

COLUMNISTS

Bishops take prophetic stances

The Catholic bishops of the United States have probably endured more than their fair share of criticism from both left and right.

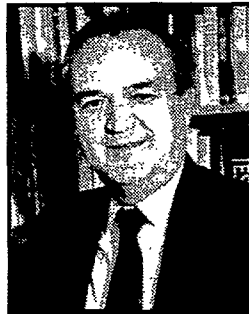
From the left, they have been accused of fiddling while Rome burns: of worrying about hidden heresies within new translations of liturgical texts, of being insensitive to the concerns of women in the church, of manifesting an almost child-like dependence on the approval of the pope and the Roman Curia for everything they say and do.

From the right, the bishops have been accused of aiding and abetting the arsonists: of washing the faith down the drain in a sea of rejected "thees" and "thous," of caving in to assorted feminist pressures, of swallowing whole the liberal politics of United States Catholic Conference staffers.

Unquestionably, the membership of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has undergone significant change over the past 15 years. Many have noted that older bishops have been promoted and newer ones appointed more on the basis of pastoral conservatism than of pastoral aptitude.

In spite of all that, the conference's center of gravity has somehow remained near the center of the spectrum, when it should have moved by now irretrievably to the right.

But the most recent national meeting of the bishops in Washington, D.C., has challenged this conventional wisdom.



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

The key moment occurred on the first day when Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, chairman of the bishops' Pro-Life Activities Committee, moved to amend the agenda in order to address "the current unprecedented dismantling by Congress of essential health care, educational and social service programs."

Instead of floundering yet one more time in prolonged and heated debate about English translations of liturgical texts (which they swiftly approved), they rose to Cardinal Mahony's challenge.

In a letter to every member of the House and Senate, the bishops called for the defeat or veto of the pending welfare legislation, which they called "fatally flawed." They objected particularly to provisions mandating family caps in welfare payments, the reduction of the earned-income tax credit by \$32 billion, measures making legal immigrants ineligible for some public benefits, and the

shifting of federal programs, by way of block grants to the states, that "protect and rescue children from abuse and neglect."

These provisions, alongside cuts in the food stamp program and Medicaid, they said, "will be devastating to poor and working families."

The bishops were especially sharp in exposing a fundamental inconsistency in the congressional majority's logic. Conservative legislators argue, on the one hand, that young women will decide against having any more children if the welfare assistance is withdrawn. But then they claim that the denial of welfare assistance will have no effect at all on an already pregnant woman's decision to have an abortion.

In his presidential address, Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore contrasted the values embodied in the Congress' budget proposals with those enunciated a month earlier by Pope John Paul II during his visit to the United States. The pope had called upon the nation "to stand up for human life and human dignity, to defend the unborn, protect the poor, care for the weak and welcome the immigrant."

"Six weeks later," Cardinal Keeler declared, "our government is considering measures which will hurt the very people our Holy Father called us to defend."

While endorsing the goals of reforming the welfare system and eliminating deficits, the cardinal argued that "the

weakest members of our society should not bear the greatest burdens."

The bishops also released a statement in observance of the 10th anniversary of their 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy, in which they pointed out that "the power and productivity of the U.S. economy sometimes seems to be leading to three nations living side by side" — the prosperous, the "squeezed" and perpetually insecure, and the desperately poor.

Political conservatives like to point out that after 60 years the welfare system has proved a failure. It hasn't eliminated poverty. Therefore, the system should be scrapped.

The bishops, in their turn, are pointing out, at least implicitly, that after more than 200 years perhaps the capitalist system itself hasn't worked. The level of productivity hasn't lifted all boats. Wealth hasn't trickled down to any great degree from the rich to the middle class and it has failed to reach the poor entirely.

We are left instead with three nations, only one of which is completely secure. Does that mean the capitalist system, too, should be scrapped?

By the time this column appears, our tiny Catholic band of richly-funded, neo-conservative writers may have "explained" why the bishops got it all wrong.

Hats off anyway to Cardinal Mahony for acting like a leader when it counted.

CORRECTION

An error was made in last week's Bingo Calendar.

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