

11-18-07 – Commentary: Catholic bishops vs. grown-ups
Voting admonition doesn't help church regain its credibility
By Eugene Cullen Kennedy, Chicago Tribune

The nation's Catholic bishops warned their people last week that the choices they make in the voting booth are something like the sins they admit in the confessional. In an approach that even friendly commentators would hardly describe as subtle, the bishops warned that how a Catholic votes will have "an impact ... on the individual's salvation."

The bishops feel pretty good about themselves regarding this action, according to reports.

Russell Shaw, their former information director, says they are "looking for hopeful signs that they have turned the corner" from the sex-abuse crisis and regained the moral influence they had a generation ago when they issued thoughtful pastoral letters on nuclear war and the economy.

The bishops have turned a corner all right, but it is into the same blind alley in which they have been milling about, unsure of what to do, since the still-unresolved sex-abuse crisis exploded almost six years ago.

The reason they feel good is not because they seek to be visionary leaders but because they think they have reasserted control over their people. Their idea of what has been wrong with the church is what other authorities, including church teaching, declare to be right: that mature faith is integrated as a master motive into the lives of believers so that, on their own, they consult theological principles and follow their consciences in making moral choices that include how they vote on Election Day.

They don't need to be told -- as if they had not reached the age of reason -- about the gravity of the choices about war and peace and life and death they make when they vote.

The bishops should examine themselves about the moral implications of the choices they have made, for example, about dealing with the sex-abuse crisis by church personnel. What can Catholics make of recent pronouncements by church leaders that seem like talking points rather than deeply held moral convictions? Cardinal Francis George has suggested that the pursuit of justice by victims through recourse to the law is only about money.

Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Paprocki recently gave a talk in which he equated the lawsuits about sex abuse with attacks on the church and suggested that such pursuits were the work of the devil. Shepherds who utter such judgments should be more worried about their salvation than their flock's.

Many men who wear miters think the best way to lead the church to 2025 is by returning it to 1925. They want to repeal Vatican II and magically bring back the devotions and practices of a wonderful but permanently ended era in American Catholicism.

They apparently feel it is dangerous for Catholics to be adult and to take responsibility for their decisions. They seem uneasy conversing with a generation of Catholics who know as much or more theology as they do.

Most bishops are warm and healthy men who, after they get home from last week's meeting and have a chance to clear their heads, will realize they are dangerously eroding rather than recovering their authority by treating grown-up Catholics as children.

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