Real Americans, Real Catholics: Race, Religion and the 2008 Election

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BY VINCENT D. ROUGEAU

It has never been easy being African-American and Catholic in the United States. Though many of us, along with our Latino brothers and sisters, trace our Catholic roots to traditions that have been present in the Americas for centuries, we have often been made to understand that we are invisible to many of our fellow U.S. Catholics. How else would one explain the relative insignificance of the political and cultural concerns of African-Americans and Latinos in the rhetoric of some American bishops and other Catholics who heaped vitriol on those of us who supported Barack Obama in the recent presidential election?

Although this hostility was typically directed in that election toward any Catholic who failed to share the view that abortion was the only issue that mattered in selecting a candidate, the message to Catholics of color was particularly stark: Not only were we not “real” Americans in the coded language of Sarah Palin and the Republican Party base; we were not “real” Catholics either.

Being invisible to the Republican Party is something African-Americans have learned to live with. It is one important reason why many of us rarely vote for Republican candidates. Hispanics were perhaps a bit more relevant to the Republicans in past election cycles, but the “real” American response to immigration reform that was championed by Republicans in the House of Representatives has put an end to any meaningful outreach to Hispanics by the Republican Party for the foreseeable future. Yet despite explicit appeals to nativism by some Republicans throughout the campaign, several Catholic bishops—apparently blind to the irony of an immigrant church supporting nativist politics—alluded to Barack Obama’s candidacy in ways that made it clear that the only issue in the presidential race worth discussing, as far as they were concerned, was the criminalization of abortion. This made the invisibility of people of color to certain Catholic bishops even more apparent, and that invisibility was much harder to deal with.

An End to the Status Quo
Given the gravity of the circumstances in which the nation now finds itself, and the undeniable responsibility many in the Republican Party bear for those circumstances due to their adherence to agendas steeped in neoconservatism, libertarianism and free-market liberalism, one would think our fellow Catholics would at least allow a bit of goodwill toward those of us who could no longer abide the political status quo. Might Latinos in particular have assessed, quite reasonably, that John McCain would never be able to get comprehensive immigration reform past members of his own party, were he ever to propose it? And who better than Colin Powell could articulate so eloquently what many African-Americans have long felt about the Republican Party, as if the condescending and dismissive treatment he received from the neoconservatives in the Bush administration was not enough to send a rather convincing message about who really counted?

Still, we were told that no good Catholic could vote for Obama. Or, to make the point affirmatively, good Catholics must vote Republican.

I suppose Catholics of color were expected to shut up and toe this political line no matter how devastating a Republican administration might be to our efforts to announce our presence in this society as something more than afterthoughts, tokens or entertainers; and perhaps it is time to make something perfectly clear. We will not be ignored and treated as if our experiences, our lives and our views are marginal, insignificant and less than central to the American experience. We will not be condescended to, threatened and bullied as if we are somehow too stupid to weigh the serious difficulties that attend one’s political choices when permissive access to abortion is a legal right. Support for human dignity and the common good cannot be reduced to self-congratulatory voting for a “pro-life” candidate. Other things also matter. It was encouraging to see Cardinal Francis George remind his brother bishops at their recent meeting that racial and eco-

drawn to the United States largely by free-market policies championed by the political right, have also become mired in poverty. Low rates of high school completion and high rates of births to single mothers in these communities make this poverty more intractable, as does the marginalization of those with undocumented immigration status. Yet in the minds of many pro-Republican Catholics, it was absolutely impossible for Barack Obama to be honest about his support for increased social spending as a strategy of abortion reduction. Increased social spending attacks the economic inequality that even conservatives like Frum believe is destructive to the nation’s social fabric, fueling the circumstances that lead so many American women to seek abortions.

Let us consider for a moment the reality of abortion in the United States. Abortion rates (which, by the way, have been in a steady decline for some time) are highest in communities that are disproportionately poor. This means African-American and Hispanic communities, which have poverty rates three to four times those of white communities. What does an all-or-nothing strategy toward criminalization of abortion say to women in these communities, women who are also routinely vilified for having too many babies? Rather than being offered hope through support for the creation of a society in which poor mothers could envision futures of solidarity and participation for their children, they are told that more of them need to be prosecuted as criminals.

Barack Obama’s simple presence in the Oval Office will probably do more to reduce abortions than any possible further restriction of the abortion laws that might have occurred during a McCain-Palin administration. For the first time in American history, women of color can look at their children, particularly their sons, and say with conviction that American society sees them as full, dignified members of the community for whom anything might be possible. Why isn’t that something worth voting for?

Reconciliation and Solidarity

Many Catholics of color feel deeply wounded and betrayed after this election, and although we are used to such feelings, they still hurt. Our experiences in this society have something to teach our fellow Catholics about the limits of the law, the realities of racism and exclusion and the real possibilities for change offered by a meaningful commitment to the values of solidarity and participation that form a fundamental part of Catholic social thought. As Pope John Paul II stated so eloquently in his encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: “Solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimension of total gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. One’s neighbor is not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father.”

We hear much talk about Latin America, Africa and Asia being the future of the church. If this is going to be more than just a platitude, more American Catholics need to take seriously the concerns of people of color at home. President Obama has already begun to demonstrate through his appointments that he is not going to govern this country as a liberal ideologue, and he has spent an extraor-
ordinary amount of time listening to the voices of people from a broad cross-section of views within the Democratic Party—including pro-life Democrats—and beyond. Indeed, his political appointments thus far have demonstrated a remarkable sense of balance, pragmatism and concern for the good of all Americans, a far cry from the ideological steam-rolling we were subjected to under two Republican administrations.

Catholics on the political right might benefit from Obama’s example by spending a few moments listening to the concerns of their brothers and sisters in faith who may have experienced the world in a different way and who, if engaged from a position of respect, might be able to communicate experiences of suffering, love and transcendence that could transform both the church and the nation for the better. If the preferential option for the poor is truly meaningful in the life of our church, we should be spending a lot more time considering the abortion issue from the perspective of those who are most likely to resort to the procedure because of feelings of exclusion and desperation. Do these women have any reason to believe that if abortion were recriminalized, authorities would take the difficulties of their lives seriously and temper justice for the unborn with mercy for their suffering mothers? One did not sense this in the rhetoric of the Republican presidential campaign. The longstanding tendency of our legal system to punish the poor and minorities excessively and disproportionately in comparison to those with means is indisputable.

Real reconciliation begins with real listening. Have Catholics been listening to one another with a commitment to hearing what others have to say? Eight years of Republican leadership have failed this nation. President Obama gives many of us hope that the United States can once again be something more than a trading floor for monied elites so shameless in their greed that, having fought tooth and nail for decades to prevent meaningful regulation of their financial activities, they now seek to cover their outrageous losses with public funds.

Why is it acceptable to assume the worst of Barack Obama when he has only just begun to govern? Where is the Christian charity in that? What will it take for those of us who have been invisible for so long finally to have a face? We are ready to join hands with our fellow Americans and begin in solidarity the long walk toward a political life in this nation in which all people matter. We may disagree on some of the paths to take, but we agree on the destination. Will you join us? The world exists in more than black and white.