

BISHOPS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Topic: When Bishops Speak out on Public Issues
Convener: James L. Heft, Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies
Presenters: Patrick Jordan, Managing Editor at *Commonweal*
Tobias Winright, Saint Louis University

Patrick Jordan opened the session by posing these questions: should bishops speak out on public issues; and if so, how. Citing several paragraphs of Vatican II's document on the bishops (*Christus Dominus*) and several statements by Benedict XVI ("The Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice" [*Deus caritas est*, #28], and "The relationship between the Eucharistic mystery and social commitments must be made explicit," and that it is "necessary for dioceses and Christian communities to teach and promote the Church's social doctrine" (# 89 and #91, the Pope's postsynodal apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum caritas*), Jordan concludes that the bishops have a clear obligation to speak out on public issues. But *how* best to do so is less clear.

Jordan recognized that not only do bishops as individuals speak out, but so do State Catholic conferences (often quite effectively), as well as bishops together as a national conference. On any of these three levels, bishops need to exercise the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. The pre-Vatican II model of "command-and-control" is no longer useful, if it ever was. A quick perusal of the contents of *Origins* over the last two years shows that individual bishops have addressed issues of justice. It is more challenging, however, to address such issues with temperance, that is, placing issues of justice in clarifying contexts. When it comes to the virtue of fortitude, most bishops, Jordan stated, need a "supersized portion." Above all, citing Leon Kass, Jordan concluded that bishops need to address the first and greatest human question: "What does all this mean? And what am I to do here?"

Tobias Winright focused his paper more specifically on what the bishops said and might have said about the war in Iraq. In retrospect, Winright concludes that their dire warnings about the war issued on November 13th 2002 were much more accurate than the analyses of George Weigel and Michael Novak who not only supported the war, but claimed, on the basis of their interpretation of the *Catholic Catechism* (# 2309), that the nation's political leaders has a special "charism" for discerning the justice of the war. After discussing the difference between moral principles and their application (for example, citing Charles Curran, moral principles are binding, whereas people may differ in good conscience on their application), Winright asked whether bishops did not often claim binding moral authority not just for principles, but also for their application when, for example, they condemned torture and the indiscriminant bombing of civilian populations. Taking up Kristen Heyer's description of J. Bryan Hehir's "public Church model" and Michael J. Baxter's "prophetic model," Winright notes that even the public Church model, using just war criteria can be prophetic. Nevertheless, Winright asks whether the bishops did enough or should have done more in condemning the war in Iraq. They have certainly been consistently and publicly vocal about embryonic

stem cell research and abortion; should they also have been as vocal and persistent about the war in Iraq, and the deaths of thousands of children there? Are there not complexities about abortion on the one hand, and moral imperatives about the injustice of wars on the other, that rarely get official affirmations?

The discussion following these presentations was both lively and substantive. Should we not realize that since Vatican II, Catholics in the United States, especially the many Catholic elected to political office have greater responsibility than before to address public issues. Is it not a mistake to expect the bishops to carry out this responsibility alone, or even primarily? On the other hand, is the use by public officials of just war language any assurance of the honest and rigorous application of just war criteria? Should we presume that when it is difficult for Catholic lay people to come to a consensus on moral issues related to war, it should be any less difficult for bishops? After all, is it not evident that there are differences of opinion on end of life issues even at the highest levels of the Vatican? Is it not difficult for bishops to disagree in public, even where disagreement may be legitimate? Besides in Catholic colleges and universities, where is there that open space for such thoughtful debate and disagreement?

Moreover, has there not been in recent years a weakening of the authority of national conferences of bishops, not just from the sexual abuse crises, but by the Vatican as well? Is not the downsizing of the US Bishops' Conference an indication that its ability to address public issues competently and prudently is now diminished? Whatever the current situation of bishops and their conference, they, as well as theologians, need to learn how to teach well, how to persuade, to offer reasons, to draw upon the Scriptures, and to fulfill the demanding roles assigned to them for the sake of the Church.

JAMES L. HEFT
Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies
Los Angeles, California