



## BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

### **Benedict XVI and the U.S. Bishops: Political Differences and the Difference They Make**

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OWENS: Today you discussed the difference between the pope's issues and politics and the issues and politics of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Could you say a bit about what general positions they share, and then a bit about where you see the divergence?

CAHILL: There are a variety of issues that you could include under Catholic ethical teaching and Catholic social teaching. I don't want to make it too divisive, but on one side you have the so-called life issues: abortion, the status of the embryo, stem cell research, providing artificial nutrition and hydration for terminal patients, and euthanasia. Related to this is also the issue of the death penalty.

Additionally, you have questions about war. There are still 'Just War' theorists, for example, but they're very cautious. Both John Paul II and our bishops raised very serious questions about the Iraq war. Pope John Paul II thought it was an immoral war.

The pope and the bishops also raise questions about the economy from the Catholic 'common good' tradition. They hold there is a right of participation in the economy, there's a duty to spread economic opportunity across the spectrum of a society. Their

economic positions are not against capitalism, but they would want to see the market brought within moral constraints.

Then there's the incorporation in recent teaching of the preferential option for the poor, which comes out really strongly in the work of the US bishops such as their economics pastoral. In healthcare, there's also an understanding that everyone should have access to basic healthcare. There's even a right to healthcare.

A couple of other issues were also covered in the Faithful Citizenship guide: racism was identified as an intrinsic evil, as was genocide. Immigration reform was considered a necessity. Torture was too condemned as an intrinsic evil. So on all of those things there is agreement between the US bishops and the pope.

The difference is not on the issues as such, it is on the political selection of issues to make a point within a social context to a particular audience with particular political objectives. And I don't mean political in a narrow sense, but in a general sense. That is, human beings are social and political animals, members of the polis. And so as a member of the polis, what do we seek for our common welfare? Everyone should be included in that, and we all have an obligation to the common good.

OWENS: If you take Europe as an analogous political unit to United States in this context, the pope has emphasized reclaiming or reinvigorating Christian heritage as a political priority in his papacy. Do you see any analogues in the United States?

CAHILL: I think the biggest analogue would not be from Catholicism but from the evangelical movement. That is, the evangelical notion that we are a Christian nation and we need to revive our Christianity. You see the same uneasiness about immigration and multiple religious traditions, especially Islam, in Europe, for example.

In terms of Catholicism, I don't know. That would be an interesting thing to try to tie down, because I think Catholics historically in the United States—and this applies to the bishops more than to the rest of the Church, which is proportionately younger—see themselves as coming from an immigrant history. Identity and belonging depended on Catholic identity, and the local Catholic Church was very much a purveyor of social services through healthcare and education and the religious orders. So it wasn't a matter of belonging to the whole by virtue of a religious identity, and a Catholic religious identity wasn't needed to

reinvigorate the whole. Catholicism was much more a specific enclave within the larger Christian America, but one that was often marginalized from social goods. And Catholics perceived themselves to be discriminated against. I think there's a lot of that mentality among some older Catholics and bishops.

We do have a huge immigrant Catholic population right now among Latinos. But I don't know whether the basis of their identity in this country is their Catholicism. I'd say probably not to the same degree as it was for earlier groups of Irish and Italian.

OWENS: Do you see the Catholic bishops seeking to focus on the broader Christian heritage as part of a political movement? It seems to me there is more of a focus on the Catholic identity here in the US than in Europe. Am I right to say that the pope is making a broader cultural appeal beyond Catholics alone?

CAHILL: Yes, exactly. Moreover, the Catholic bishops in the US who are focusing on these ethical and social issues always want to keep maintaining that what they are presenting is reasonable, and therefore should be respected in public policy and law. In a way, they're blurring the edge of the Catholic identity. I mean, it still is an issue of Catholic identity, but there is also a question of justice. And so it doesn't function in quite the same way. With respect to abortion, for example, the issue is framed as a question of Catholics protecting the human rights of the unborn.

OWENS: What do you see as the proper political, theological, and pastoral role of the US Catholic bishops?

CAHILL: I think that religion has an inherent social and political meaning, and part of what it means to be Christian is to change relationships in the world around us. I think that the bishops are entitled—even obligated—to speak to specific issues in a culture, like abortion, immigration, and war. But I need to make two clarifications: First, the bishops should be sensitive in their teaching to a number of different issues. There needs to be more of a commitment to keep a plurality of issues before the public attention.

Second, I don't think the bishops should take it to the extent of forbidding Catholics to belong—virtually condemning individual politicians and then trying to prevent Catholics from affiliating with one political party or another, at least as a general principle. I'm not sure what I would say if we suddenly had a national socialist party, so I don't want to say this absolutely, as though there could never be a candidate or party that they should

completely condemn. But I think, in general, in terms of mainstream politics, they should put the values out there, maybe express personal opinions, even, but not try to label certain positions as Catholic and the others as prohibited.

OWENS: To what extent are they doing that now? To what extent are the bishops exercising the normative role that you're laying out?

CAHILL: I think they do it well in terms of their documents and stated policy. They do it poorly in terms of concrete politics. I mentioned Faithful Citizenship, the voter's guide. That was a good example. Also, if you go to the USCCB website, they have immigration statements, healthcare reform statements, statements on war and racism, they have a joint project with Catholic Relief Services on global poverty and Haiti and that's great. But how often do you really hear public spokespersons really identifying this as critical and essential to what it is to be a Catholic?

OWENS: What do you think of the discrepancy between the documents and public statements? How has it impacted Catholic laypeople?

CAHILL: Well, as I was saying, it's affected Catholic laypeople very little. What it has affected—and this, I guess, applies to Catholic laypeople too—is the public image of what Catholicism is. It gives the impression Catholicism is a series of authoritarian pro-life positions that they're trying to impose on everyone else. It gives the impression they're getting these marching orders from the Vatican, and that they're completely irrational and completely right-wing. That's the image they're presenting. And—to be fair—the media in the US love this, and pick this up and reinforce it whenever they get a chance, so the two of them just keep it going. Take for example when the pope goes to Africa and makes an off-the-cuff unwarranted comment on condoms, there'll be an op-ed about it the next day in the *New York Times*. But if while he's there he talks about violence, global poverty, transnational corporations, extractive mining industries, and so on, that's not covered.

OWENS: Is there any way to repair the relationship between the bishops and the Catholic laypeople? You spoke about this earlier a little bit.

CAHILL: I'm sure there are ways. It's a matter of how realistic things are going to come to pass. First of all, there are some bishops who are good models, but I think it's going to take people who are more pastoral, more active and exposed and integrated at the grassroots, not aloof from the people, not insulated from ordinary Catholics by

a bubble of bureaucracy and red hats. And so—as we said earlier—the bishops and clergy need to meet the average education level of the faithful.

OWENS: One last question, and this draws on your role as a theologian as well as an ethicist. Is Eucharist a public act, and is there a difference in understanding on that by the pope and the American bishops? Of course, the context of this is the denial of communion by American bishops of politicians.

CAHILL: You're asking if it is a public act?

OWENS: I'm curious as to whether or not it's appropriate for a public denial of communion, whether the coming to the table for Eucharist is something that is a matter between the priest and God, or if it is a public statement of confession and reception and communion that is appropriately denied in order to warn other faithful? Or is it simply an individual matter?

CAHILL: It's not just an individual matter. I'm not of a mindset that you can radically separate religious identity, religious practices, and other social practices. I think they shade off into each other, and people are participants in many of these at the same time. And so a Eucharist can be more or less public, depending on a lot of factors. For example, is it a public event Eucharist? Is it in your local parish, or is it being offered for some occasion? Is the celebrant really well known? Are there obviously well-known figures there? If so, then they bring those identities in there, and they constitute a more public act. So I don't think there's a clear answer, or a clear line: is it public or not.

I also am not sure that I think it's always inappropriate to deny people communion for religious reasons. There's a book that you probably know called *Torture and Eucharist*. The point of departure for the title is the case of Chile under Pinochet where some of the bishops refused to give communion to known torturers as to make a statement against the regime and Catholic participation. I can't really say that I know that that was inappropriate. I also was working with the Catholic Peace Building Network at Notre Dame—Catholic Relief Services sponsors it—and we went to Colombia for a conference. Some of the bishops there were saying how difficult it was to hold Eucharist for some of the guerrillas who were still out in the jungle taking hostages. They saw it as a pastoral thing, to try to bring these people within the fold of Catholicism so that they could be

influenced. At the same time they're doing things that are wrong, publicly. So it's an ambiguous thing.

I don't know that I would want to say the Eucharist should never make a political statement. But in this particular case on abortion, I think it went off the rails. First of all it was too selective on the issues. Secondly, it defined what was acceptable in way too narrow terms. Politicians might be pro-choice, but it doesn't mean they're pro-abortion. Maybe they're thinking about all the illegal abortions that would occur otherwise. Maybe they're thinking that we need to have abortion be legal for a number of reasons, but they want to really advocate for these other social programs that are going to bring down abortion too. But that wasn't allowed. So it was too narrowly defined.

OWENS: That was very insightful. Thank you.