

2009 - a turning point for bishops?

Was 2009 a turning point for the American bishops, marking a tougher and more realistic approach on their part to the myriad problems, internal and external, besetting the Catholic Church in the United States? It's too soon for final conclusions, but, on the evidence, history may judge the year just past in exactly those terms.

Two episodes in particular suggest as much.

One is the remarkable fact that some 80 American bishops, acting on their own, spoke up last spring to protest Notre Dame's invitation to President Barack Obama to receive an honorary degree and deliver the commencement address. Obama makes no bones about backing legalized abortion, and the bishops considered it scandalous for the country's highest-visibility Catholic university to pay gratuitous tribute to him in this way.

The other episode has been the upfront campaign by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to keep public funding of elective abortion out of the health care legislation being pushed by Obama and the congressional leadership and to make the plan more generous in scope. The bishops have sought to influence legislation often before, but it's hard to think of a time when they've put up a fight as strenuous and determined as this one.

In neither case, to be sure, did the bishops prevail. Notre Dame shrugged off the protests and honored Obama while most graduates and faculty cheered. And although the House of Representatives amended its version of health care legislation along the lines the bishops wanted, the Senate adopted a watered-down "compromise" that may end up in the final version of the bill signed by Obama.

Thus the point being made here isn't that the bishops won. The point is that they put up a serious fight, thereby perhaps reflecting growing awareness that, absent resistance from them, the Church's interests will only continue to take a beating. It's impossible to imagine their predecessors of the 1970s and 1980s doing as much, and the new developments underline the fact that the hierarchy today is greatly different

in membership and mindset from the hierarchy of those days.

So do the words and actions in the past of a surprising number of individual bishops.

To mention three by way of example: Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, who roundly denounced The New York Times for overt anti-Catholicism; Archbishop-designate Jerome ListECKi of Milwaukee, who told a group calling itself Young Catholics for Choice that by flouting Church teaching on contraception, abortion and sexuality they were “tragically distancing themselves” from the Church they claimed to belong to; and Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, who took on Rep. Patrick Kennedy – Ted Kennedy’s son, no less – for trashing (and misrepresenting) the bishops on abortion and health care.

It’s also worth noting that nearly 60 bishops and dioceses provided financial assistance (including \$50,000 each from Philadelphia and Phoenix) to the Diocese of Portland, Maine, for a successful campaign against same-sex marriage.

Perhaps significantly, all this has been happening with Cardinal Francis George of Chicago as president of USCCB. Cardinal George is a tough-minded intellectual who’s not afraid to speak his mind publicly—as he did during the year past by criticizing Notre Dame for honoring Obama and by speaking out against health care abortion.

It remains to be seen what the impact on episcopal activism will be if, as seems probable, the bishops next November choose as successor to head USCCB a prelate who generally takes a softer line, more in the manner of the bishops of the ’70s and ’80s.

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