

# The Question Behind the Question

On the afternoon of June 14, a rather spirited, fascinating, and unexpected debate broke out on the floor of the USCCB spring meeting in Ft. Lauderdale. At issue was the possibility of reconsidering “Faithful Citizenship,” the 2007 statement of the U.S. Bishops on the formation of conscience regarding matters political.

A group of bishops, including myself, had proposed that instead of producing another lengthy document to succeed “Faithful Citizenship,” the bishops ought to write a brief and pointed letter on the political challenges of the present moment and then to create a video or a series of videos bringing forth the salient points of Catholic social teaching. Our thinking was motivated by recent research, which indicates that a very small percentage of Catholics actually read that formal statement from ten years ago. Though it had been taken in and appreciated by the bishops themselves, by lobbyists and political activists, and by members of the Catholic commentariat, it was largely ignored by the very people we were endeavoring to reach.

Once the formal proposal had been made, a number of bishops rose to speak against it and in favor of writing a document to replace “Faithful Citizenship.” With considerable eloquence, they reminded us of the shift in emphasis that has taken place with the magisterium of Pope Francis. Concern for the environment, for economic justice, for the poor, for the victims of violence, for refugees and immigrants has been brought to the fore in a new way, and our teaching, they insisted, ought to reflect this change.

About midway through the discussion, I rose to make a clarification. I said that the members of our group were fully aware of what I called “the Franciscan shift” in emphasis and that we very much wanted the bishops’ teaching to reflect this

change. What was really at issue, I explained, was not so much the content of the teaching but the vehicle for its transmission. I said that practically all of the people in the room are on one side of the page/screen divide, so that we rather naturally privilege written texts and find them more substantive. But the overwhelming majority of those under the age of, say, fifty are, I continued, on the other side of that watershed. They are far more oriented to the screen, far less likely to plow their way through a lengthy written text.

I recalled that about fifteen years ago, a member of my staff called to tell me that an article I had written had been accepted by a major Catholic publication. I was delighted, but my excitement was curtailed a bit when he informed me that it would appear on that outlet's online edition and not in the print edition. Sensing my disappointment, my colleague said, "You know, this is much better. You'd rather have it online than in print. It will reach a much wider audience." That little episode was the beginning of a shift in consciousness for me.

With that clarification made, the conversation on the conference floor transposed to a different key, as the meta-question of communication became the focus. One bishop observed that on his flight to Ft. Lauderdale, he had noticed that no one around him was reading a book, but practically everyone had his or her eyes glued to a screen. Another bishop, an expert in the use of social media, applauded the shift to digital forms of communication but also expressed the concern that people will not pay attention to videos longer than a few minutes in length. How can the Church adequately convey its teaching in a sound bite? But still other bishops chimed in to say that nothing prevents us from producing a series of short pieces that, together, cover a good deal of ground. Finally, some wondered which protocols would govern the approval of videos rather than texts. I will confess that as this part of the lively discussion unfolded, a smile spread across my face, for I have believed for some time that this issue of how we communicate is perhaps as important as what we

communicate—that is, if we are interested in moving the conversation beyond a very narrow circle.

Inevitably some commentators have tried to read the discussion as a fierce disagreement between the “Francis bishops” and their detractors. Nothing could be further from the truth. The overwhelming majority of the bishops want the full range of Catholic social teaching to be faithfully defended and they welcome Pope Francis’ renewed emphasis on the environment and care for the marginal. The far more compelling conversation—and one that clearly engaged the interest of the bishops on the floor of the conference—had to do with how we propagate this teaching as widely and effectively as possible.