

**BEYOND THE NOTRE DAME BROUHAHA:
How U.S. Catholics Are Tuning Out Their Bishops
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U.S. Catholicism has had quite a lot of controversy in recent years around the issue of politicians' position on abortion. At some of the parishes where I have given retreats this past Spring, parishioners were asked to write petitions to President Barack Obama and their representatives ranging from working against re-opening the issue of third trimester abortions (Freedom of Choice Act) to reversing *Roe vs. Wade*.

Various bishops' statements--which began in earnest the last couple elections--have reached a crescendo in the decision of Notre Dame University to ask President Barack Obama to be its commencement speaker at this year's graduation ceremonies. Around Notre Dame itself these sounds are echoed in the buzz of planes flying around the campus with banners portraying aborted fetuses and the rumble of semi trucks driving South Bend streets with huge pictures of bloody fetuses covering their trailers.

The din seems to have reached the ears of the President. His statement at his press conference this week might indicate so: He called "pro-life" citizens the name they call themselves and said that his once staunch support of the Free Choice Act was "not a top priority."

While the President may be listening to the citizenry, it can be questioned if the same can be said of some U.S. bishops and the people in the pews. Despite the fact that various bishops in the Catholic Church have staked out their positions on the matter, such statements do not seem to be having much effect on "forming" the consciences of their flock. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life data showed that Catholics are less supportive of the position of such Catholic leaders and their fellow Catholics protesting than other U.S. citizens.

An early May Pew Poll showed that 50% of Catholics approve Notre Dame giving the award to the President while 48% of all U.S. citizens did so. 22% of the Catholics polled disagreed with the invitation while 3% more of all U.S. citizens, 25%, disagreed. Such data says even more about the (lack of) influence of such U.S. bishops on their "flock" than anything else. Why is this so?

I don't think the position of Catholics revealed in the Pew Poll involves any knowledge that the Vatican itself has been virtually silent on the matter, nor the fact that Pope Benedict XVI received the divorced and remarried Catholic President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, who has virtually the same position on abortion as the Protestant President, Barack Obama, of the U.S.A.

What does speak loudly to me in the Pew Poll is the data showing that more U.S. Catholics than their fellow citizens support the Notre Dame decision. This is further evidence of another issue that I have tried to raise with bishops and even Pope Benedict XVI: the question of whether their authoritative voice on this and other issues on "faith and morals" is actually being heard. I noted this in a letter a few years ago to Pope Benedict XVI. I wrote that, "with retired Bishop Francis A. Quinn, I believe that 'an overarching crisis in today's church is a crisis of faith; not faith in God, not faith in Jesus Christ, but a crisis of faith in the institutional church' (*America*, 04.07.03). When most articles in the popular press refer to issues related to decisions by the institutional leaders, a big part of any resulting crisis comes from *their inability* to communicate the faith in

credible ways that evoke response and action from the people in the pews. Much of this crisis falls on the bishops and Vatican; most [Catholics] don't know what they teach and often, if they do, it seems irrelevant."

Two years ago, again seeking dialogue with the Pope, I repeated my concern about this issue. I noted that "when I read your statements and some sources you use, you sometimes seem locked into a defensive view and are not in dialogue with current thought. As I wrote you earlier, the issue is not the relativism you rightly challenge in the West but *relevance*. As a result, your message is not engaging the hearts and minds of many sincere Catholics still seeking and open to meaning and faith."

Somehow some "official" church leaders still seem to think that, because of their "teaching authority," they speak, *de facto*, in the name of God. Whether or not this is so is up to them and theologians. What is clear, however, is that their communication is not being "received."

If the way they are teaching is getting in the way of the message, they need to do one of two things: examine whether their teaching may be wrong or whether their communication of the teaching needs changing. I personally believe that, in almost all cases, removing the fetus from the womb is wrong (and sinful). However, I have come to this conviction not because my church's leaders have told me that abortion is wrong but because my informed conscience convinces me so. My position gets affirmation when I bring my stance on non-violence to the issue human life in any form.

Increasingly, I believe, a key issue around church leaders, politicians and abortion involves *the way* the former are communicating "the truth" around the natural law and abortion that is problematic. If, in Latin, the word "obedience" (*ob-audire*) comes from "hearing" (*audire*) it's critical that our church leaders consider how the people actually "hear" their message if they want them to obey it. Since the issue is not what they say, but how they are heard, this distinction must be foremost in their minds.

Recently three experiences attest to my conclusion. The first comes from an extended conversation I had with one of the bishops who has said that voting for politicians like Barack Obama calls into question one's Catholicism. The second comes from a 2007 book, *How*, by Dov Seidman. The third can be found in Peggy Noonan's May 2-3, 2009 Saturday column in *The Wall Street Journal*. (I read her article the same day I read about the Pew Center statistics noted above; it led me to write this piece).

In December, 2008 I had a long talk with a bishop who has made it clear that he thinks a vote for someone like Barack Obama calls into question one's Catholicism. At various times during our conversation, he said something to the effect that "my priests don't respect my [teaching] authority." After hearing this enough times, I asked: "Bishop, you keep saying your priests don't respect your authority. May I respond to that?" When he said I could, I stated: "Bishop, I've just written a book on power [*The Paradox of Power: From Control to Compassion*, 2008]. In it I define power as "the ability to influence." I also define authority as 'the power to elicit respect, trust and obedience.' So, bishop, if you say that your priests do not "respect" your authority, from those definitions, the issue you have cannot be with your priests but with your *exercise* of authority." He had nothing to say in response. The issue with such church leaders is not their authority; it's the way they exercise it.

This point gets confirmation in a fine book by Dov Seidman: *How: Why HOW We Do Anything Means Everything. . . in Business (and in Life)*. Seidman is the CEO of LRN,

an organization that helps companies build ethical cultures. With the CEOs of the Catholic Church called to help build an ethical culture of life in the U.S., what he says deserves to be heard and heeded by them.

Seidman's thesis is that inspiring right conduct has a much bigger impact than trying to coerce, demand or legislate it. He believes that "There is nothing more powerful than inspirational leadership that unleashes principled behavior for a great cause." He says that what makes an organization "sustainable," is not when it insists on fiat and other such dictates aimed to control behaviors but when a group's "employees or citizens [for Catholics, the people in the pews] are propelled by values and principles to do the right things, no matter how difficult the situation." He explains: "Laws tell you what you *can* do. Values inspire in you what you *should* do. It's a leader's job to inspire in us those values." The data shows, the Vatican and our bishops are increasingly failing to inspire—at least Catholics in "the West." Whose problem is it? And is it sufficient to say the problem is found in the pews rather than the pulpits? And, furthermore, is it right to conclude that those who have not been convinced of the "official" church's stance on the issue of abortion and other such issues dealing with life and sex can be simply told, in one form or another, that they are "no longer Catholic?"

This brings me to Peggy Noonan's article. While it did not address the issue above vis-à-vis the U.S. Bishops (much less the Vatican), it did address something that resonates with the way many church leaders justify their declining authority: their stated willingness to preside over an ever-decreasing number of adherents in the name of the purity of their interpretation of truth.

The approach of a smaller but faithful church has other names: "Righter but Lighter," "Purer but Smaller," "Leaner but Cleaner." All argue for ideological purity over anything else that might want more of a balance between orthodoxy and the kind of orthopraxy that considers policies by those who may advocate legalized abortions but which actually show such other policies actually reduce abortions.

Noonan's "Declarations" piece addressed the current debate raging among many Republicans. While some argue for a broader approach, others are insisting on ideological purity. For the former the defection of Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter was a "wake-up call;" for the latter it was a matter of Party Purification. The title of the article showed where Noonan believes the Party must go: "'Shrink to Win' Isn't Much of Strategy."

Realizing that a political party is not a church like Catholicism with its basis in "faith and morals," I believe, however, that the points she makes have relevance to this issue. It also resonates with the conclusion I wrote in the second letter to the Pope I mentioned above: "I am committed to live Jesus' words in Mark's gospel: to "preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). I will not believe this means we faithful, practicing, loyal Catholics must be resigned to watch Catholicism become an ever-smaller group of 'true believers,' especially when such a kind of "faith" often mirrors historically-conditioned patterns of exclusion (i.e. "tradition") rather than the scripture's 'new creation' that is grounded in Christ's Spirit."

Noonan acknowledged the need for the Republican Party to have a clear position based on core principles. However, she argued: "Can the party, having accurately ascertained its position, and recognizing shifting terrain, institute a renewed and highly

practical tolerance for the many flavors of Republican? Can it live happily and productively with all its natural if sometimes warring constituent groups?"

Her response to her own question was a one-paragraph: "It must."

In support of her position, Noonan offered the metaphor (tired but relevant) of the "big tent." In the process, she gave it a new spin:

"A big tent is held up by tent poles. No poles, no tent. No poles, all you have is a big collapsed canvas.

"The poles that keep up the tent are the party's essential beliefs. Republicans over the next few years should define what each of their tent poles stands for. . .

"But also, the people inside can't always be kicking people out of the tent. A great party cannot live by constantly subtracting, by removing or shunning those who are not faithful to every aspect of its beliefs, or who don't accept every pole, or who are just barely fitting under the tent. Room should be made for them . . .

"In the party now there is too much ferocity, and bloody-mindedness."

I'd say her conclusion about much of the debate in Republican circles is echoed in the Notre Dame controversy as it speaks to the future relevance of U.S. Catholicism. Echoing her point regarding the GOP, I believe we need to discover another approach to abortion than ideological purity as Catholics, especially when people like me are against it (as I've noted in these pages before), but embarrassed by other official teachings such as its stance on artificial birth control and women's (non) ordination as well as the way some church leaders seem more concerned with their own authority than the way their teaching impacts their people, even on such life-and-death issues like abortion.

As I've written the Pope and said to bishops (with such thoughts falling on deaf ears), it's not an issue of the people's relativism as much as the relevance of the way the leaders are communicating. Again, as we watch the planes fly around Notre Dame and read more episcopal pronouncements about evil politicians, I believe the problem is not as much with the message; it's with the messengers. Even more: it's not what such bishops say; it's how they say it and, ultimately, how they are heard.