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An Accomplishment for the American Catholic Laity

Ken Briggs | Feb. 13, 2012 NCR Today

Whatever else the Obama compromise on birth control may turn out to be, it is a singular triumph of U.S. Catholic laity.

Bishops touched off the public furor by claiming that the original Obama mandate infringed on their religious rights, but the White House took its cue from the laity's acceptance and use of artificial birth control to craft a solution that has largely carried the day.

Except for the bishops who sidelined themselves by resisting the proposal and, as it were, stubbornly insisting that they still held clout.

The polls consistently have shown that a majority of Catholic citizens support the availability of means of contraception, personally and in principle. While Obama heeded the bishops' warnings that the original mandate was an intrusion, the President followed the laity's lead in deciding a proper outcome.

That's no small victory for the collective conscience of Catholic lay people. In the past, politicians tended to take directions from bishops. This policy struggle is, therefore, a departure from looking only to the top for what Catholics stand for.

The laity have come through as a religious constituency as they never have before and should celebrate the influence they've exerted, over against the hierarchy in this case.

Many bishops, along with their priests, may welcome the Obama proposal, as many in those states with similar operating procedures with regard to contraception already do, but we'll probably never know. The pressures of showing a unified front have a way of prevailing over conscience. Perhaps the solidarity is sincere and real, but it seems unlikely.

I don't like referring bishops as a undifferentiated group. It goes against my common sense to think that "the bishops" act and think as a whole. But there is rarely evidence of dissent of any kind from official positions. To all intents and purposes, they speak as one, as they're supposed to.

Intelligent, caring men inhabit the ranks of the hierarchy. Like all those involved in any corporate structures -- from drug companies to sports teams -- a premium is placed on conformity. We generally don't have access to what may be going on in the minds and hearts of participants. I believe we're the losers for that.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan was elected president of the bishops as the hoped-for figure who would be tough and high profile, setting the bishops on a course toward recovery of damage sustained during the child abuse scandals and general loss of confidence in the hierarchy.

Archbishop Dolan has been visible and tough, true to form, but the laity who disagree with his stance on artificial birth control have won the day on an important issue, leaving the archbishop to ponder the reduced

status of his office.

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