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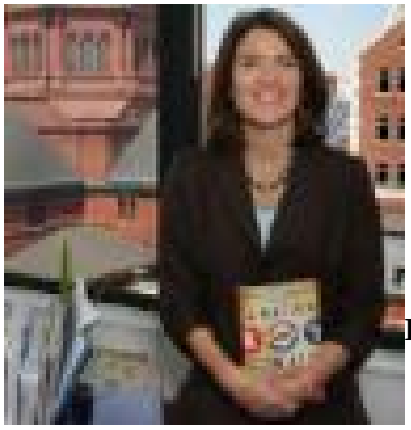
Catholics in Denver lobby for peace, common good

Mary Barron | Aug. 28, 2008


Denver

Catholics' long tradition of caring for people, reducing suffering, providing health care, education and the basics to hold together families and communities (not to mention body and soul) has somehow gotten lost along the way. Not in actuality, but certainly in the common consciousness of American society.

?When I was growing up, I understood that this was the work of the Catholic church,? said Chris Korzen, 32, executive director of Catholics United, which describes itself as a national movement for justice, peace and the common good.

In the mainstream media, especially around election time, it has been a long time since that image of the church's public role held sway. Catholics are typically portrayed as being against abortion and gay marriage and not for much of anything relevant to public policy. Korzen's group and many others are working to refocus the lens.

?There is a sense on the part of a lot of Catholic social justice groups that Catholic social justice issues are not well understood in the public square and have been eclipsed in the values debate,? said Alexia Kelley, 41, who heads Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, a network of about 20 groups including Pax Christi, Network, the Sisters of Mercy and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Grabbing makeshift seats Wednesday evening on the padded base of a moveable basketball goal in the Pepsi Center's basement --- while above us the country's most powerful Democrats talked about winning back the White House -- Korzen and Kelley spoke of their efforts to jumpstart a long-stalled public dialogue about caring for one another and not just for ourselves. ?This is what our faith calls us to demand? of society, Kelley said.

So far, their efforts and those of others associated with drafting a new ?Platform for the Common Good? (**www.votethecommongood.com**) have found far greater receptivity in the Democratic Party and the Obama for America campaign than among Republicans. But the organizers have not given up and are trying, through one-on-one relationships, to stir some interest in the GOP.

The Democratic National Committee invited me to the convention,? Korzen said. ?I'm still waiting for my invitation from the Republicans.?

To be clear, there were already greater existing connections between members of the Catholic social-issue groups and top Democrats. Kelley was director of religious outreach for the Kerry-Edwards campaign in 2004, and her current Washington, D.C.-based Alliance has a field office in Detroit headed by Vicky Kovari, who has background working with the interfaith Gamaliel Foundation.

One of Gamaliel's founders helped train Democratic nominee Barack Obama in his early community organizing work in Chicago. In addition, the organizing Obama did there was partially funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, a program of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Kelley used to work for that program.

The Alliance and Catholics United hope to draw new attention to Catholic teachings on issues like a right to health care, the need for a just economy, and responsible care for the environment ? issues they say have become crises through neglect in the last decade. But in seeking to broaden the focus, the groups are not ignoring abortion, the political issue most people immediately associate with Catholicism.

In fact, earlier Wednesday, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good unveiled a new study in Denver showing that support services for women and even the availability of jobs for men both correllated strongly with significant reductions in the abortion rate during the 1990s. Kelley and Korzen are encouraged that the new Democratic Party platform, while upholding the principle that a decision on abortion is the right of the pregnant woman and not the government, for the first time also calls for efforts to reduce abortion rates through support services for women.

Pepperdine University law professor Douglas Kmiec, a Catholic pro-life activist who worked for two Republican administrations and wrote briefs seeking to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, said he is also encouraged by the new Democratic platform language. For a number of legal reasons, including *stare decisis* and state's rights, the prospect of abortion becoming illegal throughout the United States is extremely remote, he said. Not only is there not a fifth vote on the Supreme Court, there really aren't even four votes to overturn the case in such a thoroughly absolutist way.

Kmiec, a Republican, has endorsed Obama for president, largely because of his respect for Obama's embrace of a wide range of principles consistent with Catholic social teachings.

Korzen said his organization, Catholics United, plans to run advertisements in the next few weeks and in the time leading up to the general election, pointing out inconsistencies in the records of politicians who call themselves pro-life, gain political points off that stance, and yet vote against things like making medical care more accessible to children. The ads, in both print and electronic media, particularly in areas where the group

sees Catholics as under pressure to be single-issue voters, will highlight a broader range of Catholic teaching and the idea of a consistent ethic of life.

?We feel very strongly that there are a number of organizations and individuals with no ties to the church who are using the teaching on abortion as a wedge,? Korzen said. ?We want to have a more robust and productive conversation about what it means to be pro-life, reflecting the fullness of church teachings.?

The pair said that standing up for human life and dignity also includes working for a more equitable economy, reforming our immigration system, developing better re-entry programs for ex-offenders returning to communities, building peace and reducing weapons proliferation.

(Mary Barron is a freelance writer from Colorado who is covering the Democratic Party for NCR *during this year?s presidential race.)*

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