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Progressive Catholics at home in Obama administration

Jerry Filteau | Jun. 22, 2009

With U.S. Vice President Joe Biden at his side, President Barack Obama announces federal appeals judge Sonia Sotomayor as his nominee for Supreme Court justice during a news conference at the White House in Washington May 26. (CNS/Reuters/Larry Downing)

WASHINGTON -- Catholics are visibly more active in the Obama administration than in any other Democratic administration in recent memory. Few might have guessed this only a few months back.

?The administration knows that one of the reasons that they?re here is because key chunks of Catholics -- switchable Catholics -- moved from the Republican column to the Democratic column in this last election,? said Stephen Schneck, director of The Catholic University of America?s Life Cycle Institute and former chairman of the university?s politics department.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas J. Reese said the distinctive factor in the 2008 election was ?that a lot of progressive Catholics were speaking out in support of Obama. They weren?t just going to roll over and let the conservative Catholics set the agenda and say you can?t vote for Democrats because they?re pro-choice.?

?There was a [political] pushback on that, and that was a significant change,? he said. ?Basically that?s continuing. The conservatives, especially the conservatives in the pro-life movement who see Obama as the enemy, are continuing to attack him, whereas the progressive Catholics are talking about engagement, about finding common ground, about working to reduce the number of abortions -- and working on all the other programs that will help poor people and health care, get the economy going, etc., etc.?

Where political conservatism had been in the ascendancy within the U.S. Catholic community in recent years, the 2008 election marked a significant shift in power for progressive Catholics who had for years felt increasingly marginalized from a Republican core that was ever more conservative and a Democratic core that had become more and more secular.

The Obama election meant that those progressives -- some pro-choice politically, many others plainly pro-life but seeking a new way around the 35-year stalemate over legalized abortion in a pluralistic society -- were suddenly on the inside track.

?One-third of his Cabinet is Catholic,? Reese said. These include Joseph Biden, the first Catholic vice president

in U.S. history; Interior Secretary Kenneth L. Salazar; Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius; and Agriculture Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack.

Biden and Sebelius, along with other Catholic senior administration officials such as CIA Director Leon E. Panetta, former White House chief of staff in the Clinton administration, have come under fire from some bishops and conservative pro-life groups as Catholics who depart from the official policies of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in their support for keeping abortion legal.

President Obama has also made serious overtures to the predominantly Catholic Hispanic community with his nominations of a Latina Catholic, Judge Sonia Sotomayor, to the U.S. Supreme Court and a Latino Catholic theologian, Miguel Díaz of St. John?s University in Collegeville, Minn., as the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

?Catholic politicians are really playing a very significant role in the administration at the Cabinet level and other administrative positions,? Reese said. ?You certainly can?t say that Catholics are distanced or frowned upon by the Democratic Party. Obama?s ability and willingness to do the God-talk -- he?s very comfortable talking about his religion, Jesus and his faith, and what impact that has on politics -- I think that gives a lot of comfort to religious folks who want their political leaders to be people of faith.?

He said Catholic progressives ?were certainly around in the Clinton administration,? but ?it?s been eight years of being in the wilderness for progressives, so I think there?s certainly a new enthusiasm, a lot of hope that something can be done. ... And I think we?ve already seen this, with the State Children?s Health Insurance Program bill passed and other things like that.?

Asked about Biden?s place on the Obama ticket as a pro-choice Catholic candidate after a 25-year history -- since Geraldine Ferraro?s 1984 vice presidential candidacy on the Democratic ticket -- in which pro-choice Catholics have been a political liability in U.S. national elections, Reese said, ?Any pro-choice Catholic running for office is going to stir up a lot of controversy. But the question always is, Is this more noise than substance? I mean, how much effect does it really have? Clearly when the economy?s in the toilet, how much effect does this really have? The abortion issue is simply pushed off the table.

?If everybody is perfectly happy and content [on other social and economic questions], well then they might think about that [abortion] as an issue. You know, there?s a small group of people for whom that is the only issue, and they will make noise -- but whether they can sway votes is another issue, and it doesn?t seem that they could sway votes in this last election.

?The question really is, can a pro-choice candidate run and simply ignore the blogosphere and keep changing the topic back to his issue -- you know, who controls the messaging?? he added.

?I think the Obama campaign was very good at controlling the messaging and keeping abortion from being the issue that everybody paid attention to? by focusing on the economy and Iraq, he said.

Reese also cited a sea change in U.S.-Vatican relations, saying that with the Obama administration the issues on which the United States and the Holy See agree and disagree have changed dramatically. The general unilateralism of the Bush administration, its nearly one-sided preemptive war on Iraq and its lack of a clear policy or strategy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are only a few of the former administration?s international policy gaps deplored by the Holy See over the past eight years.

?It?s almost a total flip-flop,? he said. ?The issues that the Vatican agreed with in the Bush administration are the issues that they now disagree with in the Obama administration, and the issues they disagreed with in the Bush administration are now the issues they agree with [in Obama?s administration].?

?The Vatican?s been much more positive in its approach to Obama than have been the U.S. bishops,? he added. ?How much longer can the U.S. bishops keep up this drumbeat against Obama if he?s being embraced by the Vatican? I mean, obviously, the Vatican is not embracing everything, but the Vatican is capable of saying, ?We agree and want to work with you on these things and we disagree with you on these other things.? That message doesn?t come through from the U.S. bishops. The only message that comes through from the U.S. bishops is the negativity.?

He called Obama?s choice of Díaz as ambassador to the Vatican ?interesting? but said the real question there is how much direct access Díaz will have to Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. ?What the Vatican wants more than anything else in an ambassador to the Holy See is somebody who, when they want to give a message, can deliver it to the highest levels,? he said.

He said that in the last election season new Catholic groups like the partisan Catholics United and Catholic Democrats and the nonpartisan Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good provided a significant alternative voice to the far more numerous politically conservative Catholic organizations who had previously dominated media coverage of Catholics in politics.

Schneck said, ?I know the pro-life crowd won?t believe this, but in fact the administration has been very attentive to issues that may concern Catholic voters.

?Even though Obama?s own Christian background is not in the Catholic tradition, he really doesn?t use the kind of evangelical language that was kind of off-putting when it came from George W. Bush or Bill Clinton, or even when it came from Jimmy Carter,? he said. ?He uses religious language quite frequently ... but he uses religious language in a way that seems to harmonize with Catholic sensibilities. He doesn?t push the buttons that Bush?s evangelical terminology seemed to push sometimes.?

?There does seem to be a lot of outreach? by the administration to ?progressive Catholic organizations,? said Schneck, who is on the board of directors of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. ?Progressive pro-life Catholic organizations seem to be getting the most amount of attention,? he added.

He said the attention given to those Catholics ?is starting to raise some questions on the left, among non-Catholic progressives, who seem to be struggling a little bit with the leverage that Catholic progressives seem to be having with this administration.?

Jerry Filteau is NCR *correspondent in Washington.*

[Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story identified Homeland Security Secretary Janet A. Napolitano as Catholic. She is Methodist. NCR regrets the error.]

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