

Panel: Politics at a defining moment for Catholic social teaching

WASHINGTON - The current political environment provides a defining moment for the interplay of Catholic social teachings on issues Congress is facing, according to a panel of Washington-area academics in a symposium organized by the Life Cycle Institute of The Catholic University of America.

How the opportunity is used by those with an interest in bringing church teachings to bear on public policy could affect issues as diverse as programs for the poor, health care policy, efforts to mitigate global warming and strategies for nuclear deterrence, said professors in a range of academic disciplines from Catholic University, Georgetown University and the University of Maryland.

The April 27 program in the Dirksen Senate Building drew an invited audience of congressional staffers, representatives of the Obama administration, journalists, students and others.

Father John Langan, rector of the Georgetown Jesuit community and professor of Catholic social thought at the Jesuit-run university, laid out challenges to Catholic politicians, the U.S. bishops and all Catholics involved in civic life.

"Recent storms" that drew "lightning strikes from the media, from theological vigilantes and from concerned bishops," at Georgetown and the University of Notre Dame in Indiana over those universities' interactions with the White House, raise questions for the wider church, Father Langan said.

"How are the moral and religious commitments of the Catholic community to be understood and lived in a pluralistic world where the church itself is subject to alien pressure and hostile scrutiny and where it is experiencing painful internal divisions?" he asked. "Does the recent significant change in the American political landscape point to significant changes in the way the Catholic Church and its

institutions and its members relate to the American political system?"

Father Langan proposed answering such questions by considering whether the values of Catholic social teaching are being realized in President Barack Obama's programs of financial recovery, health care reform and energy and environmental policy.

"Politics is not simply about elections and personalities and about simple yes or no decisions," he said, "but about issues and programs, which will usually require more nuanced assessments. Even for those who believe that it is seriously wrong to vote for Obama or for other pro-choice candidates, it would be a mistake to think that this point justifies a comprehensive rejection of his programs and policies."

Father Langan went on to describe the conflicts confronting Catholic Democrats in Congress, who, for instance, may believe abortion is a grave moral evil but do not think abortion can be legally banned under the Constitution, yet want to protect the Catholic health care system from being required to accept abortion as a normal practice of medicine in a national health care program.

He also talked about the pro-life movement's role in politics and said the U.S. bishops "need to think carefully about whether they are showing heroic resistance to absolute evil or whether they are being used by selfish and dishonest political interests and by zealots who show more passion than judgment when they stubbornly refuse to recognize the limits of what is politically possible in a pluralistic and individualistic society."

University of Maryland professor John Steinbruner, director of the school's Center of International and Security Studies, linked concerns about global warming and nuclear proliferation as "more intimately connected than you would realize."

He said the application of Catholic social teaching to both issues would involve "prudent limitation of catastrophic risk."

Catholic University politics professor Maryann Cusimano Love talked about the ethics of risk, such as the extent to which the government has sought to limit the risk of terrorism in the United States. While some have argued, for instance, that

torturing prisoners is sometimes necessary to keep the risk of terrorist attacks to a minimum, Cusimano Love said Catholic teaching requires a different standard.

Reminding the audience that Jesus' treatment at his trial and crucifixion would be considered torture, she said "being disciples of a tortured God requires us never to be torturers."

Catholic University law professor Robert Destro said one way of judging whether Catholic social teaching is being aptly applied to the functions of government is to consider whether governing is being done "at the 50,000-foot level" or "in the weeds," at the level of individual problems.

For example, he said little of the discussion so far about "conscience clause" legislation, which would allow medical professionals to refrain from work that conflicts with their personal moral standards, has focused on how individuals are affected by requirements to do work to which they object.

Leslie Tentler, a Catholic University history professor, offered a historical perspective on the church's interplay with government. She read a list of proposals for remaking society after World War I as prepared by the National Catholic War Council, the precursor to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The list included such items as a living wage, workplace safety, a more equitable tax code, old-age insurance and affordable health care, which she said would resonate today.