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McCain to make full-throttle push for Catholic vote

David Finnigan Religion News Service | Sep. 3, 2008

ST. PAUL, Minn.

At 67 million strong and packed into must-win states like Pennsylvania, Michigan and Florida, U.S. Catholics are the ultimate electoral prize for any candidate seeking the White House.

Since 1976, winning the Catholic vote has meant winning the Oval Office -- except for Al Gore, who narrowly carried Catholics by two points but nonetheless lost 2000's disputed election to George W. Bush.

Catholics are, to put it simply, the ultimate swing vote.

Yet with their size and diversity -- think Ted Kennedy and Mel Gibson, Catholics both -- they are notoriously hard to fit into one partisan profile. Which is why John McCain and the GOP aren't willing to lose the Catholics to Barack Obama -- at least not without a fight.

Here at the Republican National Convention, Catholic members of the GOP are confident McCain can win the Catholic vote, especially with the help of his staunchly anti-abortion running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin.

"The Hispanics will be behind someone with her values, because of the family, because of her respect for life," said Texas GOP delegate Toni Anne Dashiell, president of the Texas Federation of Republican Women.

Dashiell admitted that before the Palin pick and before McCain's Aug. 16 appearance with Obama at the evangelical Saddleback Church in California, "there was reserve" among some Republicans, a sense of only "due diligence" support for the ticket.

But after Saddleback and then the Palin pick, Dashiell said, "the volcano has erupted and people are standing behind this ticket 100 percent. I have heard personally the stories of Democrats that are going to vote for the Republican Party because of Sarah."

It won't be an easy fight for McCain. Preliminary polling by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life shows Obama with an initial 47-42 percent lead among Catholic voters. Terrorism and the economy remain top concerns for both Democrats and Republicans, and the Pew polling puts hot-button social issues like abortion and gay marriage at the bottom of swing voters' concerns.

Democrats are also widening their lead in party affiliation among Catholics -- since 2004, Democrats have erased the GOP's two-point lead among Catholics, and now lead among Catholics in party registration 49 to 40 percent.

McCain faces a noteworthy push by Obama for the Catholic vote, especially among lapsed Catholics who may not attend Mass every week and are attracted to Obama's promise to end the Iraq war.

Yet leading Republicans here insist that the Democrats' (and Obama's) embrace of abortion rights will alienate

core Catholic voters, much as it has in recent elections. The question is how much abortion will figure among other issues in voters' decisions.

Steve Krueger, national director of the Boston-based group Catholic Democrats, said most Catholics will base their votes on pocketbook issues like the economy and gas prices, not abortion.

"Abortion will not be a pivotal issue in this election, as it has not been the pivotal issue in deciding the Catholic swing vote in previous elections," said Krueger, a former leader in the church reform group Voice of the Faithful.

But Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., an outspoken anti-abortion Catholic, had sharp words for those looking toward the Democrats.

"If you want to join that team, know with your eyes wide open that you're part of a team that will significantly push the ball down the court for the pro-abortion agenda," Smith said. "Even nominal Catholics need to have their eyes completely open going into that ballot box and realize that this man (Obama) wants to be the abortion president."

Indeed, the warm reception by local Catholic leaders here stands in stark contrast to the arm's-length response by Catholic leaders in Denver during the Democratic National Convention last week.

Twin Cities Archbishop John Nienstedt, a staunch conservative and rising star in the U.S. church, hosted a cathedral Mass for delegates on Sunday and later mingled at a courtyard reception. The priest in charge at the cathedral of St. Paul offered the closing benediction at the convention on Monday, while Denver's Archbishop Charles Chaput more or less shunned the Democrats.

" ... On a number of issues that are so important for us at this juncture of our history, foremost among those issues has to be our defense of the right to life," Nienstedt said at the reception.

Teresa Collett, a law school professor at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis, was an expert witness for the state of Alaska on the Palin-supported abortion parental notification law, which Alaska's highest court struck down last year.

"There are many good Catholics who are deeply concerned about poverty and think there can be real progress there, but have become discouraged on the life issue," Collett said. "Overall, I think that the life issue, especially with the Palin pick, is going to be an issue that will require people to make a decision."

Hawaii Lt. Gov James Aiona, a Republican, toured the cathedral after Sunday's Mass and said the McCain strategy to hold on to the Catholic vote is really quite simple.

"The strategy," he said, "is God."

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