

Conscience formation is the name of the game

Regarding the election of Barack Obama, an aggressive abortion supporter, as president of the United States, a central fact must be borne in mind: this election wasn't a referendum on abortion. Exit polls show that Americans voted overwhelmingly - and altogether predictably - on the economy, not on abortion or anything else.

The situation can be likened to that of a man with a toothache and hypertension. The hypertension is a lot more serious and he knows it, but at the moment the toothache overrides everything. Economic woes are the nation's toothache right now. Other issues, abortion included, will take a back seat as long as that's so.

But after this election it's fair to ask how Americans feel about abortion. The answer, almost certainly, is: just as they have for years. Some are ardently pro-abortion. A larger, but still small, number are ardently pro-life. The vast majority are in the conflicted middle. They don't like abortion and want some restrictions on it, but they're not ready to rule it out entirely as a legal option. That's unacceptable from a pro-life point of view, but it does offer grounds for hope.

The election results paint a similarly complex but not unhopeful picture of Catholics.

According to exit polls, about 53 percent or 54 percent of Catholic voters supported Obama. Two-thirds of Hispanics, the majority of them Catholics, did that. But among white Catholics, slightly over half voted for John McCain. In relation to religious practice, a comfortable majority who go to Mass every week supported McCain while a substantial majority of those who don't attend Mass weekly backed Obama.

Here's a little rough calculating. There are about 70 million Catholics in the United States. Nationwide, roughly one-fourth of them attend Mass weekly. Without pretending to mathematical precision, I put them at about 17.5 million people.

Subtract 2.5 million who are children or non-citizens, and you have 15 million. As a matter of fact rather than wishful thinking, they're the Catholic voters the Church

actually can reach. A majority backed a (generally) prolife presidential candidate this year. A not inconsiderable minority did not.

And so?

For their November 10-13 general meeting in Baltimore, the Catholic bishops scheduled a discussion of the pastoral aspects of abortion politics. As this is written, there's no way of knowing what, if anything, the bishops might conclude. If I had a chance to speak to them, I'd say something like this:

"Your Excellencies, there's an enormous need for conscience formation among American Catholics. That isn't true just of politics and abortion - it's true across the board.

"But the need for conscience formation for political participation is particularly great. For many, there's a huge disconnect between morality and political life. That's bad for them, bad for the country and bad for the church.

"The decline in Sunday Mass attendance puts many millions of Catholics beyond earshot of the church. We need to bend every effort to get those people back to Mass.

"Meanwhile, it's those Catholics who still attend Mass regularly that, realistically speaking, you still have a chance to reach. And please don't dismiss reaching them as preaching to the choir. The election results suggest that even among the weekly Mass-attenders, there are plenty who need help.

"What kind of help? More statements about politics? No. The help that's needed is serious, continuing instruction in forming conscience. Many today don't know what that means. If the church wants to have a longrange influence on American public life in regard to abortion or anything else, conscience formation is the name of the game."

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