NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER DONATE NOW!
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Demonizing Pro-Life Democrats

Joe Feuerherd | Jun. 9, 2009 NCR Today

Is there room in the Obama governing coalition for pro-life Democrats? The President personally provided the answer to that question, a resounding yes, in his speech at Notre Dame last month. Others are not so sure.

The issue arises most recently with the appointment of Alexia Kelley as Director of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Kelley is the founder of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, a Washington-based group that ?promotes increased awareness of Catholic social teaching through the media and provides opportunities for Catholics and citizens of good will to advance the common good in the public square.?

Catholics in Alliance emerged following George W. Bush?s victory over John Kerry in 2004. Kerry, the only Catholic major party presidential candidate since John Kennedy, actually lost the Catholic vote to Bush that year. This was a source of considerable concern to those ? mainly but not exclusively Democrats -- who believe that Catholic social teaching had been narrowed and brilliantly exploited by Karl Rove and other Republican operatives. Remember all those bishops who said the pro-choice Kerry should not receive communion?

Catholics in Alliance, from its outset, took a decidedly ?seamless garment? bent to the issues. From its website: ?We support a consistent culture of life that includes protections for unborn children; implementation of social, economic and material supports for pregnant women and vulnerable families; and protections for children from abuse, poverty, and neglect. We believe that as a society, we must care for all life?whether unborn or born, guilty or innocent, young or old. We work to promote the essential conditions for a culture of life that upholds the sacred and inviolable dignity of the human person against affronts to human life at all stages.?

Cut to the chase: Catholics in Alliance was among the groups in the 2008 campaign that successfully broadened the Catholic political playing field, which redounded to the benefit of Democrats in key states such as Ohio. Obama won the overall Catholic vote and drew even with John McCain among those ? a targeted constituency for Republicans -- who attend Mass on a weekly or more frequent basis.

But election coalitions, where most everyone is welcome in the interest of defeating the opponent, are different from governing coalitions, where actual programs and policies are implemented. Once united in their support of candidate or cause, interest groups fray as the poetry of politics is translated into the prose of governance.

So today we have Catholics for Choice, a Washington-based organization that favors abortion rights, condemning Kelley?s appointment. ?In appointing an anti-choice advocate to a key position in HHS we are seeing crucial principles abandoned?principles upon which so many men and women rely to lead healthy lives,? said Jon O?Brien, the group?s president. ?From the beginning, Alexia Kelley directed [Catholics in Alliance] to ignore the question of access to abortion and reframe the debate in terms of reducing the number of abortions ? although polls consistently show that the majority of Catholics support abortion rights. This language around reducing the number of abortions should be a huge red flag to anyone who believes in and seeks to defend a woman?s right to choose.?

To recap: Kelley, says O?Brien, is an ?anti-choice advocate? because she favors programs that would reduce the need for abortion while abandoning the ?principle? of ?support for abortion rights.? Stalinists vs. Trotskyites was less arcane.

And there?s more. In a **28-page Catholics for Choice report [1]**released last week, we are told that Catholics in Alliance ?*maintains* [emphasis added] that it is a separate entity from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.? Further, says the report, Catholics in Alliance ?reveal[ed] its true colors? by quoting Pope John Paul II in a letter to the editor of the Washington Post last year. This demonstrated, according to the report, that Catholics in Alliance ?is at one with one of the most anti-choice popes in the modern era on abortion.?

The implication that Catholics in Alliance is somehow an adjunct of the US Bishops Conference (presumably because Kelley and other staff once worked there) is just plain silly. It is either an attempt to mislead the ignorant and those inclined to think ill of the church (one thinks of a NARAL staff meeting at which the light bulb goes off leading to the collective recognition that, ?Ah, they are all in this together?, or it is an abysmal analysis of the dynamic under which Catholic groups in this country operate.

Further, the idea that a Catholic organization might quote a pope is hardly surprising. One wonders: Were they supposed to cite, rather than ?one of the most anti-choice popes? in recent memory, a pontiff who favored legal abortion? Good luck with that Nexis search.

Still, the pro-choice element of the Democrat governing coalition (and, don?t kid yourself, it remains the dominant voice in the party on the issue of abortion) is right to be concerned. They need an enemy, a person ? a walking caricature like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson or a rightwing Catholic bishop ? to make their case. Today, with a popular president who embraces both *Roe v. Wade* (meaning there is no legal threat to the right to choose) and efforts to reduce the abortion rate, they are left to demonize a progressive woman whose entire career has revolved around promoting the common good.

To the degree that Democrats (and all Americans) embrace the idea that abortion is a tragedy to be avoided, and not a right to be celebrated, the professional pro-choice movement (like their counterparts among anti-abortion groups) is in for a difficult time.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2015 - 23:41*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/demonizing-pro-life-democrats

Links:
[1] http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/documents/TheTroubleWithCACG.pdf