

Congressman steeped in Catholic activism

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 8, 2009



Tom Perriello in his office in Danville, Va., on Oct. 24, 2008. (Newscom)

With a life story steeped in Catholic activism and a political outlook hewn from church social teachings, Rep. Tom Perriello, D-Va., is clearly the darling of the religious left. Meanwhile, this first term, 34-year-old politician is bringing faith-based sensibilities to Washington unlike others seen here in recent years.

“What Tom has been able to do is bring a spirit of grass-roots social change to Washington,” said John Gehring, senior writer for Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. “His brand of conviction politics has real appeal at a time when people are hungry for leadership that transcends the narrow ideologies of left or right.”

Mara Vanderslice, who works in the Obama administration’s faith-based office, says flatly: “Tom is our favorite.” Said Vanderslice, “During the [2004] Kerry campaign [when Vanderslice served as Kerry’s religious liaison] no one was more supportive of me than Tom. He called every day.”

To understand Perriello’s personal take on politics one first has to become familiar with the remarkable path that brought him to Congress.

After attending Yale University as an undergraduate and law student, he traveled to Africa in 2002, where he worked with child soldiers and got involved with conflict resolution efforts in Sierra Leone. It was then he also worked with a special prosecutor and helped to indict former Liberian president Charles Taylor for war crimes, helping to remove him from power. Perriello has also worked in Kosovo, Darfur and Afghanistan, earning a rep that virtually any geopolitical nightmare would eventually attract him like an iron file to a magnet.

The immediate link that forged Perriello’s overseas work with an emergent domestic activism came through group of amputees in Sierra Leone. “We were in the showdown with Charles Taylor just before he fell from power,” Perriello recalled recently. “And they said to me, ‘If you get him out of power, please go home and get Bush out of power. That’s the best thing you can do for us in West Africa.’ But the problems were deeper than just the Bush presidency.”

By then, Perriello recalled, he had reached the conclusion that America’s moral compass was well off course, especially in the political arena. “For 25 years we [Democrats] offered a kinder, gentler version of what was

coming from the right.? Perriello said he saw the need for deeper change.

So in 2004 he returned to the United States where his activism helped launch Res Publica and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, two social justice-driven nonprofit organizations that apply Catholic faith traditions to hot-button issues in the foreign and domestic political spheres.

In a short time, Perriello was influencing other Catholics to get similarly involved. ?I am not sure I would be doing what I am doing if it weren't for Tom,? said James Salt, political director of Catholics United, a nonpartisan group that describes itself as ?promoting the message of justice and the common good found at the heart of the Catholic social tradition.? Salt had started a Web site called Catholic Voter Project that caught Perriello's attention. While driving out to Kansas to work on a congressional race, Salt got a call from the future congressman saying he liked the site and wanted to bring more attention to it.

?By the time I got to Kansas, an AP story had hit the wires about us. Tom helped make it happen.?

The mediating method Perriello employed to analyze the ?deeper change? he was considering were the social teachings of the Catholic church. In them he found a battle-tested method for providing a systematic, analytic approach to answering the nation's core problems. ?Turning greed into a virtue in the 1980s created a culture of instant gratification that everyone bemoans,? Perriello said. ?Moral decay starts at the top.? This culture of instant gratification, he explains, had distorted the nation's politics, domestically and abroad.

His analyses were drawing him into politics. In the 2008 election he ran in the 5th Congressional District in Virginia, achieving a surprise win over Republican incumbent Virgil Goode, a longtime figure in the state's politics.

Perriello says he sees three issues as dominant in the quest for a more just social order: economic and health care reform and attending to the challenge of climate change through the creation of green jobs. ?We could be on the verge of a period of real change,? he said. ?We can afford more economic fairness.?

Perriello offers an unusual accessibility to an array of progressive religious groups, among them Faith in Public Life and Catholics United, urging believers to get involved as believers in offsetting the influence of rich and powerful interest groups. Like other Washington progressive politicians, he thinks government should intervene, when necessary, in the market to protect human dignity, an often cited principle in Catholic social thought.

Perriello has his detractors. Catholics for Choice is wary of his approach to abortion. ?Catholics in Alliance, and Congressman Perriello who helped found it, are trying to pull Democrats away from their historic pro-choice position,? said Catholics for Choice's president, Jon O'Brien.

Criticism from the right is just as strong. Deal Hudson, director of InsideCatholic.com [1], argues that Perriello's position doesn't pass muster. ?If Rep. Perriello believes that abortion is the intentional taking of a human life in the womb of the mother, and I think he does, it is incomprehensible to me why he would not want at least minimal legal restrictions on it.?

Perriello, nonetheless, remains at the center of progressive Catholic politics. At a recent symposium ?Catholic Social Teachings & the 111th Congress? held on Capitol Hill and sponsored by the Catholic University of America's Life Cycle Institute, he moved easily among the activists and policy experts.

In national security matters, Perriello is unabashedly pro-Obama. ?President Obama is really the best foreign policy president imaginable,? he said. ?We have the first leader in more than two decades making the case for security through diplomacy. This is a paradigm shift of great importance.? Diplomacy trumps military might, though it takes more time to show the fruits of its efforts, he concedes.

Perriello has not formally studied theology, but his conversations are littered with references to the subject. He speaks of the common good, easily quotes Augustine, and draws most every policy discussion to how it affects human dignity.

His moral compass can range from the sublime to the ridiculous, often in a sentence. "Part of why the Lewinsky scandal hurt Democrats so much was that so many on the left said it wasn't a big deal. That didn't pass most people's sniff test of moral credibility," he remarked recently.

Nowhere is moral credibility more important than on the abortion issue, Perriello says. Perriello, like Obama, is committed to lowering the abortion rate and argues that concerns about overturning *Roe v. Wade* are a sideshow.

"If it wasn't overturned with seven of nine justices appointed by conservative Republicans, how do you really think about promoting the culture of life?" he asked. "We know certain economic, health care and adoption policies can lower the abortion rate." With the economic downturn, he is worried the abortion rate will spike without such policies in place.

Perriello is not afraid of political wheeling and dealing or its effect on his ideals. "Another principle that comes out of Catholic social thought is prudence," he said. "There is a tendency among some activists to put a shrill purity above results. If you have a choice between judging people from above or sitting at the table and making a difference, I see a moral imperative to sit at the table."

Michael Sean Winters is the author of Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats.

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