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The Sleeping Giant

Eugene F. Diamond, M.D.

One great legacy left by the Catholic community to the American historical scene is a succession of astute politicians. A procession of ethnic leaders, usually operating from a minority political base, have achieved positions of influence and control through a combination of organizational drudgery and an inborn intuition for the unspoken will of the people. To a large extent, these political leaders have been first or second generation products of European societies which were characterized by persecution and coercion of the disenfranchised. Though their pursuit of power was born of a desire to escape certain vulnerabilities, their use of power has, by and large, been characterized by a sensitivity of the needs of the underdog and a dedication to the

obligation of government to protect the defenseless elements in the society. Since most ethnic politicians achieved office after a power struggle with an entrenched Anglo-Saxon Protestant adversary, there was little occasion to agonize over the proper role of a Catholic minority in a pluralistic society. Fierce identification with a conspicuous Catholic position was frequently the key to amalgamating a coalition of other minority groups against an intolerant and oppressive overlord. The infrastructure of this Catholic political system still exists in many areas although there has been a dilution of its homogeneity by the need for some of its principals to broaden their appeal in order to fulfill national aspirations. There has also been a modification of its social preoccupation as its constituents move from the sweat shops to the country clubs. The most unfortunate development in the function of the Catholic political system, however, has been its estrangement from the institutional church during its current epochal battles.

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The accumulated expertise and tactical genius of the many able Catholic politicians is seldom evident in the abortion reform controversy as it develops state by state. This is not to demean the yeoman performances by individual legislators in leading floor fights and developing parliamentary approaches. The problem has been that politicians have tended to defer to the clergy in the development of overall strategies and grassroots campaigns. At the parish level, the clergy have tended to be particularly inert and ineffective and, at times, even antagonistic toward developing organized lay protest against abortion law repeal. The non-involvement of the clergy would seem to derive from a confusion regarding the real issues involved. Instead of keeping the abortion issue in its proper context of life and death, young curates have tended to lump it with contraception. Nothing, it would seem, conflicts so much with a young priests post-conciliar self image as an issue even slightly tainted with "pelvic morality". Deprived then, of a coordinated and broadbased voter's protest, the Catholic tactic has typically settled for lofty and inspiring episcopal statements, couched in theological phraseology and devoid of any real or implied threat of political action. Into the void left by the lack of a diocesan grand strategy, there typically scurries a zealous and incredibly energetic group of physicians, lawyers, and other lay people who patch together a Right to Life group out of volunteers already overcommitted to professional obligations and child care. Because these people are high-energy types and because they are absolutely guilt-ridden if they shirk a single opportunity to speak out against

abortion, their achievements have been monumental. When arrayed against a sleek and affluent opponent, they are constantly frustrated and usually feel as though they are carrying water in a leaking bucket. All of their meager resources are expended in reacting to the manifold legislative thrusts of the anti-life activists. Typically, a suit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of a coterie of medical deans and department heads will send Right-to-Life attorneys into frantic sessions to prepare briefs which are usually lucid and well researched. Nowhere to my knowledge has the ordinary of a diocese retained a full-time legal staff energetic and imaginative enough to bring test cases to court to dramatize those issues which we want higher courts to weigh in the balance. It would be a credit to accept the fact that there are not adequate financial resources available for such an effort. Meanwhile, state and district courts strike down a succession of statutes because of the alleged impact to the life of the mother. Yet, as physicians, we recognize that this language is so precise and meaningful in a practical sense that, for all intents and purpose, no abortions are performed to save a woman's life.

Many have spoken of the problems related to the coexistence of bills to repeal abortion laws and bills to provide aid to private education on the

same legislative calendar. It should be obvious that this situation is capable of exploitation by opponents of either bill if we give the slightest indication of a willingness to trade one for the other. It is also obvious that no legislative program of this type ever succeeds through compromise. No one can imagine a civil-rights program which offered to sacrifice jobs or the vote in return for housing or medical care. From a practical standpoint, it would also seem obvious that any threat to close parochial schools loses its political impact when it is tendered with hand-wringing and timidity and fears regarding its ecumenical consequences. In many areas, Catholic school boards are now in the position of the poker player who bluffed with two deuces and lost. In Chicago, for example, after the Catholic school board announced that it would not close its schools, as previously threatened, the public school board refused even to discuss a proposal for shared time.

The same type of situation can now be seen to be developing with regard to Catholic hospitals as suits are filed to attack conscience clauses and the rights of Catholic hospitals to withhold their premises from abortion, sterilization, and public birth control activities. The same voices of vacillation and accommodation are again raised. The same prophets of doom stride to the podium to intone gloomy prognostications regarding the untenability of the Catholic legal

position. We hear that the code of the Catholic Hospital Association is being "revised" and anxieties are now being voiced in doctor's lounges from coast to coast that we may again be on the brink of a corporate cave-in before the battle even gets to the ramparts. Again we listen, in vain, for the language of power play and confrontation. Where is the forceful and charismatic leader who will lead us to a show down at the gap? Where is the loud ecclesiastical voice which will call for the summary close-down of every Catholic hospital on the day that first Catholic hospital is directed by a court to schedule an abortion. Not in the orderly transferral of facilities from the sisters to the community will we find any political leverage but only in the abrupt and unforewarned control of this large segment of the health care delivery system.

While we scan the horizon for banners and listen for the sound of trumpets, we sink deeper into ennui and Nirvana. The winter of our discontent is lengthening but there is still ample time. As the dominoes continue to fall and as attacks on potential life give way to attacks on nascent life and, ultimately, to attacks on deformed life and life nearing its quietus, we still have hope. We hope for the miracle which will cut away the ties which now bind down the energies of our Church, so that this sleeping giant will arise in time to salvage some of our society's values.