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Three Catholic priorities face uncertain future

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 20, 2013
Column

The morning after he signed legislation reopening the government and averting a default, President Barack Obama listed three priorities for Congress: passing the farm bill, reaching a budget deal, and enacting comprehensive immigration reform. Those three items have also been at the top of the agenda for Catholics this year.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has lobbied vigorously on all three items. In addition to the bishops, groups like Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good have published articles on all three issues in the past several months, but Catholics in Alliance's chairman, Fred Rotondaro, is not optimistic that the post-shutdown political climate will improve the chances of reaching agreement.

"Sadly, we know the president's agenda will be stalled," Rotondaro told *NCR*. "Obama has the moral necessity to push these issues with the urgency they deserve and responsible congressional Republicans need to take back their party from the extreme right wing, which is destroying American values."

Unfortunately, in their unrelenting opposition to the Obama administration's contraception mandate, which is part of the women's health provisions of the Affordable Care Act, the bishops have often joined forces with the "extreme right wing." The bishops might better be able to advance their other agenda items if they reached the conclusion other Catholic organizations, such as the Catholic Health Association, have reached: They may not like the mandate, but they can live with it.

Of the three items, the farm bill is the strangest source of controversy. Ever since Democrat Sen. George McGovern and Republican Sen. Robert Dole joined forces in the 1970s to combine in one bill legislation that governs subsidies to farmers with funding for food stamps (now known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP), the farm bill has sailed through Congress. This year, Republicans in the House demanded steep cuts in SNAP.

On June 17, the bishops' conference signed a joint letter with Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, urging the House not to cut vital programs.

"We ask that you support a Farm Bill that provides for poor and hungry people both at home and abroad, offers effective support for those who grow our food, ensures fairness to family farmers and ranchers, and promotes stewardship of the land," the letter stated. The group also specifically asked that $20 billion in cuts to SNAP be reinstated.

"Obviously the farm bill helps millions of poor households avoid hunger," said Tom Mulloy, domestic policy adviser to the bishops' conference. "But sequestration is already harming so many people. Here in the U.S., it's affordable housing, job creation and training, and education. Around the world it's access to lifesaving medicines and safety for refugees."

The effort to cut SNAP funding is part of a broader narrative -- driven by the idea that the government spends too much -- that persists even though the deficit is coming down and the number of government employees is at historic lows. Sequestration, an across-the-board reduction in spending, was originally conceived to be so draconian that it would force both parties to reach a deal, but it has become the new normal. Senate Democrats have floated the idea that they will make adjustments in entitlement programs in return for restoring some of the sequester cuts. Both parties continue to debate the possibility of overhauling the tax code, although Republican insistence that such an overhaul be revenue-neutral makes progress unlikely.

"These budget and policy discussions include big numbers," Mulloy said. "Millions and billions. Mind-boggling in some instances. How do we wrap our heads around them? We can't, and what gets lost are the people, the faces, the stories." Alas, the stories of pain and suffering on the part of the American people do not seem to capture the moral imagination of the tea party conservatives who have effectively captured control of the GOP-led House.

The bishops' conference also sent some confusing signals on the eve of the government shutdown. One letter, signed by two committee chairmen -- Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley of the Committee on Pro-life Activities, and Baltimore Archbishop William Lori of the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty -- encouraged House Republicans to attach legislation voiding the controversial contraception mandate to a "must-pass" bill reopening the government. Four days later, a different letter, signed by three committee chairmen -- Bishop Stephen Blaire of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Bishop Richard Pates of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, and Archbishop José Gomez of the Committee on Migration -- urged Congress to avert a shutdown, focusing on the harm it would cause, and leaving unmentioned any non-budgetary issues like the contraceptive mandate.

"We urge wise bipartisan leadership and moral clarity in crafting a plan to ensure the government continues to operate and meet its responsibility to protect human life and dignity, care for poor and vulnerable people at home and abroad, and advance the universal common good," the bishops wrote.

The two letters illustrated a lack of coordination by the conference leadership, and the competing priorities of different offices within the organization.

Along with opposition to the contraceptive mandate, no issue has so unified the bishops' conference in recent years as has immigration. Gomez issued a statement June 28 commending "the U.S. Senate on the vote [passing comprehensive immigration reform legislation] and for the bi-partisan cooperation displayed during the legislative process. I urge the House of Representatives to follow the U.S. Senate's lead and pass a comprehensive reform bill as soon as possible." Gomez noted his committee's opposition to some aspects of the bill, but those concerns were outweighed by the fact that, overall, the bill would be an improvement. "The status quo of our current system causes much suffering among immigrants and their families and must end," Gomez said.

The Senate passed the reform bill by a lopsided vote of 68-32.

Evidently, not all Catholic bishops are willing to push congressional Republicans on immigration reform. In a recent interview on the conservative EWTN network, Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kan., told Colleen Carroll Campbell, "What I hear from the bishops that I visit with, it's not a unanimous opinion there should be

citizenship [for undocumented workers]." Inquiring minds would like to know with which bishops Huelskamp has been meeting.

Mulloy sees a deeper level to the policy debates. "I think this is where Pope Francis can be so helpful," he said. "In words and action, Pope Francis has celebrated encounter and dialogue. He meets with everyone, talks to anyone. Those are important lessons for these policy debates. How are we striving to encounter families that rely on SNAP and understand their struggle? How are we striving to dialogue with immigrant families? How are we constantly pushing to understand the challenges that working poor families face, whose jobs pay so little that they need help to make ends meet?

"We should always be trying to encounter and dialogue with people who will bear the effects of these policy decisions," Mulloy said.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog [1].]

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