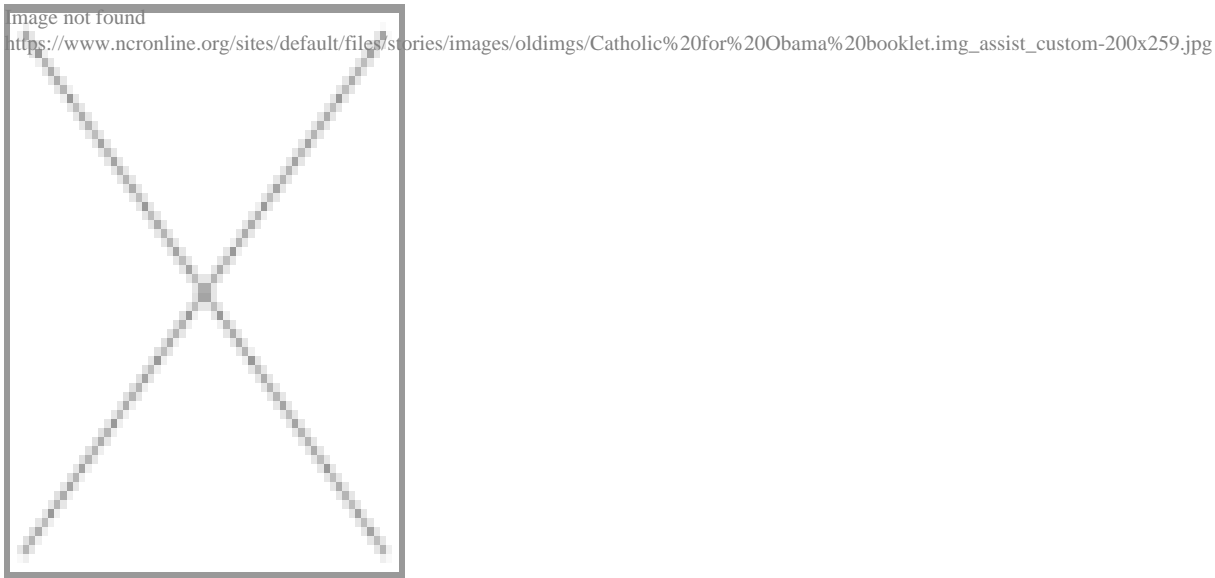


New booklet details Obama's early Catholic influences

Thomas C. Fox NCR Staff | Oct. 29, 2008



Dr. Patrick Whelan, a Boston physician, was teaching a course in medical ethics at Harvard University when then-St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke, in the heat of the 2004 election, declared that Democratic presidential nominee, John Kerry should be denied Communion because of his positions on abortion and embryonic stem-cell research (NCRonline, Aug. 8, 2008).

That was enough.

Whelan writes he realized then that "the issues that interfaced between Catholicism and politics were medical ethics issues" and he was curious that there were no doctors involved in the conversation. So he contacted the Kerry campaign to ask how he could get involved in Catholic outreach, only to be told the campaign had no such outreach effort.

That's when the energized Whelan started a Web site that resulted in "Catholics for Kerry." He discovered that throughout the country "there were groups of dedicated people" aware that "Catholic issues had been misappropriated to serve the Republican agenda."

The Whelan story picks up speed from there, leading to the formation of Catholics Democrats, an organization that claims membership in all 50 states. It is often cited in the popular press, and hosts an active Web site (www.catholicdemocrats.org).

Now, just days before the Nov. 4th election, Whelan is at it again.

This time he has published a 58-page booklet called "The Catholic Case for Obama," which is free on the "Catholic Democrats" Web site to be downloaded by anyone interested on learning more about the potential

president's Catholic roots, ties and outlooks.

Next to the download button, Whelan poses a question central to Catholic social teaching: 'Is Barack Obama really pro-life?'

And the answer offered is a resounding yes.

The case Whelan makes, while it would raise the hair on the back of the necks of bishops who have strenuously argued that Obama is pro-abortion, fits with the thinking of other Catholics who have come out in support of the Illinois senator.

Here's the Whelan case in a nut shell:

'Looking through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching, Senator Obama has spent his entire career striving for the common good. He supports health care programs that will cover all Americans, a living wage for working families, and solutions that allow distressed families to stay in their homes. And rather than trying to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, an ineffective strategy for 40 years, Senator Obama will reduce abortions. How? By promoting health care for pregnant women and better infant care, day care and job training. In fact, data has shown that social and education programs actually reduce abortions.'

Similar arguments, widely reported in the media, have been made recently by other high profile Catholics, including Nicholas P. Cafardi, the legal scholar, and Douglas Kmiec, chair and professor of constitutional law at Pepperdine University.

Of special interest in the Whelan booklet is the story of Obama's early exposure to Catholicism in Indonesia, where he lived as a child with his mother. We learn that the first school he attended was a neighborhood Catholic academy, the St. Francis Assisi Foundation School where he began first grade in 1968 a few months after Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were killed on the other side of the world.

Obama's Catholic elementary school had opened only the previous year and welcomed children of any religion. His first-grade teacher, Israella Dharmawan, now 64, said that like all the other students, 'Obama had to pray before and after each class, and cross himself in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

His family subsequently moved to a middle-class neighborhood, some distance from the St Francis School, and he was enrolled in a selective public school in central Jakarta that was part of the legacy of Dutch colonial rule.

In his personal memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama describes memories of finding himself in the company of a very different set of classmates compared to most of his contemporaries in American Catholic schools. He also describes seeing beggars every day, 'in tattered clothing matted with dirt, some without arms, others without feet, victims of scurvy or polio or leprosy walking on their hands or rolling down the crowded sidewalks in jerry-built carts, their legs twisted behind them like contortionists.'

So it was at a young age he became aware of the extremes of suffering in the world. Indonesia had undergone a military coup the year before the family's arrival there, and hundreds of thousands of people had been killed. 'The world was violent, I was learning, unpredictable and often cruel.'

Whelan recounts Obama's own story about his experience working on the South Side of Chicago as a community organizer, primarily within eight Catholic parishes that had witnessed stark economic misfortune during the 1970s and '80s.

Whelan traces Obama's journey through a series of encounters and events to grant funding by the Catholic bishops' Campaign for Human Development and the creation of the Developing Communities Project (DCP), the organization that eventually hired young Obama, the organizer. Obama took office space in a Catholic rectory to suit the new DCP enterprise.

Reminiscing about his time working in this neighborhood, Obama said in an October 2008 interview with *Catholic Digest*, "I got my start as a community organizer working with mostly Catholic parishes on the South Side of Chicago that were struggling because the steel plants had closed. The Campaign for Human Development helped fund the project, and so very early on, my career was intertwined with the belief in social justice that is so strong in the church."

Whelan quotes an October 2008 interview in which Obama, reflecting on his tenure in the Illinois state Senate, said, "I've tried to apply the precepts of compassion and care for the vulnerable that are so central to Catholic teachings to my work, (such as in) making health care a right for all Americans -- I was the sponsor in the state legislature for the Bernardin Amendment, named after Cardinal Bernardin, a wonderful figure in Chicago I had the opportunity to work with who said that health care should be a right."

Whelan also quotes a Chicago priest as saying: "Barack may not have identified himself as religious, but the religious and Christian principles he held told me that obviously he must have read [the scriptures] and studied them somewhere, because he knew it and spoke knowledgeably about it."

[Click here to download the Whelan booklet.](#) [1]

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