

ETHNIC SELF-INTEREST

The Archbishop of San Francisco last week issued a pastoral letter opposing the Central American policies of the American government. That action raised some interesting parallels to the American Jewish community and Israel.

The special Archdiocesan interest in Central America, and the special American Jewish concern in Israel, are both legitimate expressions of ethnic group self-interest. There is a heavy Latino Catholic constituency in San Francisco, which relates to the Latin Catholic nature of Central America; just as there is a Jewish constituency in America interested in Israel because of the Jewish nature of Israel.

And the Archbishop is no more guilty of "dual loyalty" because he has evinced a special interest in that ethnic constituency, than are Jews who evince a special interest in Israel. There is nothing wrong with such a special interest. Archdiocesan officials have a humanitarian concern about other unfortunate groups, such as those in Zaire or Afghanistan, and so do rabbis -- but, in both cases, they have a responsibility to be especially interested in their own constituencies when they are in trouble.

Nor does it mean that the Archbishop's or the rabbis' respective special interests in Central America and in Israel are not bounded by strong moral beliefs about what is happening or could happen in those two areas. It is just a matter of which subjects we are naturally most alert to, and about which we choose to speak out. Or, as someone is reputed to have said: While you may not be for yourself alone, if you are not for yourself, who are you?

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Translated into political terms, it is the American mode: self-interest bounded by fundamental human values. Without the value boundaries, unchecked self-interest could destroy us. Without the self-interest, the attempt to apply human values in the abstract could destroy us. We cannot decide for other people what their "best interest" is; nor do we want them to decide that for us.

Sometimes the equation is difficult, as in the case of multilingual voting material, on which San Franciscans are going to vote in November. Those who want to eliminate the multilingual ballot material are not thereby bigots; and those who want to maintain the multilingual ballot are not thereby foolish.

One of the best arguments for eliminating the multilingual ballot is that it will erode integration as a basic American principle. If we are going to have a common nation, we need to encourage a common basic language. One of the best arguments for keeping the multilingual ballot material is that it will encourage more recent immigrants to become involved in the political process. That is, among other things, a matter of ethnic group self-interest. We'd better ponder and weigh both sides of that issue before we vote on it.

But the point is that, however they may be finally weighed, the special concern of the Archbishop in Central America, of the Latinos and Chinese in the multilingual ballot, of the Jews in Israel, are all legitimate American phenomena.