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Linking liberal Catholicism and the Democratic Party

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NCR Today

The faces of American Catholicism have taken a rightward turn in the last few years, from Archbishop Timothy Dolan to Republican vice-presidential candidate Rep. Paul Ryan.

But it doesn't have to be that way: Democrats are missing the chance to link themselves to a more liberal Catholicism that is in step with many of their values. Why the disconnect?

Molly Worthen, a professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, argues in the *New York Times* that Democrats are in danger of abdicating the Catholic vote -- often a swing vote -- to conservative Republicans.

She notes that, while Sr. Simone Campbell, director of the Catholic social justice organization NETWORK, spoke at the Democratic convention, Vice President Joe Biden all but ignored his Catholic background and values when he spoke in Charlotte.

Worthen goes on to say that liberal Catholic thinking -- especially in the area of social justice -- can help provide a broad and deep vision for Democratic party initiatives that help the poor, the sick and the elderly, and seek to increase opportunity and economic equality.

She blames the party for still being shy when it comes to religious values, but she also bravely points a finger at the church itself. Worthen writes:

If the Democratic Party is not listening to liberal Catholics, it is partly because they are not in a position to speak very loudly. They are dodging the sights of a Roman hierarchy more preoccupied with smoking out left-leaning nuns than nurturing critical thinking. ?Is liberal Catholicism dead?? Time wondered a few years back. The answer is no: in some regards, liberal Catholic intellectuals

are flourishing. They are writing and teaching, running social justice initiatives at the church's great universities, ensconced in professorships around the Ivy League. Yet a cozy academic subculture can be as isolating as it is empowering. The handful of nationally known Catholic political thinkers who might be called progressive, or at least compassionate and cosmopolitan ? like the journalist-scholars Garry Wills and E. J. Dionne Jr., blogmeister Andrew Sullivan, or the feminist nun and blogger Sister Joan Chittister ? are far outnumbered by the ranks of prominent Catholic conservatives in the trenches of activism and policy making.

If liberal Catholics need to struggle to make themselves heard, so be it. Worthen is right, that the Democratic Party power structure still seems too reticent when it comes to speaking about its values in religious terms -- but liberal Catholics must not be.

Hiding out in academia and trying to live below the Vatican radar is no answer. Handing power and influence over to the right-wing only seems to make them press for more.

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