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Black Catholics see Obama candidacy as a path to racial equality

by Chaz Muth by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- As a black man who was a child in the racially turbulent 1960s, former Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele said he is exceptionally proud that a major U.S. political party has nominated Illinois Sen. Barack Obama as its candidate for president in the November general election.

But as a Republican and a Catholic, the 50-year-old Steele said he is fundamentally opposed to Obama's political positions -- especially on life issues like legalized abortion -- and as a GOP leader with national influence he will do everything in his power to block the first black Democratic presidential nominee from becoming the nation's commander in chief.

It's the first time a black candidate has secured the nomination of a major U.S. political party in a presidential contest, proving the nation has made significant progress in how it deals with race, said Father Bryan N. Massingale, 51, a black associate professor of theology at Jesuit-run Marquette University in Milwaukee.

Racial tensions, however, surfaced during the Democratic primaries and have continued into the general election season, demonstrating the country has a long way to go before it can enjoy genuine equality, Father Massingale said.

"Surprised that racial biases still exist? No," said Shirley Harris-Slaughter, 62, a black parishioner of Presentation/Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church in Detroit. "Disappointed? Yes!"

According to an Associated Press-Yahoo News poll released in September, more than one-third of white Democrats and Independents agree with at least one negative adjective about blacks, and many voters in a West Virginia exit poll taken during the May primary election acknowledged race was a consideration

when they cast their vote. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton overwhelmingly won that contest.

"Are there gonna' be some people who don't vote for me because I'm black? Of course," Obama told 60 Minutes, a CBS television newsmagazine, in September. "There are probably some African-Americans who are voting for me because I'm black. Or maybe others who are just inspired by the idea of breaking new ground. And so I think all that's a wash."

When Steele -- who had been the chairman of the Maryland Republican Party -- was selected in 2002 to run as lieutenant governor on the GOP ticket with then-U.S. Rep. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., a metropolitan newspaper ran an editorial stating he brought nothing to the partnership but the color of his skin.

While delivering a political speech during that campaign, Steele said a few audience members tossed Oreo cookies at him to make a racial statement. He also said several "ugly blogs" participated in racial name-calling.

Race will be a factor in the November general election for the mere fact U.S. voters will have their first opportunity to choose between a presidential candidate who happens to be black and a presidential candidate who happens to be white, said Steele, who lost his 2006 bid for one of Maryland's U.S. Senate seats.

Obama has dealt with racial questions since he emerged onto the political stage in the late 1990s as an Illinois state senator, Father Massingale said.

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"Racial questions were raised in the primaries," he said. "Questions like, 'Is Obama too black? Is he black enough? Is he an angry black?'"

These are not questions that would be raised about a white candidate, Harris-Slaughter said.

Though black Catholics from across the U.S. told Catholic News Service they believe many black voters connect with Obama in part because of the color of his skin, they stressed that most are inspired by the 47-year-old senator for the same reason millions of Americans from many ethnic groups are enamored with him.

Many young voters of varying ethnic backgrounds are looking beyond race in this election, said Bill Green, 80, a black parishioner of St. Columba Catholic Church in Oakland, Calif.

"These kids are getting involved in the political process for the first time and they don't seem to be energized by race, but by hope for the future of the country," Green said.

"We may get to this one day when someone's race, religion or gender isn't a factor when they run for political office," Steele said. "It's possible. It's about finding the will to make it happen."

"But, platitudes will not change the attitudes of individuals on race," he said. "A lot of the race issues in this country are taught. You aren't born not liking black people, white people or Hispanics."

Exposure to more positive black role models may provide white Americans with affirmative opinions of that segment of U.S. society, said Deacon Steven C. Rubio, a black Catholic who ministers at St. Matthew and St. Ambrose parishes in Baltimore.

"I think when you look at the images where most of us garner our information, which is mostly what is televised on the evening news, the amount of imagery that white America sees about black Americans is about crime," Deacon Rubio said. "When you are constantly fed a diet about a group of people, you are going to form a negative image of that group."

By stressing the Catholic Church's teaching that racial inequality is a sin, the church can help promote harmony among all ethnic groups, he said.

In their 2007 statement, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," the U.S. Catholic bishops called for an end to racial inequality.

"It is important for our society to continue to combat discrimination based on race, religion, sex, ethnicity, disabling condition or age, as these are grave injustices and affronts to human dignity," the statement reads. "Where the effects of past discrimination persist, society has the obligation to take positive steps to overcome the legacy of injustice, including vigorous action to remove barriers to education and equal employment for women and minorities."

Though Steele said Obama's support for legal abortion is in direct conflict with the widespread pro-life position among black Catholics, several black Catholics told CNS Obama's support for civil rights and immigration reform show a deep respect for human dignity, allowing them to reconcile their support for him on life issues.

"We wouldn't see it as a single issue, but as part of an issue, because there are a lot of elements in the whole cycle of life that would be of interest to us," said Beverly A. Carroll, assistant director of cultural diversity for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, and a black parishioner at St. Peter Claver in Baltimore. "Racism has to be considered as a life issue too."

Black voters will naturally be intrigued by Obama because of his race, but they should examine his values, policy positions, record of service and goals for the country before voting Nov. 4, Deacon Rubio said.

"Ultimately, I see a lot of pride among my fellow black Catholics about the candidacy of Barack Obama, for the same reason we are proud that Massachusetts voters elected a black governor and Maryland has now elected two black lieutenant governors," he said. "Because people, regardless of color, want to see people who look like them in certain roles. That is more life-affirming."

In 2007 Anthony G. Brown became the second black man to serve as Maryland's lieutenant governor, making the 46-year-old Catholic one of a growing number of black politicians to serve in the higher levels of public office. Brown said he sees Obama's candidacy as a natural progression in black political achievement.

"Of course African-Americans are going to be proud of these achievements and I hope it makes them realize there is a place for them in government," he said. "Other groups in our history have experienced this kind of pride, much like Catholics did in 1960 when John Kennedy became the first Catholic president."

Black pride, however, doesn't always equal support, Father Massingale said.

"There have been other black candidates -- like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson -- who have not enjoyed wide support among blacks," he said. "There is enthusiasm for Barack Obama because people agree with

his character, ability and temperament."

But Steele wanted to make it clear that a vote for Republican Sen. John McCain does not make someone a racist either, calling that judgment "wrong" and "immoral."

"I don't believe that race will be an overwhelming factor in the outcome of the election," he said.

"If Barack loses, people may misunderstand the why of his loss," Steele said. "Some will fall to the easy target of race and say it's because America is still a racist country and say it's all about race, ignoring that maybe the American voters discovered something about Barack that we didn't need or want right now in the presidency."

Regardless of who becomes the 44th U.S. president, Obama's candidacy demonstrates that Americans can envision a qualified black man leading their country, Brown said.

"I think that race is still present in American politics, society and culture," he said, but added that having a black nominee from a major party "instills a tremendous amount of pride" in the black community.

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