

**Obama and the Catholic Voter** (*A guest commentary by Mark Hanson*)

*December 10, 2008*

The controversies facing Roman Catholics about their support for Democrats have apparently not ended with the election. Not only are the U.S. Catholic bishops divided on whether they should provide Holy Communion to politicians who support abortion rights, but a South Carolina priest has recently informed parishioners that they should also not receive Communion if they voted for Barack Obama. According to Rev. Jay Scott Newman, a vote for Obama constituted “material cooperation with evil.” What this means is that voting for Obama puts him into position to do the *evil* deeds of supporting reproductive choice and embryonic stem cell research, even if voters do not do those deeds themselves.

With 54 percent of Catholics having supported Obama, that is a lot of cooperation with evil. In Montana, many of the counties with the highest percentage of Catholic voters were also, ironically, the counties that were more likely to support him. He won highly Catholic Silver Bow County, for example, 69 to 28 percent. Perhaps what these Catholics recognize is that the moral responsibilities of politicians extend to a community larger than themselves as Catholics.

In a 1984 address to the University of Notre Dame, New York Governor Mario Cuomo—a Roman Catholic—argued that the Catholic public official lives a political truth most Catholics have insisted on, namely, that “to assure our freedom we must allow others the same freedom, even if occasionally it produces conduct by them which we would hold to be sinful.”

Given the plurality of religious and moral views in our country, Cuomo argues that our public morality, and ultimately our public policy, relies on what he calls a “consensus view of what is right and wrong.” Religious beliefs and values may be a part of this consensus, but they may not be the sole basis for policy.

Consider, for example, President Bush’s position on embryonic stem cell research. Bush halted federal funding for such research based on in his personal view that a pre-embryo is morally equal to an adult at the moment of conception. Polls consistently show, however, that a strong majority of Americans favor such research. Obama’s position would honor that majority. Bush’s policy seems based on his religious views.

Likewise, Roman Catholic doctrine should not be the law of the land. And, as Cuomo powerfully argues, the church does not order him to pursue his salvation according to a precise political plan. The politician therefore finds him- or herself in a job with certain role-related responsibilities that do not require a religious agenda, but rather an agenda that works for the common good and freedom for peoples of all faiths.

Cuomo’s response to those who argue that abortion is a special case reflects his own balance of religious and political judgment: He believes that the legal prohibition of all abortions is not plausible, and, even if it could be obtained, it wouldn’t work. “Given present attitudes,” he says, “it would be Prohibition revisited, legislating what couldn’t be enforced and in the process creating a disrespect for the law in general.”

Ultimately, expecting voters to reject politicians based on “material cooperation with evil” would only lead to paralysis. A voter may not approve of Barack Obama’s support for abortion rights, but how, then, can one reconcile Christian morality with John McCain’s support for a war that violates the Christian just war tradition?

The public policy process in a pluralistic society such as ours pulls any responsible citizen—voter as well as politician—into a morass of moral trade-offs. Each must balance the multiple moral and political judgments that befall him or her. One might conclude, for example, that Obama’s strategy of trying to reduce the number of abortions through better support for families, pregnant women, and adoption is a better policy in a pluralistic society than incurring the terrible consequences of the loss of reproductive liberty for women and families. Or one might decide to support a candidate despite his position on abortion because his other policies are simply better for the country and defend life in other ways.

The best role for the religious voter is to do what all voters should do: advocate responsibly for what you believe are the best policies for our country. And when the consensus is achieved, be, what theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called, the “prophetic minority,” which calls society to an even higher moral plane. That is what any church should be doing. And as long as our laws are not religious laws, more power to them.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics at the University of Montana.