

Lay voices reshaping conversation on abortion

Tom Roberts | Oct. 7, 2008



News analysis

The every-four-year national skirmish among Catholics over abortion politics is as predictable as a politician's smile. But this year a few "game changers," in the phrase of the season, have altered the conversation within the Catholic community and for the wider culture.

For the first time since the abortion issue began to dominate the Catholic political discussion 35 years ago, groups have organized and high-profile Catholics have gone public to insist that Catholic teaching does not prohibit a vote for a pro-choice politician.

Much to the contrary, in fact, groups like Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Catholics United note that the teaching explicitly prohibits bishops from endorsing or opposing specific candidates, from instructing Catholics on how to vote or from arguing that Catholics need consider only one issue in determining how to vote.

The same point was emphasized in [a talk given Oct. 4 in Kansas City, Mo.](#) [1] by Notre Dame theologian, Father Richard McBrien who cited last November's election policy statement, which reads: "The consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and, rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues. ... Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace ..."

"I think they've changed the conversation on abortion," said Peter Steinfels, long time church observer and writer of the Beliefs column for *The New York Times*, referring to emerging Catholic lay voices.

Referring to figures like lawyers [Douglas Kmiec](#) [2] and [Nicholas Cafardi](#) [3], both of whom own unassailable pro-life credentials and have publicly endorsed Barack Obama, Steinfels said, "I think that by disconnecting their moral opposition to abortion from their political support for Republican candidates, they've actually

returned emphasis to the moral question.

They've provided a witness to the moral seriousness of what's involved in abortion.

News Update: [Cafardi resigns as Franciscan University trustee](#) [4] Oct. 8.

How much that witness influences Catholics, who have a solid record of voting for the popular vote winner, will be apparent in the post-Nov. 3 analyses. We'll also know then whether a vocal minority of bishops will have convinced Catholics that, as Bishop Joseph F. Martino of Scranton put it, "pro-choice candidates have come to support homicide" and that seeking a legal ban of abortion is the greatest good.

Former St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke also declared recently from his new post in Rome that Democrats risked becoming ["a party of death."](#) [5]

Steinfels said of bishops who appear to see only one political approach, a total legal ban, to the abortion issue: "I think they're going to harm the church in the long run and the pro-life cause."

More distressing to him, however, is the silence of the majority of bishops who refuse to publicly explain that the bishops' own documents on political responsibility prohibit a one-issue approach as well as either endorsing or condemning individual candidates.

"I feel there is a kind of leadership failing on the part of other bishops who are not happy with that kind of statement," said Steinfels, referring to the bishop of Scranton. Privately, other bishops will say they disagree, said the journalist and author of *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*.

"The only way in this media conscious world if they're not going to allow the Bishop of Scranton to speak for the U.S. hierarchy is they've got to take a public stand."

Kmiec, a former official in the Reagan White House who worked on briefs seeking to overturn *Roe v Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, announced his support for Obama last spring.

"I believe him to be a person of integrity, intelligence, and genuine good will. I take him at his word that he wants to move the nation beyond its religious and racial divides and that he wants to return the United States to that company of nations committed to human rights."

In a later panel discussion, Kmiec defended his decision to support Obama, despite the candidate's pro-choice position on abortion and Kmiec's earlier work to overturn *Roe v Wade*.

"We have been at the business of trying to find the elusive fifth vote on the Supreme Court for 30 years," he said. "We haven't found it and even if we do find it, overturning *Roe* would not save a single life, but instead merely return the question to the state. While that would be important, it is not intended and never was intended to close the American mind or, for that matter, the Catholic mind to different or alternative ways to discourage abortion."

He said one thing he liked about the Democratic Party platform this year "is that it incorporates some of these alternative ways, alternative ways that for far too long have been closed to the Catholic imagination, if you will, because of the way in which the abortion discussion has been conducted."

Both Kmiec and Cafardi, a civil and canon lawyer and former dean at Duquesne University Law School in Pittsburgh, emphasize that it is wrong to conclude from Catholic teaching that Catholics can not vote for Obama

because he is pro-choice. Each also asserts that overturning *Roe* would not end abortion, but merely turn the question back to the states, so that abortion would remain legal in some states and illegal in others.

Given that circumstance, they say, they have opted for the candidate and the party that has placed a new emphasis on programs that would aid in reducing the number of abortions.

The point is one applauded by Kristen Day, executive director of Democrats for Life of America, a group that strongly supports the Pregnant Woman Support Act now being considered by Congress. The aim of the bill, said Day, is to reduce the abortion rate in the United States by 95 percent during the next 10 years by expanding coverage to pregnancy women and unborn children, making adoption tax credits permanent, fully funding the federal WIC program, increasing funding for domestic violence programs and providing free home visits by registered nurses for new mothers.

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...e echoed in the Democratic Party platform this year. Day is cautious in her optimism
...party. "I think we have to be very careful," she said. "We never want this to be used as
...ess they are very serious about following through."

...jection of new voices into the discussion has been helpful. Supporting reduction of
abortion, in her view, is better than "keeping *Roe v Wade* as a standard. It is a good direction for us to be going
in as a party. Maybe eventually we'll have the two parties working together."

Tom Roberts is NCR news editor and Editor at Large.

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Knights disagree with leader

WASHINGTON "Upset with a [letter from their Supreme Knight](#) [8] critical of Democratic vice-presidential candidate Sen. Joseph Biden Jr. for his views on abortion, some Knights of Columbus have introduced their own Web site backing Sen. Barack Obama for president.

Led by Rick Gebhard, a member of Knights of Columbus Council 853 at Guardian Angels Parish in the Lake Michigan town of Manistee, Mich., the group launched the Web site, www.knightsforobama.com [9] Oct. 3.

A middle-school teacher, Gebhard said he decided to publicly demonstrate his support for the Democratic ticket after reading a letter from Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson that challenging Biden on abortion.

Between 1983 and 1987, Anderson held various positions in President Ronald Reagan's White House, in which he participated in the development of pro-life and pro-family initiatives.

"Basically, I read it, and as that letter ended, it said Mr. Anderson was speaking for all Knights," Gebhard told Catholic News Service Sept. 30. "He wasn't speaking for me."

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