

Business leaders hard to pigeonhole

By Joe Feuerherd
National Catholic Reporter
March 17, 2005

It was hardly a gathering of the American Catholic left. No, the March 14 press conference at which the newly formed National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management was launched reeked "Establishment" -- with a capital E.

Publicity for the National Press Club kick-off was handled by Porter Novelli, the multi-national image maker. A luncheon spread greeted the press -- the p.r. types know that reporters on empty stomachs can get feisty. On the dais: two bishops, an archdiocesan personnel director, three businessmen, a representative of Catholic philanthropic foundations and a former college president.

Not a bomb-thrower among the group.

Kicking off the event was Geoffrey T. Boisi, member of the Papal Foundation, product of Chaminade (Long Island's straight-laced all-boys Marianist-run high school), Boston College and the Wharton School of Business. Formerly a partner at Goldman, Sachs & Co., Boisi now is vice chair of JPMorgan Chase.

Among his varied interests and pursuits, the soft-spoken Boisi is a Republican Party fundraising machine. Public records (www.opensecrets.org) indicate that the Locust Valley, N.Y., resident and his wife contributed well over \$100,000 in the last election cycle to Republican causes: \$50,000 to the Republican National Committee, \$5,000 to John Thune (R-SD), the conservative Christian who defeated Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, and \$2,000 each to incumbent Republican senators Kit Bond (MO), Jim Bunning (KY), Lisa Murkowski (AL) and Arlen Specter (PA). The Boisi's provided \$6,000 to George W. Bush's campaign, \$10,000 to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist's "Volunteer Political Action Committee," and additional thousands to nine state Republican parties.

It's not unusual for big-money givers to hedge their bets, to give money to candidates of both parties, particularly those who sit on congressional committees that regulate their businesses. Not Boisi. There's not a Democrat among the two dozen House and Senate candidates he supported in 2004. He was among Bush's elite "Rangers" in 2004, meaning that in addition to his personal contributions he raised at least \$200,000 for the president's reelection effort.

By all accounts, Boisi is a sharp businessman and a committed Catholic. One thing he is not, however, is a liberal.

Boisi, however, was in for a different type of politics when it came to the church. His first foray into what would become the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management -- a July 2003 one-day meeting of lay and clerical leaders -- was nearly discredited by critics. Then-Crisis magazine publisher Deal Hudson said the gathering was made up of "the kinds of liberal and dissident Catholics that would make a Call to Action conference jealous."

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That conference -- "The Church in America: The Way Forward in the 21st Century" -- featured Catholic clerics, business and labor leaders, elected officials, journalists and academics. Topics discussed included the role of the laity, communications, financial and personnel management, and governance structures (NCR, Aug. 1, 2003). "The idea," one participant told me following the closed-door meeting, "was to talk as a group and offer our expertise and advice [to the bishops] without getting into big time doctrinal disputes."

By and large, doctrinal disputes were avoided, which is not to say the group did not grapple with some difficult issues. In a follow-up memo included in the published proceedings of the meeting, former McKinsey & Co. managing director Fred Gluck looked at the church as he would a troubled business. No left-wing activist (his sole federal political contribution in 2004 was \$500 to the Republican National Committee), Gluck began with church personnel.

"There are two broad problems with human resources: insufficient talent and inadequate processes for managing it. More specifically on the talent side:

Your work force is rapidly aging.
Your ability to recruit has declined dramatically over the last 40 years.
You are no longer the first choice of the best and the brightest.
Your people are demoralized by internal conflict and public scandal."
Gluck continued. "On the finance side:

Your traditional sources of revenues are drying up.
Your costs are escalating rapidly as you no longer are attracting high-quality cheap labor.
Your plant is rapidly obsolescing.
Your potential liabilities as a result of the recent scandals are large and growing.
Your processes for financial management seem to be highly fragmented and uncoordinated and much too underdeveloped to deal with the problems enumerated above."
From a marketing perspective, wrote Gluck, "many of your faithful (customers) no longer feel committed to your product line and openly reject portions of it as irrelevant to their lives" though "most of your faithful ... remain highly committed to your basic message and thirst for sure-handed leadership and dramatic change in the delivery system."

On church management, said Gluck, "your entity is a subsidiary of a large enterprise located in a foreign country where management has been historically committed to resisting change and maintaining the status [quo]." He continued:

"Your organization has no effective central point of leadership that can energize the necessary program change.
Your leadership is aging and also largely committed to the status quo or even the status ante.
Your tradition of hierarchy dominates most of your thinking about management."
"Coming to grips with this formidable set of challenges in an organization as historically successful as yours will be a daunting challenge, and can only be accomplished by a comprehensive program of change with strong leadership from the top," concluded Gluck.

A second Boisi-chaired meeting was held last summer at the Wharton School, the recommendations of which were included in a report released this week by the newly-formed Roundtable on Church Management. The recommendations respond to many of the issues raised by Gluck. (Coverage of the Roundtable's recommendations, and its planned activities, will be featured in the March 25 issue of NCR.)

Whether the Roundtable will have success in helping to modernize the church's management systems is an open question. Even the clout and credibility they bring to the discussion may not survive episcopal intransigence or ideological sucker punches.

One thing, however, is clear: the clergy sex abuse crisis has ricocheted in unanticipated ways, giving a voice to those once content to "pray, pay and obey." Among them are American Catholic business leaders -- highly educated, hugely successful in the secular world, used to making decisions for large organizations after hearing diverse views on complex issues, possessing a call-'em-as-they-see-'em attitude, and largely free of the tired doctrinal and theological baggage of post-Vatican II debates.

They don't claim their expertise is sufficient to cure what ails the church, but they think it is necessary. They don't fit nicely into the conservative-liberal-orthodox-dissident categories that are the hallmark of so many church discussions. And through the Roundtable they're pledging their time, talent and treasure.

In the secular world, they're used to sitting in the boardroom. Within the church, they want a seat at the grownup table.