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April 1, 2012: A Partisan Day of Prayer and Fasting

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Title: A Partisan Day of Prayer and Fasting

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4/1/2012—My book, *Hallowed Secularism*, asks the question, why has religious affiliation declined, particularly among the young? It is a complex question and the answer must not be simple. Yet, I suggest that a large part of it is failure by organized religion to be credible on issues of the rights of women and gays.

Now I have to add the obvious political partisanship of the actions of the U.S. Bishops in declaring March 30 a day of prayer and fasting in regard to religious liberty. Here is the story from the Catholic News Service:

The U.S. bishops have urged Catholics and “all people of faith” across the nation to observe March 30 as a day of prayer and fasting for religious freedom and conscience protection. The bishops announced the daylong observance in a statement titled “United for Religious Freedom” that was approved March 14 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Administrative Committee.

They asked Catholics and others to join them in “prayer and penance for our leaders and for the complete protection of our first freedom —religious liberty — which is not only protected in the laws and customs of our great nation, but rooted in the teachings of our great tradition.” The bishops said that among current threats to religious liberty is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services mandate that forces employers, including religious ones, to provide coverage of contraception/sterilization in their health plans.

Start with the fact that this day of prayer is only about something that harms the Catholic faithful. Not war. Not the end of welfare. But contraception provisions that violate Church doctrine.

Then there is the mixing of politics with principle. The Bishops know perfectly well that there has already been one compromise about contraception and could be more. Church doctrine recognizes lots of grey in these kinds of matters. There is a big difference between forcing a Catholic hospital to perform a sterilization procedure versus paying for an insurance policy that includes funding for such a procedure for an employee, Catholic or not. And, obviously, that is even more the case when the insurance company is told by the government to cover such things without charging the hospital. It is ridiculous to treat such a complex context as if it were a simple matter of absolute right and wrong. By upping the stakes to a day of fasting, the Church looks like it is purposefully opposing the government for partisan reasons.

Finally, there is the matter of timing. The Bishops are not fools and realize that they look to be coordinating the Supreme Court challenge to Obamacare with their narrower concerns. So now it looks like a day of fasting and prayer to defeat Obamacare. But if that is the case, we are entitled to ask, what about the uninsured? Where is the day of fasting and prayer on behalf of the vulnerable—the poor, the orphan, the homeless? The Bishops should be ashamed to be in bed with the reactionary forces that care nothing for the poor.

All in all, the Bishops have now cheapened prayer and fasting to the status of partisan stunt. By demeaning the Gospel, the Bishops have done far more harm to Christian life than any government could do.