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Convention history finds Catholics often sought to lead prayers

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Aug. 30, 2008

WASHINGTON -- In politics, every word, every action, every appearance is analyzed in terms of how it helps one side or hurts the other. Even prayer.

So the appearances of Jesuit Father Edward Reese and St. Joseph Sister Catherine Pinkerton in leading prayers at the Republican and Democratic conventions, respectively, are getting at least a little attention by those wondering what the two Catholic religious leaders might be saying by their presence.

To which they respond: nothing.

Father Reese, president of Brophy College Preparatory School in Phoenix, accepted the invitation from the Republican presidential candidate, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, and his wife, Cindy, to offer a prayer at the GOP convention in St. Paul, Minn., Sept. 3 because he has known the couple for years. The McCains' sons, James and Jack, graduated from Brophy. The McCains also have supported the school generously, and Cindy McCain is a member of the school's board of regents.

"It's an honor to be asked," Father Reese told Catholic News Service.

Father Reese is one of two Catholic priests who will join the convention. The second, Father Joseph Johnson, rector of the Cathedral of St. Paul, will lead the invocation to open the convention Sept. 1.

Sister Catherine, a lobbyist for Washington-based Network, a Catholic social justice lobby, gave the benediction to close business at the Democratic convention in Denver Aug. 27. While Sister Catherine, 86, serves as one of the leaders of the Catholic National Advisory Council to Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's presidential campaign, she sees her appearance on the dais as nonpartisan.

"I think it's a great opportunity for the church to show Catholic social teaching," the nun from Cleveland told CNS 24 hours after offering her prayer. "If there's anything that's going to change the way this country is going, it's those principles."

Noticeably absent from the speakers' platform at both conventions this year are members of the church hierarchy. In the past, it has not been unusual for a cardinal, archbishop or bishop from the city hosting a convention to lead delegates in prayer at some point during the nominating process.

The Democrats never invited Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver to offer a prayer this year. He was offered a seat as a convention observer, however.

While no one is saying why specifically, it's no stretch to think that the archbishop's public criticisms of Catholic politicians who support keeping abortion legal led the Democrats to shy away from extending an invitation to the leader of Colorado's largest religious denomination to pray with them.

Chaput, who is not registered with any political party, told The Washington Times he did not take the omission

personally. "I'm happy to see they are having prayer at their sessions, and they have the right to choose whom they want to do that," he told the Times.

Prior to the convention Sister Catherine came under some criticism, however, primarily from Catholics who felt her involvement with the Democrats and the Obama campaign was tantamount to supporting the party's platform, especially its unwavering support of the U.S. Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion. In response, she told CNS that she felt Obama offered a better chance at reducing abortion and implementing the values of Catholic social teaching.

"He's not for abortion," she said. "No one is for abortion."

Father Reese reported getting no such calls when it became public Aug. 26 that he would be at the Republican convention.

Meanwhile in St. Paul, Archbishop John C. Nienstedt declined more than one invitation from the Republicans to be part of the convention, according to Dennis McGrath, spokesman for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

"We can't be partisan, so we've turned down all those opportunities," McGrath said.

Partisan concerns, however, have not seemed to influence the decision of church hierarchy in the past when it comes to political conventions. And it's clear since the U.S. Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision in 1973 that church prelates seem to have shied away from Democratic conventions, appearing just twice in the last 35 years, but have appeared four times at Republican conventions.

In 2004, New York Cardinal Edward M. Egan led the benediction shortly after President George W. Bush accepted the Republican nomination in New York City. The Democrats settled for Father John Artis, director of the Paulist Center in Boston and the pastor for Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, the party's nominee.

Four years earlier, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles prayed with Democrats when their convention returned to the City of Angels for the first time since the party nominated John F. Kennedy in 1960. Cardinal James F. McIntyre prayed with the Democrats then.

Democrats also enjoyed the presence of Archbishop Eugene A. Marino of Atlanta at their convention in 1988. Documents from almost a century ago show that Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore joined the Democratic convention in 1912.

On the Republican side, Archbishop Patrick J. Ryan of Philadelphia joined the party in prayer in 1900. More recently, Philadelphia Cardinal John J. Krol did so twice, in 1968 in Miami and again in 1984 in Dallas. In 1992, Bishop Rene H. Gracida of Corpus Christi, Texas, and Auxiliary Bishop Carl A. Fisher of Los Angeles were with the party in Houston. Bishop Robert H. Brom of San Diego followed suit in 1996 when the GOP gathered in his diocese.

And just to be sure that he was not perceived as playing favorites, Cardinal Dennis J. Dougherty prayed with both parties when the nominating conventions met in Philadelphia in 1948.

This year, Archbishop Demetrios, primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in America, is following in Cardinal Dougherty's footsteps. He led the invocation Aug. 27, the second day of the Democratic convention, and was scheduled to join the Republicans Sept. 4, the last night of their quadrennial gathering.

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