

Catholic leaders see Obama election seen as mixed bag

The election of Sen. Barack Obama generated a decidedly mixed response from Catholic leaders throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

While peace and social justice advocates had high praise for the president-elect's promise to end the War in Iraq, others were concerned that the new administration will roll back recent gains on the prolife and Catholic education fronts.

Many viewed the election of the first African-American president as a reaffirmation of democratic values, calling it a symbol of American freedom, idealism and openness. They offered their prayers for the new president and called on the new Congress to work with him.

"The election results were hopeful signs that Americans are thinking deeper than skin," said Sister Diane K. Bardol, executive director of the Baltimore-based Murphy Initiative for Justice and Peace.

"Issues that concern all of humanity must be addressed and they must be addressed by the most capable person," said the Grey Nun of the Sacred Heart. "Americans put their confidence in Obama."

Sister Diane believes Sen. Obama will set the United States on a collaborative foreign policy course that will be more focused on justice and peace. While she does not believe it would be wise to pull out of Iraq immediately, she is optimistic that Sen. Obama will find a just end to the conflict and involve other nations.

"I am hopeful that Obama will have the ability to bring people to the table and be part of a process that's bigger than our concerns," said Sister Diane. "I think he'll bring a new set of lenses to foreign policy - that we don't have to impose democracy on every country."

Sister Diane noted that late last year, she studied at the European University Center for Peace Studies in Austria with 44 others from 29 nations. Her colleagues had a

very strong negative image of American foreign policy, believing that America has not used its power for the global good.

After Sen. Obama's election, Sister Diane was flooded with e-mails from those same critics who praised Americans for changing course.

"You showed the world your true power: love," read one of those e-mails.

Linda Brenegan, Respect Life Program Director for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, found little to celebrate in the president-elect's domestic social agenda.

She feared the president-elect will make good on his promise to sign the Freedom of Choice Act that would nullify parental notification and informed consent on abortion. The act would also effectively undo the ban on partial-birth abortion and eliminate conscience rights of doctors, nurses and hospitals, she said, forcing them to choose between performing or referring for abortion against their will or face legal action.

"I am gravely concerned about the basic right to life, the free exercise of religion and freedom of conscience under the next administration," Ms. Brenegan said.

The Freedom of Choice Act would require all Americans to pay for abortions with their federal and state tax dollars and would allow for certain post-viability sex-selection abortions.

Calling Sen. Obama's abortion record "extreme," Ms. Brenegan said Sen. Obama would most likely also rescind the Mexico City Policy, thus mandating that American tax dollars go to organizations that promote and perform abortions abroad.

Mary Ellen Russell, incoming executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, was also concerned about the president-elect's abortion positions and his willingness to provide federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

"It's imperative that on all the life issues, we become even more vocal and more involved," Ms. Russell said.

Calling Sen. Obama's election a "historic moment for the country," Ms. Russell said she is hopeful the needs of the poor and vulnerable will be given priority by the

Obama administration and the new Congress.

Ms. Russell was encouraged that in the election, voters in California, Florida and Arizona approved amendments to state constitutions to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

"It sends a loud and clear message that the majority of Americans recognize that the institution of marriage is a vital component to the social life of our country," she said.

Voters in Maryland approved a slots referendum that the Maryland Catholic Conference opposed.

"We had concerns about some of the effects of slots," she said. "The people's voice has been heard, and we are hopeful that the additional funds to the budget will free up monies to address the increasingly acute needs of the poor and vulnerable."

Because Sen. Obama has been a vocal critical of vouchers and other school choice measures, Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools, said Catholic school supporters will have to be proactive with the incoming president.

"He seems to be a man willing to listen," said Dr. Valenti. "We are going to have to be tenacious in doing our own lobbying so he will see the contributions that Catholic schools make and the impact they have on the kinds of situations he wants to remedy."

Under the Bush administration, Dr. Valenti attended a White House summit focused on saving nonpublic schools in urban areas. The superintendent questioned whether that kind of summit will be a priority for the Obama administration.

"He has very clearly stated that he wants to make some changes to No Child Left Behind," said Dr. Valenti. "Getting support for nonpublic schools is going to be a little bit of an uphill battle."