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Communion wars resurface in Rhode Island

by John L. Allen Jr.



Rep. Patrick Kennedy speaks at the funeral Mass for his father at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Boston Aug. 29. (C.J. Gunther-Pool)

ANALYSIS

Though Rhode Island Congressman Patrick Kennedy may be the one facing a spiritual sanction in his recent standoff with Providence's Bishop Thomas Tobin, some Catholics inside the Beltway are quietly worried that it could be the pro-life cause that pays the most immediate political price.

With a critical debate on health care reform underway in the Senate, in which funding for abortion is a central bone of contention, these observers say moderate Democrats now face another incentive to think twice about bucking their party's official pro-choice stance: fear of appearing to cave in to pressure tactics from Catholic bishops.

In late November, the 42-year-old Kennedy, the third child of late Massachusetts Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, told a Providence newspaper that Tobin had barred him from Communion because of his pro-choice stance. Tobin then released part of a February 2007 letter in which he had asked Kennedy not to

take Communion.

Whatever Kennedy's motives for waiting almost three years to make that disclosure, it created a PR headache for the bishops at a moment when they had been on a roll. Most observers credit the bishops with helping secure passage of the Stupak amendment in the House, which bars the use of federal health care subsidies to pay for abortion.



Several newspapers in the Northeast accused Tobin of breaching

church/state separation. Two leading candidates for the Senate in Massachusetts, both Democrats, defended Kennedy -- in effect, declaring they would not brook ecclesiastical manipulation. (Rep. Michael Capuano put his reaction in caustic terms: "And they wonder why people stop going to church.")

In terms of public opinion, the unpopularity of Communion bans is well documented. In 2004, when a similar debate erupted around Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, a pro-choice Catholic, a Pew Forum poll found that 64 percent of Americans felt the bishops were wrong to deny Communion to politicians who hold views contrary to church teaching. Strikingly, that opposition actually rose among Catholics, to 72 percent.

Given this background, some Catholic analysts suspect Kennedy's revelation was timed to cast the bishops in a negative light.

"The fact that our adversaries wish to continue to focus on the bishops suggests they think a focus on ecclesiastical power works for them," said one longtime pro-life activist, who spoke on background for fear of further stoking the controversy.

Threats from bishops, this activist said, "alienate the very people we need," meaning "Catholics and other Democrats who fear being portrayed as caving in to ecclesiastical pressure." The activist pointed to moderate Democrats in the Senate such as Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and Robert Casey of Pennsylvania, both Catholics, as figures who might fear that kind of blowback.

At this stage, most experts said, it's too early to tell if the nasty exchange will have any impact on the Senate debate. The U.S. bishops have voiced disappointment with the bill currently proposed by the Senate's Democratic leadership, criticizing an "abortion surcharge" that they claim would force insurance purchasers to pay for other people's abortions; provisions that would allow the Health and Human Services secretary to mandate abortion coverage; and that the bill does not allow religious institutions to offer their own employees coverage that conforms to their institution's teaching.

The crossfire involving Kennedy and Tobin erupted in mid-October, when Kennedy publicly criticized the U.S. bishops' opposition to public funding of abortion in a health care reform package.

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Kennedy wrote that his disagreement with the hierarchy on abortion "doesn't make me any less Catholic." That prompted Tobin to assert that when Catholic politicians break with the church on such an important matter, "It absolutely diminishes your communion with the church." In a subsequent radio interview, Tobin appeared to invite Kennedy to leave the Catholic church, suggesting "maybe he can find another fine Christian denomination where he can be more comfortable."

Both sides now apparently want to declare a truce. Tobin has declined new requests for comment, and Kennedy told a forum on health care reform at Brown University in Providence on Nov. 30, "These are personal issues of faith for me. I am not going to indulge in this debate anymore."

Officially, the U.S. bishops treat eligibility for Communion as something each bishop has to work out in his own diocese, although a solid majority opposes Communion bans for fear of politicizing the Eucharist. As it did with Kerry, the Vatican sat out the Kennedy/Tobin row.

As the dust settles, one puzzle remains: why the story drew so much attention, since it's hardly the first time such controversies have swirled.

Many observers believe the drama was amplified because both sides had reasons for playing it up. For pro-choice activists, it was a way of disrupting the bishops' lobbying efforts. For pro-lifers, it offered payback for what many considered an overly indulgent response from church leaders during Edward Kennedy's funeral last August.

For those simply weary of the culture wars, however, the Kennedy/Tobin clash offered little more than an unwelcome taste of déjà vu.

One Catholic with a long history in Washington put it this way: "If bishops would talk less about politics, and politicians would talk less about theology, we'd all be better off."

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