

After You, Father
by DAN SAVAGE

http://www.thestranger.com/blog/2006/11/after_you_father.php

U.S. Bishops Adopt Guidelines on Gays

Hm. Celibacy. Doesn't the Catholic Church in the United States have a wee credibility problem where celibacy is concerned? Considering the inability of the Catholic Church to keep its own priests celibate, I don't think the sour-faced U.S. Bishops seen above are really going to have much luck with rank-and-file gay and lesbian Catholics, to say nothing of gay and lesbian non-Catholics.

Like most gay and lesbian readers of the New York Times, seeing today's headline about the U.S. Bishops' unwelcome, unsolicited plans for my life (loneliness, misery, and lifetime of sexual frustration—sign me up!), only reminded me of this headline from yesterday's NYT:

New York Priest's Sex-Abuse Trial Begins, in Pennsylvania

Celibacy? Get your priests to honor their own vows of celibacy and then maybe—maybe—we'll consider contemplating your advice for us. (We'll still reject it, of course, but we'll contemplate it.) Until that blessed day arrives, well, let's just say my first impulse on reading the story in the New York Times today was not to call my boyfriend and break up. I laughed—and not just at your proscriptions for gays and lesbians.

The guidelines welcome gay people, but they also affirm church teachings that “homosexual inclinations” are inherently disordered. While having such inclinations is not sinful, gay sexual activity is, according to the core teachings. The guidelines, called “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination,” passed by a vote of 194 to 37. They also speak out against same-sex marriage and adoptions by gay men and lesbians....

The bishops also adopted “Married Love and the Gift of Life,” which is meant to explain church teachings about contraception for engaged and young married couples.

The document asserts that artificial contraception introduces a “false note” into a marriage and has led to a decline in respect for life in society. Catholics use birth control to the same extent as other Americans; only 4 percent, the document said, use natural planning, the type of birth control backed by the church.

Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kan., said on Monday that gay Catholics who are not celibate and married Catholics who use artificial contraception should not receive Holy Communion.

Wow! How can I ever thank you guys for linking your sex-phobic, ill-informed, thoroughly-backwards and completely idiotic gay bashing with your equally sex-phobic, ill-informed, thoroughly-backwards straight bashing? By tackling both issues at once, by linking homosexual activity and heterosexual activity like this, you all have demonstrate that your issue isn't really with homosexual sex, per se, but sex, period. And, I'm sorry, but your credibility on contraception isn't much better than your cred on gay sex. Ask the average straight American Catholic what a priest might recommend as a birth control method and you're likely to hear, “Come on the altar boy, not in him.”

And did you catch that, U.S. Bishops? Only 4% of straight married Catholics use “natural planning.” Do you really intend to deny Communion to 96% of American Catholics? Are you double agents working on behalf of the Lutheran Church or what? Are you trying to make Protestants of us all?

And speaking of “natural planning,” I guess the U.S. Bishops missed the big news about how many fertilized eggs—you know, human beings with souls and shit—wind up dying as a result of “natural family planning.” Also from the NYT:

A philosopher in Britain has ruffled feathers on both sides of the Atlantic by suggesting that the rhythm method of contraception may increase the risk of early embryonic death.

Luc Bovens, a philosopher at the London School of Economics, argues in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* that couples who try to prevent pregnancy by avoiding sex during the woman’s most fertile time of month may be more likely to produce embryos that do not develop or implant in the womb.

If this is correct, he writes, then “millions of rhythm method cycles per year globally depend for their success on massive embryonic death.”

Are Bible Stories "Myths"?

November 13th, 2006 by catholicisensibility

I would like to post part of Fr John Breck's latest "Life in Christ" [column](#). Fr Breck suggests that the Bible does reflect "certain universal mythical themes," but claims that these themes have been "transformed by the essentially historical interest of its various authors." While Bible stories must reflect some "kernel" of historical reality in contrast to other "myths," the use of mythical themes shows that the biblical writers' concern was not merely to tell us "what really happened." The writers, inspired by God, do not mean to communicate what is definitively past and gone, but rather what must be reactualized to be spiritually experienced once more in the immediate present. If this intention sounds rather opaque, please forgive my brief summary and read these paragraphs:

This primary concern of the biblical authors led them to modify traditional mythical motifs in very significant ways. Most importantly, the chief actor or subject of the biblical writings is God, rather than multiple gods, a hero or a king. As with much ancient mythology, Israel's popular stories are often etiological: that is, they explain the occurrence of specific actions or things in the life of the nation such as ritual celebrations or natural phenomena (the autumnal New Year festival, for example, or the pillar of salt, Genesis 19:26). In any case, the presumed historical events behind these accounts are presented in such a way as to offer a theological interpretation of those events. A good example is the Exodus tradition(s) [compare Exodus 1-15 with Psalms 77/78 and 80/81]. Here, underlying mythical elements (conflict, destruction, rebirth) have been reshaped to proclaim through the written account the truth of God's saving activity in and for His people Israel. The result is a ritual retelling, and thus a reactualization, of what actually occurred in the framework of Israel's salvation history.

We take it for granted that historiography will record for us an accurate picture of "what really happened," events that are demonstrably factual. To the Israelites, however, the aim of written "history" is not primarily to record facts or provide a record of actual past events. Their sagas, for example, convey above all theological and spiritual meaning for the present. Those epic stories (e.g., of Noah or the Patriarchs) are built on an indispensable, if irrecoverable, kernel of historical reality. Their true significance, however, lies in their ability to relate that past event to the present life of the people. History for the ancient Israelites is meaningful only to the extent that it is living history, extending, as it were, from the past into the present life of the people. Accordingly, the Hebrew concept of "remembrance" signifies reactualization: to remember the past is to experience its conditions and challenges in the immediate present.

This perspective is troubling to many people because it seems to throw into question the "historicity," the historical reality, of much of the biblical tradition. Yet the reason it does so is because we misunderstand the true meaning and function of myth. In today's parlance, the term myth implies "fable," "folklore" or

"legend": a story with no historical underpinnings that serves to convey a moral lesson or simply to amuse. Applied to Scripture, however, the term myth properly describes a tradition that uses human language and images to express the ineffable interaction between the immanent and the transcendent, between God and His human creatures. The myth, rooted in actual historical occurrence, interprets that occurrence (an element of salvation history) so as to convey its meaning for us in our own life and experience. This does not mean that we have to call into question the historical grounding of that event. It means, rather, that the ultimate significance of an event lies less in its being a fact of the past than in its continuing influence in our life and faith today.

To give an example, the accounts of Jesus' birth (which differ considerably between Matthew and Luke) clearly reflect ancient traditional, and arguably mythical, themes. These include the appearance of the star (the heavenly portent), the Magi and angelic host (representing powers of earth and heaven), even the virgin birth (a phenomenon not limited to the Gospels). This does not mean, however, that those accounts are to be dismissed as non-historical. It means, rather, that what is historical is interpreted by the very shape of the stories, so as to proclaim the gospel. The meaning expressed by those canonical stories is unique. It was unique for the earliest followers of Jesus, and it remains unique for us today, as a promise of God's full presence in the person and future ministry of the Christ-child.

ARCC spot LIGHT (commentary on current issues in the Church for members of ARCC provided by the ARCC Publications Committee, R. Schutzius, ed.)

Unsolicited Advice to the Bishops

The United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is meeting now in D.C. and it is rumored that a change in priorities is on the agenda. Who would question the wisdom of this? Not that this would ever occur, but suppose, just suppose, that you had 15 minutes to deliver a layperson's perspective on this project and could give some advice. Here a few thoughts that ARCC would offer:

Dear Bishops,

1. You asked for this job, you worked and prayed for it, and you got it. Now live with it. Don't moan and groan about the difficulties and criticisms involved. They are part of the job.
2. You owe your people an explanation for the decisions that stem from your own personal convictions. Reference to authority is not enough. As Pope Benedict XVI said at Regensburg, Faith and Reason go hand in hand. If you cannot support your decisions by reason and common sense, there is a good chance you are wrong.
3. Always make it a point to consult with your people in the pews (not just your hand-picked consultants). Know the *sensus fidelium* (opinion of the faithful). You cannot teach us, if you don't know what we know or do not know, or how we are thinking. The Spirit speaks to all of us. It is also important that we know that you have asked, and heard what we have to say.
4. You are spiritual leaders, not political, not financial, not military, or psychological, but spiritual leaders. You should know about these things as we do, but lead us spiritually and trust us to respond according to our expertise. If you were not such legal owners/managers/controllers of our Churches you would have less fear and be better able to provide due process.
5. Respect is due your office, but as persons you must earn respect like everyone else. Respect your people and their willingness, qualifications, and intention to help.
6. If you are open and accountable, we will respond.

Maybe you have some suggestions of your own that you might offer. Here is your chance to add your thoughts. ARCC is listening - rschutz1@prodigy.net

Thank you for your support. Please encourage your friends to join the ASSOCIATION FOR THE RIGHTS OF CATHOLICS IN THE CHURCH at <http://arccsites.org>

Don't forget ARCC's hotline 877-700-ARCC

Some simple and genius revelations, made by students

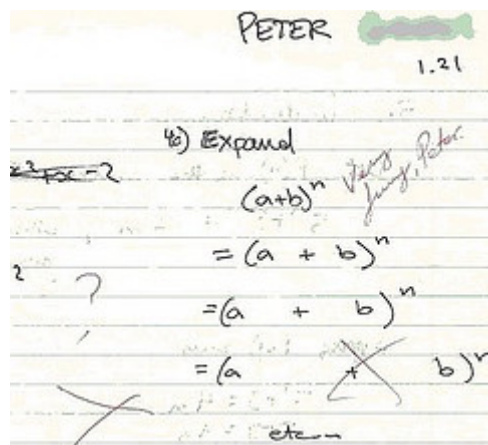
$$\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2} = \sqrt{\quad}$$

Teacher: "Who can tell me what 7 times 6 is?"

Student: "It's 42!"

Teacher: "Very good! - And who can tell me what 6 times 7 is?"

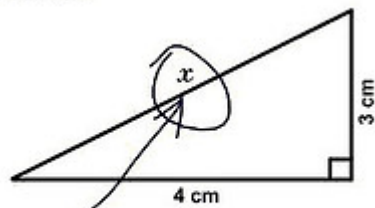
Same student: "It's 24!"



Teacher: What is $2k + k$?

Student: 3000!

3. Find x .



Here it is

Solving equation by one Blendie:

$$\frac{1}{n} \sin x = ?$$

$$\frac{1}{n} \cancel{\sin} x =$$

$$six = 6$$

One day, Jesus said to his disciples: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like $3x^2 + 8x - 9$."
A man who had just joined the disciples looked very confused and asked Peter: "What, on Earth, does he mean by that?"
Peter replied: "Don't worry - it's just another one of his parables."

Jen McCoy / Daily Register (Wisconsin)

The booming voice of Bishop Robert Morlino permeated the air Sunday within St. Mary's Catholic Church in Portage. Morlino's recorded 14-minute address permeated the silence of the church and the congregation quietly listened as his voice came through the public address system. The message was heard by parishioners across the region Sunday after Morlino made the recording mandatory for churches to play in the 11 counties under his watch.

Some parish members left the building Sunday — as they had at previous Masses this weekend — as the recording started to play in lieu of a traditional priest homily.

Morlino said that there is a "big challenge" facing the Catholic church regarding three issues on the Nov. 7 ballot; a proposed state Constitutional amendment banning civil unions for straight and gay couples, an advisory referendum on the death penalty and stem cell research.

He addressed each of the issues as "universal truths, based on reason alone," not as Catholic doctrine. "Politicians from both parties... are causing confusion to people of good will about natural law," Morlino said. "The nicest thing I can say in church is that it is baloney. No one has the right to redefine marriage." On the live recording, taken from a Nov. 5 speech Morlino gave at his church in Madison, a woman laughed in apparent agreement when he referred to opposing views as "baloney."

"Thanks Ruth... I appreciate the support," Morlino said.

Prior to Sunday, Morlino had sent a letter to priests in the Madison Diocese ordering them to play his message at church before the Nov. 7 election. Any dissent from area priests about playing the recording, verbal or non-verbal, "will be considered by myself as an act of disobedience, which could have serious consequences," Morlino said.

Jim and Colleen Murphy, members of St. Mary's Catholic Church for 11 years, said that Morlino's warning was "primal, threatening and a little bit dictatorial."

The couple said they both will vote on Tuesday.

"I wanted to hear what he had to say and it unfortunately reinforced that my church might be out of touch," Murphy said.

Morlino said that anyone who causes "confusion" on the issues should have "a millstone tied around his neck and be tossed in to the sea whenever they cause another to sin."

Murphy said that the numerous references to millstones "sounded rather capital to me."

Prior to the recording, Father Jim Murphy read from Mark 12:28-34, where it states that the most important Biblical commandments are to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul... The second is this: Love thy neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

Ironically, the specific reading was scheduled by the Catholic church, it was not chosen by Father Murphy.

Mark Curran, a member of St. Mary's for 26 years, said that he did not see a contradiction between "loving thy neighbor" and a "yes" vote on the civil union amendment, which opponents say is contradictory. Curran said that he did not think Morlino's message was mixing religion and politics. "I don't think he was talking politics, he was giving us the church's feelings in areas where there is confusion," Curran said. "It's statements about your faith, he said nothing about (voting for) a certain candidate."

Anne Curran, daughter of Mark, recently turned 18 and said that she was planning to vote for the first time. Mark said he also plans to vote on Tuesday.

"I thought it was really good because it brought light to understanding what the church believes," Anne said.

"Tired" of the media on the issues, Morlino said that reinstating the death penalty in Wisconsin would heighten the "climate of violence and terrorism" in society.

Morlino added that continuing stem cell research in the state would be done in the interest of money.

"There is a common interest in our state because there are big bucks in this for somebody and that's scandalous," Morlino said. "Jesus was a pre-embryo, you and I were embryos once just like Jesus."

During the entirety of the Morlino speech, Father Murphy sat with his head bowed and hands folded in front of the parish. After the recording, Mass continued on as normal.

Morlino's stance on the death penalty did not spark much discussion outside of church, but stem cell research and the church's support of a civil union ban did.

Jim said the church's stance on gay marriage may have strayed from some of its teachings.

"They're not very empathetic to all of God's children," Jim said. "There are still so many questions in and around the amendment. I don't think people realize that it affects straight and gay people."

Both Jim and Colleen said that they are tired of politicians using "guns, God and gay people as wedge issues to energize conservative voter turnout."

"I think his (Morlino) Jesus and my Jesus are not the same guy," Colleen said. "I feel uncomfortable with the church telling me how to vote. I'm getting bombarded enough on TV and I come here to be spiritually fulfilled, not given a political message."

The Currans plan to vote in accordance with Morlino's sentiments.

"He (Morlino) is not secular. There is a huge difference between secular and religious people and there is confusion between government and religion," Curran said.

He said he agrees with the separation of church and state and that Morlino's message did not cross into politics because what the Catholic church believes is what the church is about.

All five of Wisconsin's bishops support a constitutional ban on civil unions and oppose the death penalty, but only one other Wisconsin bishop — Green Bay Bishop David Zubik — has recorded a message and required churches to play it during Mass.

Milwaukee Archbishop Timothy Dolan wrote a guest column in October by Rev. Bryan Massingale in the Catholic Herald that urged Catholics to reject a constitutional ban on civil unions, according to the Wisconsin State Journal. Dolan is the publisher of the paper.

jmccoy@capitalnewspapers.com

Chris Thomas: Priests and laity deserve better than treatment received from Bishop Morlino

A letter to the editor

Dear Editor: Many of us in the Diocese of Madison have heavy hearts this week.

I understand that our bishop is intent on educating his people on the issues of family, stem cell research and the death penalty. That is his right and his duty. Each of these topics, however, deserves deep study and great soul-searching.

The very pat and glib ("baloney") manner in which our bishop expressed his views leads any thinking person to wonder whether he has really struggled to probe the realities of these topics. Many of this diocese's priests and lay people have likely formulated a far more nuanced view than that of Bishop Morlino on the topics presented.

I deeply resent being told to base my vote on the views of my bishop rather than on the conclusions that I have come to as a result of my own lived experience and thoughtful study of Jesus' mandate to above all else "Love one another as I have loved you."

Even more troubling to me is the fact that our priests are not allowed to express any of their own insights into these topics. How can a church survive and thrive if there is no give and take of ideas, no shared struggle to weigh the pros and cons, not even any recognition of the Catholic Church's bedrock teaching on primacy of conscience?

At least we laity can form our opinions and openly share them with others. Our priests, people who spend their lives dealing pastorally with their parishioners, likely have much insight into these areas but are told they may not express any disagreement with this bishop's teaching, under threat of "serious consequences."

How disrespectful. How demeaning. How unlike the way in which Jesus must have related to others.

I speak for many who are appalled by the events and edicts of this past week. We can only hope and pray that God's spirit will bring some unexpected good out of such unfortunate circumstances.

Chris Thomas
Madison

Published: November 8, 2006
The Capital Times
Madison WI

The Catholic governor of North Carolina, Mike Easley, spoke last week at Notre Dame.

Some snips:

My mother always insisted I go to mass every Sunday. "Even if you are not getting anything out of it, she said, you are putting something in." Now, years later, those so very early Sunday masses and so very long sermons are part of who I am.

To the extent that our values guide our policy, and our religion influences our values, then our religious faith guides that policy as well.

However, this is not a violation of the constitutional provisions regarding separation of church and state. We are not required to separate morality from policy. To the contrary, it is quite natural and appropriate to navigate public policy with our own internal moral compass.

But, I am very uncomfortable when I hear politicians invoke the Almighty for their own purposes. How often have each of us been offended to hear the name of God invoked to demean and even hurt people who do not see the world as we do. Such talk diminishes religion and turns people off.

It is better to remember the words of my patron saint, St. Francis of Assisi, who said, "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words."

St. Francis reminds us that action and deed are what really matter.

When I was born in North Carolina in 1950, we had 22,000 Catholics, about the same percentage of fans

who will be wearing Carolina blue at the game tomorrow. And we probably were not any more popular than the visitors at the Notre Dame stadium.

While my parents made certain that all seven of their children practiced our faith, it was not an issue that we discussed a lot in public. I remember JFK running for president in 1960 and I was 9 years old at my dad's tobacco warehouse. We handed out cards for Kennedy often to hear, "Sorry, I ain't got much use for them Catholics."

I learned very early to work by deed rather than to preach the benefits of Catholicism to a warehouse full of farmers who did not fully appreciate the Pope. But I think they do appreciate much of what the church has to say.

Twenty years ago the U.S. Bishops shared their thoughts on the economy in a pastoral letter titled "Economic Justice for All." They discussed how we need broader social commitment to the economic good. The moral role of government, in their view, is to protect human rights and secure justice for all.

Okay, who can argue with that? But we have to put these words into action. Politics is one way to do that.

Benedict XVI said this in his first encyclical, that politics is needed for justice.

There is one theme upon which most major religions agree. In my faith, it is best explained as, "Whatever you do to the least of these, that you do unto me."

The political debate over this policy is not whether we help the least of these, but how, and how much.

The objective is clear. It is to set the right policy, one that helps all people reach their full potential so that they can make full use of their God-given talents. But, getting the policy right is only part of the job.

The other part, and often the most difficult, is building a consensus that will put those policies into action.

Governors must execute the laws. By the nature of our jobs, we have to get things done. We have to be more than an advocate or a strong voice. We have to produce.

We have to not only make the speeches, but also make the decisions and actually implement those things that we deem good public policy. Again, as St. Francis reminds us, the words are hollow without the action.

Articulating a grand vision is of no value if not followed with the planning, strategy and resources it takes to make the vision a reality. Leadership requires that populist rhetoric give way to consensus building.

Statement of Women's Ordination Conference
on the meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

WASHINGTON, DC — The Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) is profoundly disturbed by the focus of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in Baltimore. At a time when it is clear that celibate male priests will not be able to meet the physical and spiritual needs of U.S. Catholics, some bishops have penalized women who are taking action to address these needs by being ordained in valid but illicit Roman Catholic ceremonies. Instead of listening to the concerns of U.S. Catholics, the bishops will address arcane issues, which will continue to erode their moral authority and relevance.

Since the bishops will not address women's full equality in ministry including ordination, we urge them to consider the opinions of the majority of U.S. Catholics regarding the topics that they will discuss that concern women.

We denounce the creation of a directory for music and liturgy, which would establish a group of “doctrinally correct” hymns, require a bishop to sign off on all new songs, and remove all feminine pronouns and imagery for God. The use of non-sexist language and imagery is important because it allows women to live out our spirituality in a way that reflects the fact that both women and men are created in the image of God, as stated in Genesis 1:27. Taking out inclusive language and female imagery for God makes women invisible in our spiritual home. As Sr. Joan Chittister recently stated, “Women are always considered essentially the same as men when (the hierarchy) chooses pronouns, but always essentially different when they choose leaders.”

WOC represents the majority of U.S. Catholics who support women’s ordination to a renewed priesthood. A 2006 National Catholic Reporter survey of U.S. Catholics found that 62% of respondents support ordaining women as priests, and 81% support ordaining women as deacons. An Associated Press/Ipsos poll conducted in April 2005 found that 64% of U.S. Catholics support women’s ordination.

###

Founded in 1975, the Women's Ordination Conference is the world’s oldest and largest national organization working for women to be ordained as deacons, priests and bishops to a renewed priestly ministry in the Catholic Church. For more information, visit WOC’s website at www.womensordination.org.

War, religion, and gay rights

By James Carroll | November 13, 2006

IN JERUSALEM, Muslims and Jews have found common cause: attacking gay people.

A gay pride parade was scheduled for Friday. In Palestinian areas, Muslim leaders vigorously condemned homosexuality as criminal, and in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, Jewish demonstrators staged raucous protests. As a result, organizers canceled the parade. One of them said, "Now we are being dragged back into the dark world of religion."

In US elections last week, while a wave of change was reversing the nation's conservative direction, a counterwave crested, and it, too, attacked gays.

On the ballot in eight states were amendments defining marriage as between a man and woman, a direct repudiation of the right of homosexual couples to marry. In seven of those states, the amendment passed. One of those was Colorado, where a leader of the anti-gay-marriage movement, Pastor Ted Haggard, had, the week before, been forced out of his position as head of New Life Church in Colorado Springs because of an alleged relationship with a male prostitute. In his resignation letter, Haggard confessed, "I am a deceiver and a liar. There is a part of my life that is so repulsive and dark that I've been warring against it all my adult life."

In Massachusetts, ahead of last week's constitutional convention, the Commonwealth's four Catholic bishops took a rare political initiative, calling on Catholics to pressure legislators to support an anti-gay-marriage amendment here. The convention recessed without taking action, but the bishops had demonstrated the absolute priority of rolling back the right of gays to marry. When public crises are defined by an immoral American war, universal cuts in social services, violence among young people, resurgent nuclear arsenals, rising global inequity, unprecedented jeopardy of the earth itself, why are the bishops obsessed with this particular question?

Same-sex erotic love is not the issue. Humans, including Catholic bishops, have long accommodated it. But that accommodation assumes denial and shame. What brings demonstrators into streets across cultures, and what shows up in the United States as "values" politics, mobilizing bishops, is the movement to bring homosexuality out of the dark.

When gay people openly assert their identities as such, whether through parades or through the demand for full and equal social recognition, reactionaries cannot stand it. Why?

Two answers, one personal and one political. The open affirmation of gay identity can pose a mortal threat to people whose own sexual identity is insecure. The Haggard story is a cautionary tale. As it happens, I was present last year to hear Pastor Ted preach a sermon at his mega-church, and it included a

digressive attack on homosexuals that was as venomous and it was gratuitous. He equated gay sex with bestiality.

Even at the time, I wondered about the dark energy of his hatred. That it is revealed now as self-hatred comes as no surprise. One needn't draw a direct line from Haggard's behavior to the private morality of Catholic bishops to sense that the church's own deepening insecurity on all matters of sexuality, especially those surfaced by the still unresolved crisis of priestly sexual abuse of children, informs its exceptional opposition to gay rights.

And so in Jerusalem. The insecurities of male establishments, whose dominance over women is threatened, readily explode in contempt for any expression of gay pride. Patriarchy is at issue. There is a deflection here, and that points to the political use of gay bashing. At the end of the Cold War, when the Pentagon defined itself as the world's largest closet by decreeing "don't ask, don't tell," the issue of gays in the military was being used to deflect attention from the military's real problem: how to maintain Cold War levels of spending, and a Cold War nuclear arsenal, without a Cold War enemy? The real "don't ask, don't tell" was "Don't ask us about our budgets and nukes, and we won't tell you about the future wars they will enable." All of the Sturm und Drang about gays in the military deflected American attention from the real issue of the moment, and it worked. The American Cold War ethos is still with us.

The human race is undergoing a massive cultural mutation. The meaning of sexuality is being transformed as biology revolutionizes reproduction. Women are demanding equality across the globe. Men are being forced to reimagine their familial and social roles. Gays and lesbians are at the center of these changes. Their refusal to be silent and invisible is one of the era's great resources, a magnificent sign of hope

Married Priest James Carroll's column appears regularly in the Boston Globe. He is a frequent lecturer on reform issues in the Roman Catholic Church and author of many books.

Plenary in Lourdes

At their plenary in Lourdes, the French episcopal conference draws the line:

France's Catholic bishops called on rebel traditionalists on Thursday to show full loyalty to 1960s Vatican reforms if they want to return to the Roman fold and celebrate the old Latin mass with papal approval.

Their message gave official support to a rare clerical protest spreading across France against the Pope's reported plan to readmit the traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) to the Church without requiring their support for the reforms.

In a carefully worded statement the bishops, meeting in the pilgrimage town of Lourdes in southwestern France, said they shared with Pope Benedict an attachment to "the riches of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council"....

"The liturgical question is not the only source of difficulties," the bishops said in a message expressing support for their leader, Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, in negotiations with the Vatican on readmitting the SSPX.

"The bishops expect from these faithful a gesture of unequivocal assent to the teaching of the authentic magisterium of the Church," they said, referring to the Catholic dogmas updated by the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council.

Ricard, who rushed to Rome to meet Benedict when reports of an imminent compromise with the SSPX emerged in October, told the bishops last weekend that the Vatican had not yet made any decision and was open to hearing the French church's views.

N.B. At Benedict's appointment, Ricard is a member of the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei, which handles issues of the indult and ecumenical dialogue with traditionalists.

The Swiss-based SSPX was expelled from the Church in 1988 when its founder, French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, consecrated four bishops without Vatican approval. It rejects Vatican II and wants the Holy See to return to its pre-Council traditions.

Its current head, Bishop Bernard Fellay, has said he wants the SSPX to be readmitted without making any doctrinal deals, an approach the French bishops see as bringing a hard-line opposition inside their post-Council church.

The reported reconciliation has met some criticism from bishops in Belgium, Germany and the United States but open opposition in France, where the SSPX has a small but dedicated following and some links to monarchist and far-right movements.

USCCB: No Guides from Outside

Here's the latest from the [Religion News Service](#) wire.... With five days out 'til Election '06, the story from RNS writer Dan Burke might help clarify a thing or two:

Voter guides produced by outside groups can present political and legal trouble and should not be distributed by Catholic parishes, U.S. bishops warn.

With the Nov. 7 midterm elections fast approaching, Catholics and other Christians have passed out millions of voter guides purporting to demonstrate the correct approach to candidates and issues.

The guides, which often resemble scorecards that rate candidates on various social and political issues, may be "influenced by a partisan agenda" and could cause "legal entanglements" for Catholic parishes, Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore wrote in a private letter to fellow bishops.

Although bishops may determine their own policies in their dioceses, the prohibition was sent from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and unanimously approved by the bishops' Pro-Life Committee, which Keeler heads. Religion News Service obtained a copy of the Oct. 5 letter.

"The Pro-Life Committee discussed this issue at length, and concluded that the wisest course in these situations _ from the standpoint of maintaining the integrity of our teaching, as well as that of avoiding legal entanglements _ is to urge parishes not to distribute voter educational materials that are not authorized and distributed by the diocese, the state Catholic conference or this Conference," Keeler wrote....

Groups producing voter education materials in 2006 have included Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, the National Coalition of American Nuns, Catholics United for the Common Good, Catholic Answers Action, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, Priests for Life and the Catholic social justice lobby NETWORK.

A handful of non-Catholic groups from across the theological and political spectrum have produced voting guides this year as well....

Because Catholic churches are nonprofit entities, they may not endorse or otherwise publicly support political candidates without risking their tax exemptions. They are also limited in the extent to which they

can lobby on a particular issue.

But not all groups that produce voter guides are careful about the nonprofit rules. James Goodness, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., said one Christian group asked for help distributing guides in churches. He grew alarmed when he saw that the guide encouraged pastors to endorse candidates from the pulpit.

“That’s not cool in the church. The Catholic Church does not endorse candidates,” Goodness said. He said he could not recall the name of the Christian group.

Jimmy Akin, who claimed his San Diego-based group, Catholic Answers Action, will produce between 1 million and 6 million voter guides this year, said that he had not seen Keeler’s letter and could not comment.

His group’s “Voter’s Guide for Serious Catholics” proclaims “five non-negotiable issues” -- abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning and homosexual marriage -- that are “intrinsically evil” and must be opposed. The group encourages Catholics to hand its guide out after Mass, try to place it in church bulletins and offer it in parish literature racks.

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good has produced about 1 million copies of its voter guide, “Voting for the Common Good,” according to executive director Alexia Kelley. Instead of a “simple ‘litmus test’ of a few selected issues,” the alliance’s guide seeks to present a Catholic approach to a broader range of issues, including poverty, war and the environment.

Kelley said Keeler’s letter was “a victory for Catholics eager to hear the fullness of church teaching.”

“We were concerned that accurate church teaching had been eclipsed in the past by more partisan guides, so we welcome this,” Kelley said. And there you have it.

posted by Rocco Palmo on “Whispers in the Loggia” blog

October 30, 2006

What if the Amish Were in Charge on 9/11?: Fantasies of a Christian Nation

I officiated at a baptism for a 6-month old named Kathleen a week or so ago. The family wanted to emphasize the community aspect of the sacrament, so that guided my reflections as I prepared. I realized that although infant baptism doesn’t mean much to the infant at the time, it makes a profound difference in her whole life. If, for example, I had been welcomed into a Protestant or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu community, I wouldn’t have been there with Kathleen and her family. My life path, my beliefs and even a number of my values would have been dramatically different from who I am today. The fact that we don’t know how her future will unfold does not in any way change the impact her baptism into that community will have on her.

Then it struck me: what if our political leaders on 9/11 had been baptized into the Amish community? Would they have responded in the same way the Amish did to the tragic shooting of their daughters in rural Pennsylvania a few months ago? Where would we be today if they had?

Would they have let the police authorities handle the investigation, pursuit and punishment of the people who committed the crime? Would international crime fighting networks have been developed and strengthened for combating the organized crime of terrorism?

- Would they have shown the same ability to forgive and heal? Would we be at war today in Iraq and Afghanistan? Would the thousands of U.S. soldiers be dead and the tens of thousands wounded – and the tens or hundreds of thousands of Iraqis be dead, maimed, terrorized daily by war? Would so many families across the Middle East and here at home be so torn apart? Would so many people face disoriented and disturbed psychological futures?
- Would we have so damaged our moral authority as a human rights advocate globally and disgracefully abandoned our own values by torturing and demeaning our prisoners?
- Would we have a declared pre-emptive policy threatening any nation that might challenge our supremacy or interests anywhere on the planet or in space?
- Would we be developing a new generation of nuclear weapons at the same time as we accuse others of feeding nuclear proliferation?
- Would we be in nuclear confrontation with North Korea and Iran?
- Would we be daily driving our nation so deeply into debt that our economic future is very uncertain?
- Would we be trying to wall off hundreds of miles of borders and abandoning our tradition of welcoming the needy migrant in order to secure ourselves?
- Would we be calculating the size of toothpaste tube we can carry onto an airplane?
- Would we be any less secure?

The Amish community in Pennsylvania gave the nation an awe-inspiring example of compassion and forgiveness when they reached out to the family of the man who had killed their daughters, sharing prayer, food and financial resources with them – acknowledging that they shared in the tragic grief. In doing that, they defused the power of hatred that had been unleashed, giving an indelible testimony to the power of love to regenerate hope and re-build a shattered peace. Could we have done that for the families of the hijackers on 9/11? What difference might it have made?

As I reflect on what might have been, I am left very sad. What in our response to the attacks of 9/11 marked us as the Christian nation so many among us like to claim we are? This was our chance to live up to the images of the “city on the hill,” or the “light on the lamp stand to give light to all” that are so treasured in our national religious mythology. It was squandered.

Would such an approach have “worked?” Would there be fewer people in the world than there are today who are bitterly committed to fighting the U.S. way of life? I am sure there would be and that our world would be immensely safer. Can I prove it? No.

Would the U.S. public have allowed our political leaders to take us down this path of law enforcement, forgiveness, healing and love? I am not sure – and that brings the question back home to each and all of us. Are we willing to live the Christian vision of loving forgiveness when it is painful – and to make it the guiding light of our foreign policy? Is being a “religious nation” a real possibility for us? And if it is not just an impossible phantasy, why did we not demand it of our leaders in the aftermath of 9/11? Why are we not demanding it now?

I extend my profound gratitude and admiration to the Amish of Pennsylvania for their witness to what is really possible for our humanity, living in faith, to achieve for the world. It can only be a sign of the sickness of our culture that we marginalize them as a quaint glimpse of a past left in the dust of our progress.

Posted by Jim Hug, SJ - President, Center of Concern.

Published: Friday, September 15, 2006

Dialogue in the Church

By Father Richard P. McBrien

The promotion of dialogue within and beyond the Catholic Church was one of the highest priorities of the Second Vatican Council. In recent years, a few commentators have been bemoaning the absence of dialogue in the Church, insisting that it is the only antidote to what they see as a growing polarization within the Church.

It should go without saying that dialogue is a good thing. Its opposite is monologue. No one likes to be subjected to a one-way conversation or to be a student in a course that does not permit questions, much less one where the raising of questions is considered a punishable offense.

That said, some recent calls for more dialogue in the Church have a troubling side. Oddly enough, these calls have come mainly from the more conservative side of the Catholic community.

These advocates of dialogue make two assumptions: first, that there are two roughly co-equal groups in conflict with one another in the Catholic Church --- liberals and ultra-conservatives --- while the broad center (in which they implicitly place themselves) is blessedly free of polarizing tendencies; and, second, that both sides are equally at fault because they are more interested in stereotyping the other than in entering into constructive conversation.

Both assumptions are subject to challenge. There are not two co-equal groups at logger-heads in the Catholic Church today, the one liberal and the other ultra-conservative. Liberal Catholics (by whatever name) constitute the great majority of today's most active Catholics. Many were formed by Vatican II and others have grown up in a Church shaped by it.

Like the council itself, they hold that the Church is the People of God and that they --- women and men alike --- have an integral role to play in its mission and ministries. They are generally happy with the liturgy as renewed and reformed by the council, except perhaps for some of the homilies and music. But they would not want to return to the Latin Mass or to a style of worship focused on the priest rather than the whole congregation.

Significantly, ultra-conservative Catholics, who have never been comfortable with the changes brought about by Vatican II, are a small, if often vocal, minority in the Church. This group has no numerical equivalency with the broad cross-section of Catholics who have been generally supportive of the council and its reforms.

While it is unfortunately the case that ultra-conservative Catholics sometimes create a hostile atmosphere in parishes and dioceses, directing their fire at pastors who do not observe the rubrics of the Mass in every detail or who support religious education programs that reflect modern theological, biblical and pedagogical scholarship, the same is generally not true of the broad cross-section of Catholics formed by Vatican II.

They may become exasperated and even angered by the various forms of harassment they receive from fellow Catholics on the far right, but they have no wish to drive them out of the Church --- nor to fight with them, for that matter.

The second assumption of today's pro-dialogue commentators is that dialogue between these two groups would be possible if both would just lay down their arms and agree to talk with one another in a mutually respectful way.

But if polarization occurs, as they say, in the absence of dialogue, dialogue, in turn, presupposes some measure of equality. Dialogue cannot happen if one side controls the agenda, the invitation list and the microphones, and also has the power to reward or punish participants. Dialogue requires a level playing field.

The unequal distribution of power in the Church today makes dialogue difficult, if not impossible. It came about because of the pattern of episcopal appointments and promotions that was operative during the previous pontificate.

The laity, who once had a say even in the election of popes, have long since been consigned to the lowest level of the ecclesiastical pyramid --- passive recipients of spiritual benefits and moral direction from on high.

This pyramidal system was reformed in principle by the Second Vatican Council, particularly with its doctrine of collegiality, but collegiality gave way in the previous pontificate to a restoration of centralized papal authority.

Today's internal conflicts are the result, in large part, of a deliberate pattern of episcopal appointments that has not only shifted the balance of power disproportionately in favor of one small faction in the Church, but has at the same time deliberately withheld pastoral authority from those in the Church's broad

center --- pastorally adept moderates, of left and right alike, who could promote real dialogue in the Church.

Many look to Pope Benedict XVI in hope.

Father Richard P. McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Benedict XVI has decided to loosen restrictions on use of the old Latin Mass, making a major concession to ultraconservatives who split with the Vatican to protest liberalizing reforms, a Vatican official said Wednesday.

The pope's intent is to "help overcome the schism and help bring (the ultraconservatives) back to the church," said the official, who asked that his name not be used because the papal document has not yet been released.

It was not immediately clear when the pope will make his decision public, but the official said it was expected soon. The Times of London, in a report Wednesday, said the pope had already signed the order and it could be published in the next few weeks.

The late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre founded the Swiss-based Society of St. Pius X in 1969 in opposition to the reforms of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, particularly allowing Mass to be celebrated in local languages instead of Latin. The Vatican excommunicated Lefebvre in 1988 after he consecrated four bishops without Rome's consent.

Benedict has indicated he wants relations with the St. Pius X group to be normalized. He met last year with the current head of the society, Bishop Bernard Fellay.

The Tridentine Mass, the name of the old Latin Mass, can now only be celebrated with permission of the local bishop. In addition to the use of Latin, the priest faces the altar — his back to the worshippers — and there are no lay readers as in the modern Mass.

The issue of the Mass will only be one of the points in the papal document that will reach out to the ultraconservatives, the Vatican official said.

Benedict already took a concrete step in that direction when in September he approved an institute for French priests who left the movement. The small group based in Bordeaux, made up of five priests and some seminarians, is allowed to celebrate the old-style Latin Mass in exchange for their recognition of the pope's authority.

Saint Thomas Merton?

Forget it!

Even though Merton's writings continue to inspire and move people towards God, even if he is considered a spiritual giant in our time and his prophetic voice resounds still (and maybe because of it), the institution would hardly promote him as a saintly model for change and growth.

Perhaps, even more than in his own life-time, might not these words of Merton ring true now?

"Authority has simply been abused too long in the Catholic Church and for many people it just becomes utterly stupid and intolerable to have to put up with the kind of jackassing around that is posed in God's name. It is an insult to God Himself and in the end it can only discredit all idea of authority and obedience. There comes a point where they simply forfeit the right to be listened to." (Hidden Ground of Love, p. 230)

A great quote but not very saintly put, and certainly a stick in the wheel of his canonization.

Thank you for your support. Please encourage your friends to join the ASSOCIATION FOR THE RIGHTS OF CATHOLICS IN THE CHURCH at <http://arccsites.org>

Your comments are welcome. rschutz1@prodigy.net.

Freeing Celibacy

Donald Cozzens

Liturgical press (Dist. Columba Book Services), ££11.50

Tablet bookshop price ££10.35 Tel 01420 592974

The American priest and scholar Donald Cozzens makes a strong case in this book for the abolition of "mandated" celibacy. It is the stronger for being also a clear affirmation of the value of the celibate state. This, he claims, is a "great gift" to the Church, not simply because it is administratively convenient to be able to dispatch priests anywhere at any time, but because mature celibates are powerful communicators of the love of God. They have about them a sense of being at ease with themselves, which puts others at ease, and a generosity of spirit, which makes them seem available at any time for any person. In the wastelands of our city centres, when the social services have retired for the weekend and other clergy have long since retired to the suburbs, such men, rattling around alone in their presbyteries, vulnerable to conmen and assault, often offer the only care available. Without priests like this we should all be the poorer.

But, insists Cozzens, this gift needs to be set free from its present entanglement with law and discipline, for it is a charism, a gift from God which is clearly not given to all. The idea that the Church can guarantee that God will automatically add it on to the grace of holy orders, he says is presumptuous. Grace can only perfect nature; therefore celibacy is a "graced ability" that has to be grounded in natural gifts. For those so gifted, the celibate state is simply "the right way to live out their lives". But when David is squeezed into Saul's armour and this state is instead endured as part of the priestly "package", then lives are diminished, humanity eroded and with it that precious ease in relating to other people. What results is "an inner disquietude" which is good news neither for the priests themselves nor for those whom they serve.

Cozzens takes great care not to make easy links between mandatory celibacy and child abuse but he poses a real question when he asks whether the formation of celibate priests may fail to encourage that psychosexual maturity without which there can indeed be risk. This, of course, is the real issue in the case of homosexual priests. It is not orientation that should be the worry, but whether there is achieved a mature coming to terms with whatever sexual orientation one has. Resisting the scapegoating of gays, Cozzens points out that some of the "brightest and best" of priests are gay but that they have to carry the burden of seeing what life has handed out to them as "objectively disordered". For such, "mandated celibacy" may prove an enticing escape from the issue, an opportunity to put their "painful sexuality" on a shelf.

Priests, whether celibate or married, have real human needs. Cozzens recognises that the authentic celibate life needs to be fed by close, non-sexual friendships with both men and women. Anxious authority worries about the danger of "particular friendships", but far more worrying are those priests who think that they can do without them. This attempt to dodge the flesh can be encouraged by the rhetoric of celibacy, the claim to a more whole-hearted commitment to God, a more radical fidelity to the gospel. If you have Jesus as your special friend whom else do you need? But that is a distorted spirituality, which puts asunder love divine and love human, which in Christ have been united. Ask the question, Cozzens tells us: "whom did Jesus love more - God his Father or us humans?" and you will see that such a competition for our love has no place in Christian thinking.

These arguments are not new but this excellent book mounts them with such moderation and sensitivity that we would expect him to get a sympathetic hearing. But the truth is that this issue goes on being met with a wall of silence from authority. What is it afraid of? Perhaps it is the deconstruction of a particular model of priesthood that has flourished since the Reformation, the loss of that mystique, which surrounds the brotherhood of celibate priests living in solidarity with their bishop. That model still has great strengths but the response to the child abuse scandal has revealed some of its weakness: the faithful may no longer be willing to be treated as children by this all-male controlling world.

At the moment something of a rearguard action is being fought to resist the emergence of a new model of ministry; young priests are being stuffed back into their soutanes and laity warned off holy ground. But if we ask the daring question: "What does God want?", we might look for the answer in his apparent failure

to provide sufficient priests to maintain the old way and in his raising up lay men and women to run vibrant parishes with occasional priestly assistance. The future that God may be shaping looks "collaborative", a matter of men and women, celibate and married, lay and clerical learning to use their varied gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Authority understandably hesitates to end mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests of the Latin rite because it fears slippery slopes, one thing leading to another. When, some 20 years ago, it was suggested that, as a married man, I might be recycled as a Catholic priest, I went to see the late Cardinal Hume to discuss the matter. I wanted to know whether the authorities had thought through where all this might lead; for indeed I guessed that once you let married priests out of the closet, you might never know what other issues would come tumbling out as well. Eighteen years serving as a Catholic priest has assured me that, far from being scandalised, the faithful are quite relaxed about it all and that my brother priests who are celibate are able to take me as I am - wife, children, grandchildren and all. If they envy the married retiring home to their wives, then we can remind them of the night-office that younger married priests must perform, taking their turn to change the nappies and give the feed.

It has been my good fortune to work in situations in which I am not expected to be the omniscient omnipotent parish priest but in a university chaplaincy, a prison, a school, to be part of a team working together with men and women, lay and cleric, married and celibate. With such a model of priesthood one can abandon the attempt to be god, enjoy the different gifts and be happy. Freeing celibacy, as Cozzens argues, is part of the construction of this model of ministerial variety.

The pope's PR blunder

Pope Benedict XVI was never a fan of political correctness.

But even Catholic experts concede that his controversial speech on Islam has proved to be a major public relations blunder that risks undermining dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Muslim world for years to come.

Moreover, Benedict's words have sparked alarm within the Vatican over the safety of Catholics living in Islamic countries and has raised serious questions about the competence of his closest advisors.

In what was being described as "an unprecedented about-face," Benedict last Sunday said he was "deeply sorry" for the reactions that his public address at the University of Regensburg had caused in the Islamic world. In his speech in Germany, the pope quoted a 14th century Christian emperor as referring to elements of the Muslim faith as "evil and inhuman".

Violent backlash

Benedict insisted that the quotation "in no way" reflected his personal thoughts on the matter. But he did not retract and fell short of issuing a formal apology, as some Muslim clerics had demanded.

Though moderate Muslims welcomed his "correction", latest reports indicate that it has failed to stop the violent backlash that his speech has sparked among Islam's extremists.

Images of the pope were burnt in Pakistan while an Iraqi cell of al-Qaeda called for a Jihad (Holy War) against the "worshippers of the cross."

The murder of an Italian nun in Sunni Muslim Somalia also sparked major concerns over the security of Italy's 15 000 Catholic missionaries, many of whom live in Muslim countries such as Sudan, Turkey and

Indonesia.

Speech a mistake

Many Vatican experts in Rome regard the pope's speech, seen as portraying Islam as a religion that implicitly endorses violence, as a mistake.

"The West's relation with Islam is the most delicate issue facing our time. It is precisely for this reason that a religious leader like the pope should be very careful about what he says," Marco Politi, one of Italy's most respected papal watchers, told Deutsche Presse Agentur dpa.

One Vatican insider who followed the pope's visit to Germany said that though Benedict meant no harm with his speech, "he should have seen it coming".

"The pope's speeches are normally checked beforehand by the Vatican's press office and officials at the secretary of state. So his address in Regensburg raises questions about what kind of advice he is getting when talking about such sensitive issues, as well as the pope's knowledge of how the media works," the insider, who asked not to be named, told dpa.

Dialogue with Islam

Eberhard Gemmingen, a Jesuit who heads the German section of Vatican Radio, defends the pope and says his words were intended to promote a serious dialogue with Islam.

"Until recently, the Muslim world was convinced that the West tends to ridicule God - as the recent controversy over the Mohammed cartoons showed - and that the pope was one of them. But Benedict merely wanted to show that we believe in a rational God, and as such is against all forms of violence," Gemmingen told dpa.

John L Allen, in his latest column for the National Catholic Reporter, notes that Benedict is not one to "allow his thinking to be channelled by the taboos and fashions of ordinary public discourse".

The pope's well-known stance against "relativism" - a philosophical doctrine whereby all criteria of judgment are relative to the individuals and situations involved - clearly demonstrates this.

Pope should have been more careful

But Politi believes Benedict should have been more careful when talking about Islam. Moreover, he argues that his blunder risks having major implications for Catholic-Muslim relations.

"The (pope's) unfortunate anti-Mohammed citation is much more than a communications mistake. It violently brings to the surface the change of tack made by Joseph Ratzinger in comparison to the strategy carried out for decades by his predecessor John Paul II."

Politi notes that while John Paul actively engaged in dialogue with the Muslim elite and always stressed the "common faith" that unites Muslims, Christians and Jews under one God, Ratzinger has ended up unravelling years of laborious diplomatic efforts carried out by the Vatican towards Islam.

Council for inter-religious dialogue

One of Ratzinger's first decisions as pope was to water down the powers of the church's council for inter-

religious dialogue by giving the head of the pontifical council for culture temporary control over dialogue with Muslims.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's recently-appointed secretary of state, is now suggesting this will have to change in the future.

"I hope that dialogue between the church and Islam will resume. In this context, the pontifical council for inter-religious dialogue is being offered a chance to increase its role," Bertone told *Corriere della Sera*.

In a highly controversial document published six years ago, when he was still head of the Vatican's congregation for the doctrine of the faith, Ratzinger wrote that only the Roman Catholic Church provides the means for salvation and that followers of non-Christian religions are "gravely deficient".

As Politi points out, the underlying question now facing the Church is the following: "Does Ratzinger want to deal with the Islamic world as merely a cultural partner, or is he willing to recognise that Islam should enjoy the same status as Christianity?"

<http://www.nytimes.com/>

October 14, 2006

Beliefs

Voters' Guides Define Moral Compromises to Take to Polls

By PETER STEINFELS

Voters' guides have gone theological. "Voting God's Politics." "Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics." "Voting for the Common Good: A Practical Guide for Conscientious Catholics." "Voting With a Clear Conscience." And more.

These are not the familiar guides that line up candidates by their views or votes on a list of selected issues and that, in some cases, give them ratings, a practice that has migrated from lobbies like those on gun control, tax cuts and environmental regulation to religious groups like the Christian Coalition.

No, the new voters' guides try to be mini-manuals of moral theology and church-state relations, offering voters a religious framework for making their choices, not endorsements of candidates or parties.

Of course, it isn't that simple. The complex entanglement of theology and politics is made clear in the case of competing Roman Catholic guides, a matter of political import in view of the belief that Catholics constitute a swing vote, especially in what are considered swing states.

For example, on the eve of every presidential election year since 1976, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops administrative board has issued a booklet raising questions for Catholics to consider as they carry out their political responsibilities. "Faithful Citizenship," in its 2003 edition, emphasized that politics involved fundamental moral choices. While highlighting issues like abortion and euthanasia having to do with the protection of life, it also gave attention to other issues: warfare and terrorism and world poverty and health care, from marriage ("a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman") and family life to job creation and racial discrimination.

"Faithful Citizenship" soon encountered competition, however, from a "Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics" prepared by a San Diego group now called Catholic Answers Action. It argued that Catholics should cast their votes based on candidates' positions on "five nonnegotiable issues": abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem-cell research, human cloning and same-sex marriage.

Citing church documents, the pamphlet argued that unlike war or capital punishment, these issues involved actions that were "intrinsically evil" and "must never be promoted by law." Ten million copies of the "Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics" were bought, reproduced and distributed during the 2004 presidential campaign, and a new version has been circulating for the November elections.

Now the pamphlet for "serious Catholics" has a competitor of its own, a guide for "conscientious Catholics." Just issued by a new group, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, "Voting for the

Common Good” rejects the idea that the question of how Catholics should vote can be answered “by applying a simple ‘litmus test’ of a few selected issues.”

Echoing the bishops’ “Faithful Citizenship,” it lists seven major themes of Catholic social teaching and mentions 19 issues in alphabetical order, from abortion and the death penalty to war and workers’ rights. There are yet more variations on these guides. “Voting With a Clear Conscience” originates from Priests for Life. It, too, takes the nonnegotiables stance, but with language equating abortion, for example, with terrorism: “Suppose a candidate came forward and said, ‘I support terrorism.’ Would you say, ‘I disagree with you on terrorism, but what’s your health care plan?’ ”

According to the guide, “Any candidate who says abortion should be kept legal disqualifies him/herself from public service.”

“Voting God’s Politics” is very different. The product of Sojourners, a liberal monthly magazine with evangelical roots, this voters’ guide gives seven brief headings like “Compassion and Economic Justice” or “Peace and Restraint of Violence.” Each is followed by a biblical passage and several recommended public policies. Some of these state general objectives (“develop clean, efficient and renewable energy sources”), and some get quite specific (“phased withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq that starts immediately”).

The dueling guides from Catholic Answers Action and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good directly challenge each other in the most interesting — and, given their condensed formats, even the most thoughtful — ways.

Both, of course, urge active participation in the political process. Both lean on official church statements from the bishops and Rome.

Both actually agree on what, after all, is the radioactive issue in this whole debate: the moral status of abortion. One guide highlights abortion among the five nonnegotiable issues; the other lists it among four “affronts to human life”— abortion, poverty, torture and war.

And both recognize the inevitability of compromise in political life, which is where things get interesting. “Where all of the available candidates take morally unacceptable positions on one or more of the nonnegotiable issues,” the Catholic Answers Action guide says, “a citizen will be called upon to make tough choices.”

The Catholics in Alliance guide says, “Since we seldom, if ever, have the opportunity to vote for a candidate with the right positions on all the issues important to Catholics, we often must vote for some candidates who may hold the ‘wrong’ Catholic position on some issues in order to maximize the good our vote achieves in other areas.”

At this point the two guides diverge.

Catholic Answers Action demands that all “tough choices” be made within the limits of the five nonnegotiables. It would be legitimate, for example, to vote for a candidate favoring embryonic stem-cell research but at least opposing euthanasia and same-sex marriage. It would be illegitimate to support a candidate aggressive about combating global poverty or preventing genocide in Darfur but favoring embryonic stem-cell research.

The Catholics in Alliance guide rejects this approach.

In addition, the Catholic Answers Action guide always emphasizes candidates’ positions. Legitimate compromise, it suggests, involves supporting a candidate with one or more disapproved public stances on central moral issues because he holds other, approved ones.

By contrast, the Catholics in Alliance guide says compromise can encompass political effectiveness as well. It compares, for example, candidates who support ending abortion but who “don’t produce results” with “candidates who don’t believe in making abortions illegal” but support measures that might reduce the number of abortions.

At stake are contrasting responses to the reality of political compromise. In this case, one is focused on the preservation of moral principle, and the other on the moral claims of the practical.

<http://www.nytimes.com/>