

COLUMNISTS

Political guidelines need more bite

Bishop James T. McHugh of Camden, N.J., is one of the most thoughtful and politically astute Catholic leaders in the United States. In a commentary on the 1996 election, published in *First Things*, Bishop McHugh proposed several reforms in the way the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and its public policy agency, the United States Catholic Conference, approach the next presidential election cycle.

The reforms are necessary for a very simple reason — the current system just isn't working.

That conclusion is unavoidable on any reasonable analysis of the 1996 election. A year before the voting, the bishops issued a lengthy statement on political responsibility. Some 500,000 copies were circulated in early 1996, and an update was sent to all bishops in September, urging them to heighten the moral dimension of various campaign issues.

Concurrently, the bishops were engaged in an unprecedented public confrontation with the Clinton administration over the president's veto of the partial-birth abortion ban. The bishops' conference, quite properly, does not endorse candidates. But by Nov. 6, 1996, the stakes in the contest between the bishops and the president had been made unmistakably clear to anyone paying attention. A line had been drawn, and the president had flagrantly crossed



the catholic difference

BY GEORGE WEIGEL

it. The results? Amid the lowest voter turnout since the Coolidge/Davis/LaFollette contest in 1924, 53 percent of the Catholic vote went to President Clinton, up from 44 percent in 1992.

There is no single explanation for this dramatic rebuff of the bishops by Catholic voters, but Bishop McHugh is surely right in arguing that the bishops' message is not getting through clearly enough. His reform proposals deserve serious attention:

- The "political responsibility" statement for the election in 2000 should be shorter, should make clear that there is a hierarchy of issues in the bishops' concerns and should be debated and approved by the bishops' conference as a whole, rather than being a product of the conference staff.

Bishop McHugh adds that the next statement should "... take a tone of moral forcefulness and give Catholics more pointed advice on how to measure candidates in light of their positions. The statement should also explain clearly why Catholics should refuse to vote for those who fail in personal integrity or who hold positions contrary to the moral teaching set forth in the document."

Some issues, as Bishop McHugh writes, are "fundamental and non-negotiable," and "some positions are so much at variance with Catholic teaching that candidates holding them are disqualified from Catholic support."

Which is to say that a statement in 2000 that lumps together several dozen issues without indicating any priority among them is not going to cut through the static of American political chatter and make the needed moral arguments. The bishops should identify certain thresholds that any candidate must be expected to cross in order to deserve a Catholic's vote.

- Issuing this kind of forceful, sharp-edged statement is going to require some changes in the approach to public advocacy taken by the bishops' legal counsel. Bishop McHugh describes the problem, perhaps, too gently: "The bishops have been given an excessively cautious interpretation of what Catholic entities may do" in addressing the moral dimension

of the policy debate. In the fall of 1996, for example, the bishops' legal counsel disallowed "written or spoken references critical of President Clinton's support for partial-birth abortion ... on the grounds that such criticism might give the perception of involvement in (IRS-)prohibited political activity (by a nonprofit organization)."

This is not, frankly, "excessive caution." It is legal and political cowardice, based on a pusillanimous fear that the IRS will, somehow, challenge the church's tax-exempt status if the bishops' conference does what Jesse Jackson and Planned Parenthood do.

And if the IRS did threaten decertification? Well, then, the proper response would be, "See you in court." No administration in its right mind is going to take responsibility for a lawsuit in which the U.S. government challenges the tax exemption of institutions representing one-quarter of the population.

Clearer moral instruction, issue-prioritizing, identification of basic moral/political thresholds and a legal office that functions as a facilitator of the bishops' public moral role rather than as a muzzle — these are the McHugh reforms. They ought to be acted on, promptly.

George Weigel is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

Kids' Answers from page 11

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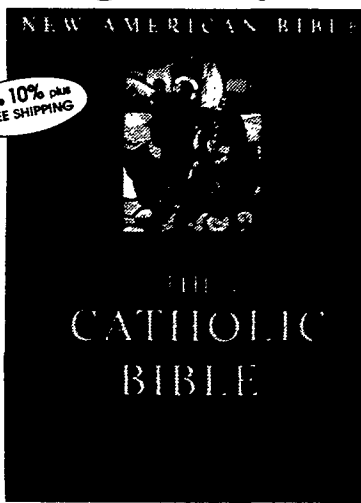
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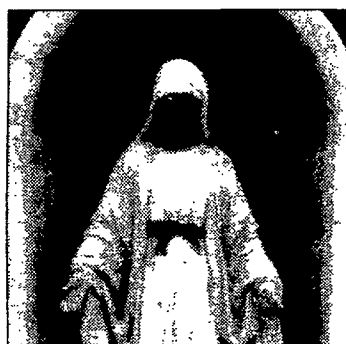
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<p>HEBREWS READING GUIDE</p> <p>At a Glance</p> <p>1. Hebrews is a letter to the Christians in Rome who were being persecuted for their faith.</p> <p>2. The author of Hebrews is unknown, but he was a Jewish Christian who had been a Pharisee and a teacher of the law.</p> <p>3. The author of Hebrews is writing to encourage the Christians in Rome to remain faithful to their faith in Jesus Christ, even if it means being persecuted.</p> <p>4. The author of Hebrews is writing to encourage the Christians in Rome to remain faithful to their faith in Jesus Christ, even if it means being persecuted.</p>	<p>Questions for Discussion or Reflection</p> <p>1. How does the author of Hebrews describe the faith of the Christians in Rome?</p> <p>2. Why does the author of Hebrews describe the faith of the Christians in Rome as "faith in Jesus Christ"?</p> <p>3. How does the author of Hebrews describe the faith of the Christians in Rome as "faith in Jesus Christ"?</p> <p>4. How does the author of Hebrews describe the faith of the Christians in Rome as "faith in Jesus Christ"?</p>	<p>Differences between the Two Major Divisions of Genesis</p> <p>Genesis 1-11</p> <p>Genesis 12-50</p> <p>1. The first division of Genesis (Genesis 1-11) is the "Primeval History" and the second division (Genesis 12-50) is the "Patriarchal History."</p> <p>2. The first division of Genesis (Genesis 1-11) is the "Primeval History" and the second division (Genesis 12-50) is the "Patriarchal History."</p>

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