenty-five years, told me. ?The USCCB?s essential work to protect the unborn, immigrants, the poor and religious liberty is ongoing, with or without public notice. For example, the USCCB founded and leads the Circle of Protection, the most effective advocacy for the poor in budget battles. Because of its rules and bias against statements, the November agenda can offer a misleading impression of what matters in the Conference.? But, again, tone matters. The bishops are not stupid. They know that the press loves stories about culture war issues but has little interest in covering their on-going work to help the poor. And, as Bishop Robert McElroy pointed out, [3] the USCCB?s public statements have not focused as clearly on poverty as they should because of the misuse of the concept of ?intrinsic evil? in political discussions. +Dolan is well advised to use his last presidential address to point the way forward for the conference towards an agenda that may or may not be less confrontational, but which holds up the social doctrine of the Church as clearly as Pope Francis has done in these past nine months.

Over coffee and dinner and drinks, the bishops will be discussing Francis. Surely, the majority of bishops grasp the sense of excitement this pope has generated in his short time steering the Barque of Peter. There is nothing on the public agenda about a report from Cardinal Sean O?Malley on the discussions of the Council of Cardinals, but perhaps they will ask him to share his thoughts in executive session. O?Malley was a ?Pope

Francis bishop? before Francis was pope. He ?gets? Francis. His words at the Knights of Columbus convention ? ?The truth is not a wet rag that we throw in other people?s faces? ? is something they might want to hear and digest at, say, the Ad Hoc Committee on the Defense of Marriage.

To be clear, no one will say, ?We are changing course here.? There will be no mea culpas for indulging the culture wars. When the Church changes course, it always begins with the words, ?As the Church has always taught?.? This is not hypocrisy. It is a recognition of the richness of our tradition and the way different strands of that tradition come to the fore at different times. This is true in the life of the Church and it is true in the life of the individual believer. In the early Middle Ages, the Church turned to monastic life to carry on Her mission ? and to save the memory of civilization! Do we not, each of us, at times, feel the need to retreat from the hurly-burly of the world, to recoup our strength in quiet and reflection? In the face of the French Revolution, the Church needed to stand and fight and, often enough, embrace the crown of martyrdom. Do we not, each of us, find times when we feel compelled to stand and fight for our faith? But, we fight with the tools of faith: prayer, fasting, alm giving.

What is arresting about Pope Francis is that he is quite willing to be trenchant, quite willing to castigate the ways of the world and challenge them with the words of Jesus. The difference is that what gets Pope Francis ginned up is the materialism and economic injustice of the world, not whether or not a ministry of the Church belongs to some coalition which also includes groups that do not follow the Church?s moral teachings in every single regard. The pope?s first trip outside Rome, to Lampedusa, showed his priorities and also suggested that bishops can, if they wish, do things on the fly. The trip was not planned well in advance, but thrown together at the last moment, because the pope saw in the immigrants killed and nearly killed the face of Jesus. If the USCCB is catching Francis Fever like the rest of us, they might consider issuing a powerful statement on immigration, maybe pledge that each of them will visit their local Immigration Detention Centers, or go as a group to the border, as Pope Francis went to Lampedusa, and encounter the suffering Christ in the sufferings of our immigrants. These things can be done. The Pope has shown how.

Perhaps more importantly, Pope Francis engages the world with the loving touch of Jesus. The pictures yesterday of the Holy Father cradling the head of a severely deformed man, covered in boils, went viral for a reason: The images looked like the pictures we grew up with in an illustrated children?s Bible of Jesus healing lepers, yes? They recalled the pope?s namesake, Saint Francis, kissing a leper and starting a revolution within the Church. Many of the bishops do actually get out and visit the poor, the afflicted, the imprisoned. They must highlight those works of mercy. They must defend CCDH and CRS and the sisters who do the works of mercy day-in and day-out and be less precious about the conscience rights of corporations. The credibility of the Church is always, always, always, rooted in the credibility of Jesus. This is what must emerge from the meeting next week in Baltimore.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/22/2014 - 02:53*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/raising-curtain-usccb-mtg-part-ii

Links:
[1] http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2013311050029
[2] http://www.dioceseofspokane.org/bjc_2013/bjc112113.htm
[3] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/mcelroys-game-changer