

Pastor's Column

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President Barack Obama and the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize

There has been no shortage of opinion, perspective, and commentary regarding President Obama's award of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.

It is important, first, to know the official Vatican reaction and, secondly, the reaction of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Delivered by the Holy See's lead spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, here is the statement presented on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI and the Vatican:

The awarding of the Nobel Prize for Peace to President Obama is greeted with appreciation in the Vatican, in light of the commitment demonstrated by the President for the promotion of peace in the international arena, and in particular also recently in favor of nuclear disarmament. It's hoped that this very important recognition will further encourage that commitment, which is difficult but fundamental for the future of humanity, so that the desired results will be obtained.

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), gave this statement:

In the name of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, I would like to offer congratulations to President Barack Obama on his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. As he has graciously said, much of the work of realizing a more peaceful and just world for all persons and nations remains to be done; but the prize was given because as President of the United States he has already changed the international conversation.

In our country, the remarkable and historic achievement of his election has changed the relationships between men and women of all races. The rich diversity of United States society is now more surely anchored in a national unity that is better able to foster the peace we all are challenged to pursue. Our prayer is that almighty God will bless the President and his family.

On the First Sunday of October, in the Catholic Church, we celebrate **Respect Life Sunday**. This celebration provides an opportunity for us to be mindful that, as Catholics, we are a "pro-life" people. "Pro-life," for us, means that we are a people who are creating a culture of life in our society that encompasses all people, and all situations, from womb to tomb.

In my Pastor's Columns this month, I have been keeping to the "pro-life" theme in the hope of reminding everyone that to be "pro-life" is not just to be "anti-abortion." If we are "pro-life," we are concerned about a variety of issues that include abolition of the death penalty, universal health care coverage, nuclear disarmament, ending the violence of war as a solution to differences, assisting those who are on the fringes of society for a variety of reasons, end of life issues, etc.

Wherever we see "culture of death" attitudes, we need to name them and denounce them. Wherever we see "culture of life" attitudes, we need to name them and applaud them. The reality is that we find almost all segments of our society with a mix of "culture of death" and "culture of life" attitudes. Our two major political parties exemplify this the best, and indeed, most of us Catholics, find ourselves living with "the mix" in our own personal views as well.

There are those in all circles of Catholic life who see the "pro-life" stance in terms of only "anti-abortion," and it is all or nothing. It is this one issue only that matters at this time. This debate among Catholics is now raging at all levels in the Church.

I am of the opinion that we must embrace all life issues at the same time. Denounce "death" where we see it, and applaud "life" where we see it. As we become more life-centered in other areas of society, I believe, the desire and need to protect "pro-choice" laws will decrease.

With all this in mind, we need to denounce the policies of President Obama because of his protection of "pro-choice" laws, but we need to applaud him for his efforts in regard to nuclear disarmament. Is this not a laudable effort, to rid the world of nuclear weapons? Our global community now has the ability to destroy our world as we know it. Is this not an important "pro-life" issue? I believe it is. So does the Vatican and so does the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The phrase in the statement of Cardinal George is crucial: "...the prize was given because as President of the United States he has already changed the international conversation..."

This phrase is important, because as Catholics, from day one, 2,000 years ago, we have been involved in an international conversation. The Catholic Church is a "multi-national" organization and we have always been one. We appreciate, cherish, and support all efforts in which we, as a global community, are willing to work together. This is what the Vatican and the USCCB acknowledge in the preliminary work of the Obama Administration.

We, as Americans, may not be able to see the shift as clearly, but the leaders and citizens of other countries in our global village see an America that is now more willing to deeply engage with other countries in the work of protecting our Planet, Earth.

This is a very "Catholic" approach, and indeed, is a "pro-life" concern.

As Disciples of the Lord Jesus, let us continue our ministry on behalf of life, a "culture of life" that embraces all from womb to tomb.

F. Mike