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Party Politics and the Priesthood

by

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In a highly publicized study of members of the press and media by Freedom Forum and the Roper Center¹ it was reported that 89% of the members of the fourth estate had voted Democratic in a series of elections. The inference to be drawn from this study by most observers was that members of the press and media were drawn overwhelmingly from the liberal wing of the political spectrum and that this orientation in their political views could and probably would influence the way that they covered and reported the news. The long-alleged liberal bias of the media was supported by this study and by subsequent documentation.²

In recent years there have been similar allegations made about the National Council of Catholic Bishops based on some of the statements and policy papers emanating from the NCCB particularly those relating to public policy rather than issues of faith and morals. During the cold war, particularly, commentaries on wars carried on by Soviet surrogate groups in Nicaragua and El Salvador were largely reflective of the policies of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and in opposition to those of the Reagan and Bush I administrations. The bishops' statement on atomic weapons leaned heavily in the direction of the "ban the bomb" strategy rather than a policy of deterrence. More recent statements such as "The Many faces of AIDS" and "Always Our Children", in contrast to papal statements such as the 1975 Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics and a Letter to the Bishops on Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons in 1986 seemed to many Catholics to be tilted toward the liberal position of tolerance for and sympathy with the Gay Rights movement.

It would be simplistic and unwarranted, of course, to attempt to identify the policies and platforms of a particular political party with the overall teachings of the Catholic Church in the United States or with the positions of the Magisterium on important moral issues.

Nevertheless, an increasing number of politicians and theologians are beginning to question the evident incompatibility between the standards of the Democratic Party and positions advocated by the Catholic Church on numerous prominent moral issues. At least one prominent Democratic Catholic politician has questioned how "any Catholic in his or her right mind can continue to support the Democratic Party."³ Senator Carlin points out the most notorious example of an issue that leads him to this conclusion, the issue of abortion. For decades, the Democratic Party has been America's pro-abortion party. As pointed out by Cardinal George, the Democratic Party has gone so far as to question whether the anti-abortion politicians can be candidates for office on the Democratic ticket.⁴ Of course, the conflicts do not end with abortion but extend to many other life and death issues. The principal support for physician-assisted suicide originates in Democratic caucuses.⁵ The majority of Democratic members of Congress also favor embryonic stem cell research and a majority also favor cloning of embryos. Such sympathy as exists for same-sex marriage at the state level also originates from initiatives within the Democratic Party.

While positions on historic Christian values do not entirely separate one party from another, they do provide the principal contrasts. Interparty differences on education, national defense, public welfare, social security, etc. certainly do exist although in most instances the differences are of means rather than goals. The late Cardinal Bernardin's "Seamless Garment" approach to a so-called consistent ethic of life appears on examination to be an attempt to subsume the controversial issue of abortion into a laundry list of quasi-life issues such as unemployment, housing, etc., which are not really issues of life and death. At an abortion conference at the University of Notre Dame in 1980, Father Theodore Hesburgh inveighed against "Mindless Zealots" within the pro-life movement who were represented by politicians who "agreed with the Catholic Church on abortion but were opposed to Catholic values on every other important moral issue." Of course, when pressed for particulars, Father Hesburgh was unable to identify any single pro-life politician who was campaigning simultaneously in opposition to abortion but in favor of poverty, hunger, war, segregation, poor housing and other important "moral issues." No such politician exists in either party, of course.

Historically there is no denying that Democratic leadership existed during the overcoming of the depression, the victory in World War II and the great movement to abolish racial segregation. Many would point out differences in monetary policy and a preferential option for the poor as having characterized the Democratic Party platforms of the mid-20th century. Party affiliation does not qualify anyone for office; however, at this point in the epic struggle for the protection of the sanctity of human

life, it can fairly be said that an unqualified pro-abortion position should *disqualify* any candidate for elective office.

A much more controversial question relates to the extent to which political affiliation relates to the deliverance of the Gospel message by clergy. Just as it is legitimate to question whether the press and media can objectively inform the public if they are overwhelmingly of a liberal persuasion, is it also legitimate to question how political party affiliation influences the choice of emphasis of moral issues selectively.

Influences of political orientation would, of course, be subtle and difficult to discern. It is proverbial among conservative Catholics that issues such as abortion are under-emphasized in homiletics and there is often overt hostility on the part of pastors to the distribution of material identifying the votes of candidates on pro-life issues.

The best-documented evidence for political bias is in the distribution of funds from the Catholic anti-poverty program funded through a collection for the Campaign for Human Development.⁶ The campaign has a long and well-documented history of funding the left, including organizations that are engaged in activities that are contrary to Church teachings. When challenged, CCHD claims that funds given are to support some other acceptable activity engaged in by such organizations. All funds are fungible, of course, and monies given for a laudable purpose can free up other funds for immoral activities. CCHD has also admitted funding certain "Coalitions" which might have a single member who receives the grant while engaged in joint activities with other organizations such as NOW, ACLU and ACORN who engage in political activities opposed to Catholic interests. Although CCHD has responded to criticism by making some reforms in making grants, the Capital Research Center has documented numerous loopholes in policy and a continuing, if reduced, pattern of grants to organizations engaged in abortion referral, gay rights, and civil disobedience.

The Archdiocese of Chicago has made seven-figure grants to the Industrial Areas Foundation, an Alynskiite organization whose political activities can hardly be said to reflect the mainstream political sentiments of the Catholic congregations whose contributions are diverted into the support of this left-wing agenda.⁷

What can be inferred from what appears to be a liberal bias in the activities of the Church with regard to public education and financial grant making? Is it related to seminary formation, a preferential option for the poor, a passion for the underdog, propaganda with regard to the insensitivity of conservatives or their alleged exaggerated sensitivity to property values and the wealthy?

From a demographic standpoint many vocations in the mid-twentieth century originated from middle-class, blue-collar ethnic groups who were,

by tradition, drawn to the Democratic Party for their purported representation of the interest of labor unions and working classes.

Whatever the genesis or motivation, there is now substantial evidence that the clergy of at least one archdiocese (Chicago) have demonstrated voting patterns indicating a preference for a Democratic Party affiliation.

The Illinois Leader, a conservative news source has recently published on their web page the results of a survey of voting patterns of Chicago priests covering four primary elections from 1996 through 2002. This study demonstrates a consistent voting pattern of approximately 4 to 1 in favor of the Democratic Party among Catholic priests in Chicago.

The actual results were as follows:⁸

Year of Primary	%Republican	%Democrat
1996	19.8%	80.2%
1998	16.5%	83.5%
2000	23.0%	77.0%
2002	24.5%	75.5%
Average	21.3%	78.7%

The above percentages apply to those who actually voted. Not all priests voted in each of the primaries. One interesting side note is that 100% of recorded votes by auxiliary bishops of the archdiocese were for the Democratic Party.

What conclusions can be drawn from the data showing that 4 out of every 5 priests who vote were registered Democratic? The conclusion drawn by most of the commentators responding to similar data on members of the media from the Freedom Forum/Roper Center study was that at least the potential was present for the coverage of the news to be influenced by a liberal bias.

Priests obviously do not report on current events but they do choose which issues to emphasize in their homilies and parish bulletins. They also at least attempt to control the distribution of educational material on the voting records of incumbent politicians on the premises of the parish. The vast majority of pastors discourage the distribution of pro-life materials in parking lots and at least one bishop instructed all pastors in his vicariate to suppress such distribution. (This was a bishop who voted Democratic 100% of the time.) Some pastors and bishops express the concern that distributing pro-life educational materials will put their tax exempt status at risk. Such a position fails to distinguish between voter education and electioneering. Voting records scrupulously abstain from endorsing candidates but rather allow the voter to draw his own conclusion from the record. Myriad opinions from state and federal legal authorities confirm

the fact that such educational activities are not incompatible with a 501(c) 3 tax exempt status.⁹

Could priests, pastors and churches influence the election of public officials who are pro-life? When one considers the prestige factor and the fact that the congregation is largely a captive audience, there seems little doubt that an energetic, high profile education campaign could have a major impact. Does party affiliation strongly influence voting records? A published resume of congressional voting records leaves no doubt.¹⁰

Those with 100% pro-life records consisted in 156 Republicans (86%) and 25 Democrats (14%). Among those voting consistently *anti-life* were 175 Democrats (92%) and 14 Republicans (8%). According to Senator Santorum, 60% of the votes to *support* partial birth abortion, certainly the most odious vote possible, were *Catholic* senators of record.¹¹ Such a record bespeaks of a total failure of the Catholic system to support life adequately among its members.

Summary

1) A survey by the Freedom Forum that indicated that 89% of the members of the press and media had voted Democratic was widely interpreted as indicating a liberal bias in the reporting of the news.

2) Position statements of the NCCB, particularly on the Soviet-sponsored wars in Central America, atomic weapons, and the Middle East, have been widely interpreted as indicating a liberal tilt among the bishops on matters of public policy.

3) A recent study of voting patterns of Catholic clergy in the Archdiocese of Chicago shows a consistent voting pattern of 4 to 1 Democratic over Republican.

4) Organizations such as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development have been accused of preferentially funding the Left.

5) The extent to which liberal Democratic Party affiliation influences emphasis of issues such as abortion in parish educational activities is a matter of legitimate concern.

6) There is every reason to believe that a high profile attempt to inform congregations on life issues could influence the election of pro-life candidates of either party.

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