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Bishop decries 'combative tactics' of a minority of U.S. bishops

Tom Roberts | Aug. 26, 2009

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan

Albuquerque, NM
A majority of U.S. bishops disagree with the loud tactics of some of their peers in opposing President Barack Obama?s May appearance at the University of Notre Dame, but remain silent because they do not want to engage in a public battle over the issue, according to Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, NM.

In an Aug. 12 interview at archdiocesan headquarters here with *NCR*, Sheehan took the opportunity to decry the combative tactics of what he described as a minority of U.S. bishops who spoke out against the university?s invitation and issuance of an honorary degree. Many urged the university to rescind the invitation because of Obama?s opposition to criminalizing abortion.

Sheehan said he spoke out strongly against the strategy during the bishops? meeting in June in San Antonio. According to reports from *NCR*?s John Allen at the time, some bishops said privately that they were appalled at the conduct of the most vocal opponents and others said the debate had become too narrow and partisan, but the issue was never brought up in public session. The bishops interviewed at the time commented anonymously.

In the Aug. 12 interview, Sheehan said the Catholic community risks isolating itself from the rest of the country and that refusing to talk to a politician or refusing communion because of a difference on a single issue was counterproductive. He described such actions as a ?hysterical? reaction.

The comments came in the course of an interview on a range of other topics, most of which will appear in subsequent stories in the ongoing series, In Search of the Emerging Church.

The archbishop was forceful in describing the manner in which church leaders should handle significant disagreements with elected officials. He said his approach ? whether dealing with civic officials or church members, relied heavily on collaboration, a technique he said he learned from the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago.

?I believe in collaboration,? he said. ?I worked under Cardinal Bernardin and he taught me how to collaborate,

how to consult. So I am very committed to the concept called shared responsibility. I think involving people in the process all the way along ? my priests, my lay people, I am open to talking to them, working with them. Consultation, collaboration, building bridges not burning them. And you can get so much done when you have collaboration and you build the bridge with other people, whether it?s priests or laypeople, deacons, whoever.?

Bernardin had a reputation as a reconciling force within the bishops? conference and was often called on to oversee mediation efforts in disagreements within the conference or between U.S. bishops and Rome. He also founded the Common Ground Initiative just before he died. It was an effort to establish a means for Catholics to discuss differences in a civil manner.

Sheehan said that in June he told his fellow bishops, ?I don?t feel so badly about Obama going [to Notre Dame] because he?s our president. I said we?ve gotten more done on the pro-life issue in New Mexico by talking to people that don?t agree with us on everything. We got Governor Richardson to sign off on the abolition of the death penalty for New Mexico, which he was in favor of.?

Gov. Bill Richardson, in explaining why he reversed his long-standing support for the death penalty, said he was persuaded in part by discussions with church activists and with Sheehan.

?We talked to him, and we got him on board and got the support in the legislature,? Sheehan said. ?But you know, he?s pro-abortion. So? It doesn?t mean we sit and wait, that we sit on the sides and not talk to him. We?ve done so much more by consultation and by building bridges in those areas. And then to make a big scene about Obama ? I think a lot of the enemies of the church are delighted to see all that. And I said that I think we don?t want to isolate ourselves from the rest of America by our strong views on abortion and the other things. We need to be building bridges, not burning them.?

Asked if there were any other bishops who agreed with him, he said, ?Of course, the majority.?

He was asked why none of the bishops who disagreed with the protests that dominated the news for weeks had spoken up.

?The bishops don?t want to have a battle in public with each other, but I think the majority of bishops in the country didn?t join in with that, would not be in agreement with that approach. It?s well intentioned, but we don?t lose our dignity by being strong in the belief that we have but also talking to others that don?t have our belief. We don?t lose our dignity by that,? he said.

?We?d be like the Amish, you know, kind of isolated from society, if we kept pulling back because of a single issue.?

He acknowledged the loudest voices were creating what appeared to be the Catholic position for the general public.

?Of course. I mean that?s always been the case,? he said. ?That?s news, you know.?

He said that in speaking to the other bishops he wondered aloud what was so bad about inviting Obama and giving him a degree. ?Last month,? said Sheehan, ?the pope made the president of France an honorary canon of St. John Lateran?s -- and he [President Nicolas Sarkozy] is pro-abortion, pro-gay marriage, married invalidly to an actress, and the pope did that. It doesn?t seem that [the Vatican] had quite as big a concern about this matter of Obama and Notre Dame as some of us.?

Noting that the Vatican has consistently been more positive about Obama than some of the leading critics among the U.S. bishops, Sheehan said, ?The Vatican is a little more diplomatically sensitive. But you?ve got to

have the big picture.?

He also said given Obama?s association as a young man with priests and nuns during his time as a community organizer on Chicago?s South Side that the ?issues of social justice that we teach and preach would resonate in his own work and in his own mind.?

If Sheehan disagreed with the tactics of some of his fellow bishops, he believes at least that Obama may have ?a greater awareness now of how passionately and how deeply the church people feel? about abortion. ?I think he probably had to come to grips with it in a way that, I suspect, has had a positive effect.?

He said the bishops might revisit a controversial statement on Catholic politicians but he said he opposes withholding communion based partly on the church?s own historic experience. Making reference to Giuseppi Garibaldi, who campaigned to unify Italy in the mid 1800s and who advocated abolition of the papacy, Sheehan said the church then said Catholics would be excommunicated or refused communion if they voted for him. ?Well, it didn?t work.?

?Using sanctions ? you have to be very careful about doing that.? He said he was cautioned in seminary to be very careful when even considering refusing communion to someone. ?And I?ve had occasions where I was wondering whether I should give communion to this person who had been in a quote bad marriage. I gave him communion and after Mass he came up to me and said Archbishop, I have such good news. Our marriage case was settled.? With a bit of emotion, Sheehan said, ?And if I would have refused him communion.

?You have to be very careful. The Vatican doesn?t do these big sanctions, you?re out of the church if you vote this way. They?ve tried it, it doesn?t work, and I try to learn from what the Vatican has to teach and to use that myself,? he said. ?The primary responsibility for someone receiving communion is the person himself or herself and their conscience, to come forward to receive. The priest shouldn?t be like a watchdog, looking around and finding out who?s unworthy.?

Asked if he was concerned about reaction from those who seemed to consider opposition to Obama?s appearance at Notre Dame or refusing communion to a politician who differed from the church?s view on abortion strategy as proof of orthodox Catholicism, he responded:

?I seek to teach, to teach, and not to use sanctions. To teach, to talk to people. Like I say, we got more done this year with the state legislature by connecting with people and by saying our piece in a hopefully reasonable, and not an emotional and hysterical, way. Hysterical activity doesn?t bear fruit, and there?s been some hysteria in these areas.?

Roberts is NCR editor at large.

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