

COLUMNISTS

Laity-hierarchy gap evident also in politics

In the decades before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) lay Catholics usually looked to the hierarchy for moral guidance on all sorts of public policy issues, like aid to parochial schools. Instances of open conflict between laity and bishops were rare.

Since the council, however, survey after survey have disclosed a widening gap between the laity and the hierarchy, not only on public policy issues, like abortion legislation, but even on issues pertaining to doctrine and discipline, like birth control, women's ordination, and clerical celibacy.

If anyone were still doubting whether there has been a significant change in the traditional relationship between Catholic laity and their hierarchy over the past few decades, the recent U.S. presidential election should have put those doubts to rest.

I should guess that the majority of Catholic bishops voted for Sen. Robert Dole in the November election (or at least did not vote for President Clinton), and that their primary reasons for doing so were President Clinton's pro-choice policies in general and his veto of the partial-birth abortion bill in particular.

We know, for example, that the retired archbishop of New Orleans held a press conference just before the election and announced that it would be a "sin" for a Catholic to vote for President Clinton and for the Democratic candidate



essays in
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BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

for the U.S. Senate in Louisiana, a Catholic woman who is pro-choice. President Clinton carried Louisiana, and Mary Landrieu won her Senate race, albeit by a slim margin.

But the national statistics are even more telling. While white Protestants were voting for Sen. Dole by a margin of 53 percent to 36 percent (with 10 percent for Perot), Catholics were voting for President Clinton by an opposite margin: 53 percent to 37 percent (with 9 percent for Perot).

In fact, the margin of Catholic support for Mr. Clinton actually increased over 1992, when many Catholics in the so-called "Reagan Democrats" category returned to the Democratic fold. That year 44 percent of Catholic voters cast their ballots for candidate Clinton, while 35 percent voted to reelect President George Bush (20 percent voted for Perot).

These figures are all the more striking when compared with Catholic voting patterns during the previous decade.

In 1980 Catholics voted for candidate Ronald Reagan over President Jimmy Carter by a margin of 50 percent to 42 percent (with 7 percent for Independent candidate John Anderson). Four years later Catholic defections to the Republicans increased. Fifty-four percent of Catholic voters supported President Reagan's reelection, while 45 percent supported former Vice President Walter Mondale.

Although the margin tightened in 1988, the Republicans held onto the majority of Catholic voters, even with a relatively weak Democratic campaign. Fifty-two percent of Catholic voters supported Vice President Bush, while 47 percent supported Gov. Michael Dukakis.

Why the turnaround in 1992 and again in 1996? In a word: the economy.

In 1992 voters were unhappy with the economic condition of the country and with what they perceived to be President Bush's failure to recognize the problem or his lack of ideas for doing something about it.

In 1996 Catholic voters supported Mr. Clinton's bid for a second term by an even larger margin than was registered by the nation at large (which went for Clinton over Dole by 49 percent to 41 percent). Like most of the voters, pro-Clinton Catholics felt that they were indeed "better off" today than they were four years ago.

What is clear from all this is that Catholics, like most Americans, vote for or against a candidate for president in

peace-time mainly on the basis of the economy and their own place within it.

Only a tiny minority of voters, including Catholics, votes for or against a presidential candidate on the basis of issues like abortion.

It should be noted that the gap between laity and hierarchy in the political sphere is even greater when one focuses on Catholic women.

On the one hand, President Clinton lost the national male vote by a margin of 44 percent to 43 percent (the gap is even higher if one excludes African-American males, who voted overwhelmingly for the president). But Clinton won the support of female voters by a margin of 54 percent to 38 percent. A large percentage of that support came from Catholic women.

On the day of his renomination as speaker by his Republican colleagues in the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich admitted that he had made some serious mistakes during the previous Congress and then declared the end of the era of confrontation and the beginning of the era of cooperation and collaboration.

It is a declaration worth applying to the church as well, especially as the gap between laity and hierarchy continues to widen. But as in politics, the rank-and-file can't do it on their own. The leadership has to help make it happen.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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