

Return to consistent ethic of life? Not yet

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The U.S. bishops have come under heavy criticism from progressive Catholics and the media for not speaking out on justice issues but focusing on the culture war against abortion, gay marriage, and birth control. Critics say this is not consistent with Pope Francis' vision of a poor church for the poor.

This [complaint](#) [1] was expressed by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Catholic Democrats at a [press conference](#) [1] prior to the opening of the USCCB meeting in Baltimore this week.

The bishops respond that they have spoken out for the poor in numerous letters to Congress supporting immigration reform and opposing budget cuts in programs like food stamps (SNAP) that help the poor. The problem is that the media ignores this work.

This is one of those debates where both sides make legitimate points. It is true that the chairs of USCCB committees dealing with poverty and justice make numerous statements on poverty and immigration and that these statements are mostly ignored by the media.

But the bishops as a conference have been embarrassingly silent on economic justice during the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Last year, the conference failed to pass a document on the economy despite growing inequality and high unemployment.

Many bishops fear that speaking loudly about economic issues would help Democrats and undermine their alliance with the Republican Party on issues like gay marriage, abortion, and religious liberty. Some even think that the conference's earlier letters, "Economic Justice for All" and "The Challenge of Peace," were mistakes because they hurt their friends.

Will the new leadership of the conference make a difference?

Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York was elected three years ago because the bishops saw him as the perfect "happy warrior" in the culture wars. He could come out swinging but with such charm that no one could demonize him. Bishop Gerald Kicanas, the USCCB vice president and heir apparent, was thrown under the bus because he was seen to be a protégé of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the architect of the "Consistent Ethic of Life," which was concerned about life from the womb to the tomb.

When Cardinal Dolan was asked what the bishops might concretely do in response to the pope's vision of a poor church for the poor, he responded by saying, "I don't think we have to add anything." The first draft of my story on Dolan's press conference had the headline "Dolan says bishops have done enough for the poor," but I changed it to the more boring headline "[Dolan on poor church for the poor](#) [2]." Not only is Dolan bigger than I am, I don't think that the first headline reflected what he meant even if it was close to what he said.

Dolan went on to say that the bishops want to resist the temptation to see a new document, a new office, or a

new collection as the solution to every problem. Funny how they could not resist a new document on pornography but gave no attention to "the most serious of the evils that afflict the world," according to Pope Francis, "the old need care and companionship; the young need work."

Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, the new president, is seen by some progressives as [a pastoral bishop who has worked with the poor](#) [3]. Although not as colorful as Cardinal Dolan, Kurtz knows how to answer questions in a way that does not lead to embarrassing headlines. For example, in response to questions about a poor church for the poor, he said, "We are very much in solidarity with Pope Francis on this. ... We need not only to serve the voiceless and vulnerable but to be an advocate."

He went on to say that the bishops already do a lot on behalf of the poor. "Can we do more?" [Kurtz asked](#) [4]. "Of course we can. There's no question about that."

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the new vice president, noted that the committees of the conference have made a lot of statements on poverty. "It has not become one major statement put out in a 'once for all,' " he said. "The conference is engaged in this. It may not have the rhetorical focus that perhaps some are looking for ... But the bishops are very committed to the poor and to [responding to] the causes of poverty."

With all this talk about the poor and the vulnerable, I wondered whether the conference was moving back toward the consistent ethic of life rather than simply focusing on the so-called nonnegotiable issues of abortion, gay marriage, and birth control.

When I asked Archbishop Kurtz, he was reluctant to "categorize" the efforts of the conference in a particular way. "The conference responds to the challenges that are presented to us," he said. "I would be reluctant to fit ourselves into a category. If you look honestly at the energies of the conference we have spoken about immigration, the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of marriage, a robust religious freedom, some of those are responses to movements that are going on in the culture. But in all cases I would be reluctant to categorize them in a particular way."

Cardinal DiNardo was blunter: "We will never stand down from our defense of the human person particularly at the beginnings of life and at the end of life. That is nonnegotiable. At the same time, we always respond, as the archbishop said, to what is given to us."

The new conference leaders are clearly reluctant to embrace the "consistent ethic of life," which in the eyes of many pro-life advocates, establishes an equivalency between the protection of the unborn and issues of poverty. Those supporting the consistent ethic of life argue that antipoverty programs improve the lives of poor families while at the same time reducing the number of abortions.

The new leaders are not going to radically change the direction of the conference, although there may be a slight course correction. The culture war is still on, but we will hear more about immigration reform and the poor, but no return to the consistent ethic of life as a framework for conference action, at least not yet.

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