

"Bishop Hubbard's Message"  
 Week of January 2, 2012  
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY  
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany, NY, is the only U.S. bishop whom I know of who has explicitly taken into account the report of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that appeared more than two years ago and found that one in ten Americans has left the Catholic Church.

Thus, if ex-Catholics were a denomination unto themselves, they would constitute the second largest behind only the Catholic Church itself.

Bishop Hubbard is also one of the few bishops who was known and respected by the Catholics of the Albany diocese when he was named in 1977. Today, the frequently-heard comments after a bishop has been appointed are: "Who is he? Where is he from?" or "Oh my God, not him!"

Bishop Hubbard has been writing a series of monthly articles in his diocesan paper, *The Evangelist*, regarding the departure of so many Catholics from the Church. His initial column attributed the fall-off to the usual suspects: the loss of a sense of sin, individualism, rampant consumerism, secularism, and so forth.

But he received some feedback to these articles. Readers noted that he had "neglected to acknowledge ways in which the church itself has contributed to the alienation of many of its members and to its lack of appeal, especially to younger people."

Other bishops would do well to read his column, "Failings of the Church," in *Origins*, November 17, 2011, vol. 41, no. 24

At the top of his list of failings is the sexual abuse scandal in the priesthood. The problem was "not only that a number of priests betrayed the sacred bond of trust by sexually abusing minors, but more significantly there is a disillusionment and a loss of faith created by the way we bishops engaged in negligent retention and placed the image of the church before the protection and well-being of children and vulnerable youth."

One has only to look to Ireland to see the negative effects of the sexual abuse crisis on a country that is far more Catholic in its population and social traditions than the United States or Canada.

"Many Catholics...have been appalled by the fact that church leaders have not acknowledged sincerely and convincingly the reality of what happened, assumed responsibility for it and brought about the conversion of mind and heart which alone can rectify it."

"Truly," Bishop Hubbard declared, "clergy sexual abuse and its handling by the hierarchy are self-inflicted wounds—born of clericalism, power and secrecy—that will take a long time to heal."

He also mentioned parish closures and mergers, but gave little space to them. He devoted more print to what he called "anemic parish life." He referred to the problem of cliquishness, and the difficulty many new members have to fit in.

"But surely," he wrote, "inclusiveness and hospitality should be high priorities in a parish..."

Then he listed "pastoral insensitivity" as another reason why so many Catholics are alienated from the Church. Here all-too-familiar complaints surfaced, among them parents whose child is denied baptism because they are not regular church-goers or couples who are denied marriage because they are not registered parishioners or family members who are prohibited from saying a few words about the deceased at the end of the liturgy of Christian burial.

Of course, there are always complaints about poor liturgies and homilies. The latter are too often "canned," with little to do with the Scriptural readings of the day or the daily realities of the congregation. Neither do the music selections reinforce the liturgical theme of the Sunday.

The reason why the Church has lost so many younger members, Bishop Hubbard continued, is that the younger people are technologically proficient. They are wedded to their cell phones and the Internet, including Facebook, tweets, blogs, and websites.

He asks if parish and diocesan websites are imaginative, easy to navigate, full of live links, and are continually updated and redesigned.

Finally, many Catholics feel unaccepted or exploited. These include women generally, the separated or divorced, the single parent, the gay or lesbian person, and those who cannot fully accept the moral leadership of the hierarchy, especially on issues related to human sexuality and reproduction. (The last is only alluded to in Bishop Hubbard's list, but many Catholics do complain about the fixation of bishops on such issues as abortion and gay marriage.)

"Some people," Bishop Hubbard concluded his column, "find the church too traditional; others too progressive." In my opinion, however, it is not a 50/50 problem. There are many more disaffected Catholics who feel that the Church has abandoned the path marked out by the Second Vatican Council.

But that's for another time.

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## "The Disconnect Between Bishops and Other Catholics"

Week of January 9, 2012

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The U.S. Catholic bishops have produced a new introduction to their 2007 document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." The full text of the new introduction is available in *Origins*, October 13, 2011, vol. 41, no. 19. The original document is also available in *Origins*, November 29, 2007, vol. 37, no. 25.

The new introduction reminds Catholics that some moral issues "involve the clear obligation to oppose intrinsic evils which can never be justified," while others "require action to pursue justice and promote the common good."

The bishops point out that their quadrennial statements, on the run-up to every U.S. presidential election for nearly 35 years, have "at times been misused to present an incomplete or distorted view of the demands of faith in politics" but remain "a faithful and challenging call to discipleship in the world of politics."

Some Catholics who have actually read the 2007 document would take issue with the assumption behind the bishops' characterization of the response to their statement, namely, that it has at times been misused by progressive Catholics, who present "an incomplete or distorted" understanding of the demands of faith in the political order.

Actually, the record of the previous campaign shows that, if anyone presented "an incomplete or distorted" interpretation of the document, it was the traditionalist Catholics, especially in the hierarchy itself.

One thinks of the then-archbishop of Denver, now the archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, who argued that, because the Church's teaching on abortion involves an intrinsic evil, abortion "trumps" all other moral issues, especially those that touch on Catholic social teaching.

Therefore, the abortion issue is the only moral touchstone for Catholic politicians. If they are "wrong" on abortion (for example, they have supported or voted for funding for abortion), their views on the whole range of Catholic social doctrines are of no account.

And conversely, if Catholic politicians are "right" on abortion and "wrong" on a whole range of social justice issues, they are to be given a free pass, so to speak.

That is why so many theologically conservative bishops supported the Republican ticket in November 2008, some even going so far as to insist that Catholics who voted Democratic would have committed a serious sin and even endangered their eternal salvation.

It also explains the opposition of some 80 bishops (or fewer, depending upon a number of variable factors) to the University of Notre Dame's inviting President Barack Obama to give the Commencement address in 2009 and to receive an honorary degree.

In last week's column I cited Albany's Bishop Howard Hubbard's October message on the "Failings of the Church" in his diocesan paper, *The Evangelist*. He acknowledged in that column that some Catholics disagree with the hierarchy's teachings on a variety of moral issues.

This is confirmed in a recent survey of U.S. Catholics, commissioned by the *National Catholic Reporter* and published in its October 28-November 10, 2011 issue.

On the matter of Catholic attitudes toward the credibility of the bishops' teachings, the survey found that relatively few Catholics look to church leaders as the sole moral arbiters.

This is particularly true with regard to official teachings on such issues as divorce and remarriage, abortion, non-marital sex, homosexuality, and contraception.

Upwards of half of those surveyed say that individuals, not the hierarchy, are best equipped to

make moral decisions on these matters. When it comes to contraception, however, the percentage rises to two-thirds.

On issues other than divorce and remarriage and contraception (where the percentage of dissidents is roughly the same today as it was 25 years ago), the share of Catholics who look solely to church leaders for guidance on matters of right and wrong has declined.

Those who attend Mass every week are more inclined to look to the hierarchy for guidance, but not by much.

Indeed, half of the oldest generation of Catholics believe that individuals themselves are the proper locus of moral authority, even on such issues as abortion.

In summary, on most of the issues the survey asked about, majorities of Catholics said that the locus of moral authority rests with individuals, not the bishops, but after taking church teachings into account.

Given the findings of this latest survey, it is clear that relatively few Catholics look to the bishops themselves as the sole source of guidance on moral issues.

It would have been useful to know how many Catholics actually read the teaching documents produced by the bishops, whether this “new introduction” or the original statement itself.

There is an evident disconnect between what the bishops *think* is happening “out there,” and what is actually going on.

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