

## Brownback urges Catholic whole life view for GOP

Michael Humphrey | Sep. 5, 2008



St. Paul, Minn.

One of the most prominent Catholics in the Republican Party says that it is time for his party to stop conceding the social justice message to Democrats. Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., a Catholic convert who ran for his party's nomination for president last year, told *NCR* that his party is still hesitant to passionately embrace some aspects of Catholic social teaching.

"There is a bit of a philosophical difference," Brownback says of his party. "Catholics really are more given to the whole life view. But I see that changing."

The GOP has embraced Catholics themselves as part of the faith-based leadership, Brownback says. Despite his own short run as a presidential hopeful -- Brownback pulled out before the first primary -- he says there's no doubt a Catholic could be a Republican president.

"It could happen now," Brownback says. "I don't think there's any blockage there."

For most of the 20th century, the faith-based movement within the Republican Party was dominated by Protestants and especially by evangelicals the last half of the century. Catholics were reliable Democrats, especially when the majority was middle-class urbanites and often members of unions.

That has drastically changed. In the 2004 election, George W. Bush won the Catholic vote over John Kerry, a Catholic, by a sizable margin, 1.6 million votes. Many give credit to Bush's chief strategist, Karl Rove, for courting Catholics by placing issues such as opposition to abortion, gay marriage and euthanasia at the top of the agenda.



Brownback says he strongly agrees with his party's position on all of

those issues.

"You have to have life for there to be social justice," Brownback says. "You can't begin a social justice mission without defending the life of the unborn first."

He also strongly supports his party's position on other issues that go away from the church's stated position. The war in Iraq is the most notable, where Brownback says there is moral ambiguity.

"It think it does cause legitimate concern," Brownback says. "That's a prudential judgment issue.

To me it was the right prudential judgment at that time (to invade Iraq). You can look back and say, "Where are the weapons of mass destruction?" But at the time, we thought they were there. And I don't think any Catholic would say now we should pull out of Iraq and have it go into anarchy."

Capital punishment is another ambiguous issue for Brownback, who held hearings in 2006 to examine it. In beginning those hearings he said, "So each generation may -- and good citizens should -- consider anew the law and facts involving this solemn judgment. I believe America must establish a culture of life. If use of the death penalty is contrary to promoting a culture of life, we need to have a national dialogue and hear both sides of the issue."

But there is a list of issues, once considered the domain of progressives, that Brownback says his church could teach his party to better embrace without equivocation.

"I want to say, (Democrats) are wrong on life and marriage," Brownback says, "and here is our social justice agenda. We haven't gone that distance. We've said, you get the social justice agenda, we get the life and marriage agenda. And I'm pushing at this cloth of being pro-life and whole life, and that applies to the immigrant, the person in prison, to those is poverty and those in Darfur."

One example of how this plays out in the Senate is last year's collaboration with vice presidential nominee Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.) to strengthen laws against human trafficking.

Brownback said at the time, "Human trafficking is a daunting and critical global issue that often victimizes the most vulnerable among us."

He says it's a good sign that John McCain has been an advocate for several of these issues.

"So here's a guy that is opposed to torture," Brownback says. "He is for immigration reform, has a heart for the

developing world.

But it's not always been easy for McCain. Taking on President Bush over the issue of torture and, on the other hand, taking up the president's cause on immigration reform nearly derailed his candidacy.

If that left some Republicans leery of McCain, it is because the party is just now starting to understand that its agenda can broaden without losing focus on core issues. And Brownback says the Catholic agenda is making inroads.

"I see that growing within the Republican Party," Brownback says. "And if you want to talk philosophy, I say, these are sacred people. And they started sacred."

(Michael Humphery is a freelance writer from Kansas city, Mo., and is covering the Republican Party Convention for NCR.)

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