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A Memo to the Bishops

A call to preach the fullness of Catholic doctrine

By Vincent Miller

As the bishops meet in Baltimore this week, the political climate and economic crisis demand they consider the effectiveness of their teaching the full range of Catholic social doctrine.

Every Catholic and every American citizen knows the Church's teaching on abortion and marriage. The same cannot be said for the rest of Catholic social teaching. This has consequences for both American public life and for the Church.

Few American citizens or politicians, including Catholics, are aware of the Church's teaching that government is necessary to serve the common good; the importance of solidarity with all of the vulnerable, not just the ones we consider innocent or worthy; and, most importantly at this hour, the fact that subsidiarity cuts both ways, limiting government intervention and demanding it when necessary.

These Catholic teachings are under fire: Glenn Beck warns millions of faithful listeners to run from any church that preaches social justice. Anti-immigrant extremists like Sheriff Joseph Arpaio are folk heroes (a textbook case of the Catholic definition of causing "scandal"). Tea Party denunciations of socialism and tyranny form public opinion on the legitimacy and scope of government. A new Republican majority in the house, led by a Catholic Speaker, plans to respond to the economic crisis by extending tax cuts for the rich and defunding health care reform ¿ which means those portions that subsidize insurance for the working poor. These profound rejections of Catholic teaching and corrosion of the common good demand an effective episcopal response, yet too often, no response at all is given.

Two recent Church statements are striking by their juxtaposition. On Nov. 3, Pope Benedict called for a committed mobilization of the laity "to study, spread and carry out the social doctrine of the Church" so that they may dedicate "themselves to the common good, especially in the more complex realms such as the world of politics." On Nov. 8, panelists from the USCCB announced that the Bishops' policy agenda was "unchanged" by the election results.

The panel comments display the USCCB's inability or unwillingness to deal with the partisan complexity of the American political context. The comments of John Carr, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, are exemplary. "Nobody talked about (the poor and vulnerable) ¿ Democrat or Republican." Carr's perennial "pox on both of your houses" rings a bit false after the massive conservative media machine and Tea Party-serving Republican candidates have been howling "socialism" against any government attempt to serve the common good for the past 18 months. It is not the Democratic Party that is demonizing those who support programs for the poor. Taking an "even-handed" tone is possible only if the USCCB washes its hands of what has actually happened.

And it has happened with their cooperation. Many bishops have cultivated a "prophetic" style of engagement on life issues and marriage. On these matters, they do not hesitate to confront policies and politicians at odds with the teaching of the Church. Politicians are named. Communion is denied. USCCB bulletin inserts and postcard campaigns are distributed.
Yet precious few bishops are willing to be as forceful on the rest of the Church's social doctrine. Callous lack of concern for the poor and unemployed; dismissals of the positive role of government in serving the common good; inflammatory scapegoating of immigrants, Muslims or the poor; none of these elicit a high-profile ecclesial challenge. Yes, of course the USCCB secretariats issue press releases and testify before Congress on a broad range of issues. Bishops and staff repeat the mantra that the Church's teaching does not conform to either party. But, absent a serious media strategy to have them be heard, these have almost no effect on public life or the faith of Catholics. The bishops are unwilling to directly confront policies and Catholic partisans who dissent on other points of social teaching.

The reality is that these aspects of Catholic teaching have been systematically sidelined by neoconservatives seeking to subordinate the Church to their own program and by a mainstream media all too willing to accept conservative framing of religion. To break through this frame, to teach the Catholic fullness of the faith with effect, the bishops must be willing to be forthright and specific in their defense of all Catholic social doctrines. Names and policies should be named here as well.

Problematically, the bishops have been painted into a corner through a reductionist use of the category of "intrinsic evil," which is applied not to the full range of intrinsic evils, but only to abortion, embryonic cell research and same-sex marriage; issues of profoundly different levels of moral gravity. On these matters they do not hesitate to wade fully into the weeds of policy language, no matter how hypothetical the connection. Other epochal moral concerns; rising poverty and wealth inequality, the shifting of the tax burden to the middle class, the details of providing universal health care coverage, forthright advocacy of dismantling government domestic policy and social safety networks; are passed over as matters of prudential concern left to politicians. They are effectively ignored.

The bishops need not reduce abortion to one issue among many in order to subject other policies to scrutiny. Putting Catholic social teaching into practice is enormously complex. It demands both teaching and exhortation from the bishops and the hard work of lay experts and politicians. This is precisely the sort of grand "service to the truth which sets us free" that Benedict outlined as the Church's social mission in Caritas in Veritate. Truth demands attention to the dignity of the human person. It also demands honest and careful constructive policies to serve the common good in a time of crisis. The latter has withered under episcopal neglect.

Much more than politics is at stake. The bishops are failing to teach the fullness of the Catholic faith to the Church as well. Both the 2007 Barna study and Robert Putnam and David Campbell's recently released American Grace find that young people who have come of age in the past two decades identify Christianity with the conservative side of the culture war and nothing more. A minority finds this appealing. The rest do not. This is one of the reasons that they are walking away from the Church in numbers that exceed the declines of the Sixties and Seventies.

Our failure to communicate the fullness of the Catholic faith to this generation deprives many of the church heritage that resonates with their deepest moral and political convictions. It also deprives them of the reasons to stay that could help them cross the bridge to other teachings they find more difficult. It deprives those who do stay of full demands of the Catholic faith.

The U.S. bishops are failing in their duty to teach the fullness of Catholic doctrine. Some attribute this to their ideological commitments, others to the difficulty of speaking effectively in the current media climate. Whatever the motivation, in a year when Sister Carol Keenan is singled out for censure and the torrent of toxic anti-government rhetoric receives no response, the perceived message is all too clear. The American public and the next generation of the Church desperately need to hear the fullness of the Church's social doctrine.

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