

Sightings 11/7/05

Bishops and Budgets

-- Martin E. Marty

Doing sightings in Friday and Saturday newspapers no longer means having to be satisfied with church ads, church bulletin notices, and the like. The *Chicago Sun-Times* licenses religion writer Cathleen Falsani not only to be cucumber cool and objective when reporting, but also hot on the spot in her signed columns. On November 4 she let a longtime friend, an atheist, raise questions about the priorities churches advance in issues of justice. Falsani then raised her own questions and made her own declarations: "And this week, as Republican leaders try to force a monstrous \$50 billion budget cut ... it is clear that [the administration's] moral compass ... has been lost." Democrats in Congress don't have much in the way of policy and action to let them off the hook, either.

Falsani goes on: This "so-called 'budget reconciliation' would have devastating effects on the poorest, most vulnerable Americans, while allowing tax relief for the rich." She specifies ways in which the poor and other vulnerable people would be short-changed or cut out. "Is this the kind of leadership" voters had in mind when they "cast their ballots in 2004 based on 'moral values'"? "Is this what faith-based 'compassionate conservatism' looks like? Is our nation more moral, more secure or spiritually healthier than it was a year ago," at election time?

Mounting not a soapbox but a pulpit, the columnist addresses her "fellow Christian voters specifically," asking, "has the Good News been advanced in any way?" "No. Absolutely not." (It was not a day for subtlety.) Not wanting to be alone at the lectern, she invokes "all 65 synod bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [who] have signed a letter to members of congress" opposing the budget-reduction bill, and who cite the biblical record as being clear on this subject (as it may not be on all others). The unanimous Lutherans (my tribe) are by no means alone on this front; some would say they are latecomers.

Consider a test case: Church leaders who come out for or against "school prayer" or "homosexual rights" or "abortion" causes are on the front page, and can make people in Congress quake. One cynic would say that these bishops have no more power than the Pope and the Vatican when the latter oppose preemptive war strikes, capital punishment, and the like. Cynic number 2 might say that Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and other leaders have no business speaking up; they are just bureaucrats. A third cynic charges that the bishops are out-of-touch bureaucrats. But they are reelected by the roots of the grass roots in congregations, and are in touch. Cynic number 4 says that if people want to follow biblical injunctions to care for the poor and vulnerable, they should do it through their churches or other religious institutions. Why involve publics and citizenries?

The dollar figures represented by cuts that will hurt "God's people," the poor, are staggering, and all the voluntary good will that could be summoned in an ideal world -- and ours is not that, the bishops would say -- could not address the need. Most churches are small and fiscally (though one hopes not spiritually) bankrupt.

I rarely retrieve pulpit or soapbox for use on this Monday op-ed, but let this be an exception. Check biblical chapters and verses along the way, and then check budget priorities as they get approached on both sides of the aisle.

References:

To read the bishops' letter, go to: <http://www.elca.org/advocacy/issues/hunger/05-10-06-reconciliation.html>. For a typical synod's longer statement, see: <http://www.semnsynod.org/assembly/2005/2005-09.html>

P.S. Subscribers know that we are reluctant to use *Sightings* as a bulletin board. But this once, I'd like to send a message aimed at the Chicago area: Tomorrow -- Tuesday, November 8, 7-8 p.m. -- at Northwestern University (Chicago Campus), Thorne Auditorium, I am speaking on "Welcoming the Stranger." This is one of many events at the Chicago Humanities Festival. I am pulling strings (my own strings, in this case) because I was on the founding board of the Illinois Humanities Council and have a soft spot in my affection zone for the state humanities programs.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.