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

Why are the Catholic bishops silent on the Wisconsin recall election?

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Jun. 1, 2012 Young Voices

Wisconsin is facing a divisive recall election Tuesday. The election pits current Gov. Scott Walker against recall challenger and Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, who lost to Walker in 2010. Barrett supporters are dissatisfied with Walker's elimination of collective bargaining from many public jobs, among other issues. Walker supporters think Barrett supporters should just suck it up and deal with a governor who was elected just two years ago. The recall election is splitting neighbors, co-workers and family members. It's the talk of my home state.

Well, unless we are listening to our Catholic bishops talk. Then the recall is nowhere in the discussion.

In 2006, another issue divided the state -- the constitutional ban on gay marriage, which passed. At the time, Diocese of Madison Bishop Robert Morlino came out strongly in favor of a constitutional ban -- so much so that he had local parish priests play recordings of his teachings on the issue from the pulpit. Some in the pews cheered; many walked out before Mass was finished. What 2006 showed me is that if there is an issue a bishop is passionate about, he can do anything and everything in his power to make that known.

There is a significant campaign on the Diocese of Madison website [1] called "A Fortnight for Freedom," addressing the issue of how President Barack Obama's health care reforms might force Catholic institutions to cover women's health care needs on issues that the Diocese of Madison does not support. However, you would never know that one of the most significant gubernatorial elections in this nation's history is happening Tuesday if you were just going by the diocese's website, or even the Wisconsin Catholic Conference's website [2].

I understand it's dicey for a 501(c)(3) nonprofit like the Diocese of Madison or the WCC to advocate for a specific candidate. The WCC does provide this document [3] from 2010 on a parish's involvement in electoral politics. I'm not saying the diocese or the WCC should take a stance on whom to vote for on Tuesday. But there is a deep lacking in moral education about the main issues that this gubernatorial recall election is raising.

Where are the Catholic bishops' voices on the issue of organized labor, which has a strong history of support in Catholic social teaching? Interfaith Worker Justice provides a lot of resources on what the Roman Catholic Church has to say about the right to collectively bargain on this resource page [4].

Where are the Catholic bishops' voices on the issue of Gov. Scott Walker's revised job numbers? I'm trying to enjoy the NBA playoffs right now, and I'm getting bombarded by ads with Gov. Walker touting that his policies have created more than 33,000 new jobs in Wisconsin since he took office, even though it's sketchy at best on how he got to these revised numbers after the Department of Labor reported that Wisconsin had the most job losses in the nation since Walker took office. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, which came out in support of Walker in the election, has even been fiercely publishing reports [5] on how Walker got to these numbers, which includes mixing and matching two different data sets to work in Walker's favor. Rick Ungar, a contributor to *Forbes*, has also written extensively [6] on how in the heck Walker was able to unveil these new job numbers just a few weeks before the election that may force him to look for a new job.

One of the guidelines presented by the WCC regarding electoral politics is "to educate Catholics and others regarding the teachings of the Church and the responsibilities of its members." It seems like a perfect teaching moment to come out strongly in favor of collective bargaining and to try to shed some light on the new job numbers Walker's opponent, Barrett, has termed a bunch of fiction writing. The bishops' silence on these issues in the face of such an enormous election speaks louder than words.

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