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At GOP Convention, two Catholics, two causes, two paths

Michael Humphrey | Sep. 2, 2008

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Don?t let the quiet on the floor of yesterday?s Republican National Convention fool you. While cable news showed Hurricane Gustav blow through the Gulf Coast, with intermittent images of an empty convention hall, there was plenty of noise on the St. Paul streets, in the hotel meeting rooms and even the corridors of the convention center.

No matter what brought them to St. Paul, activists, delegates and politicians were getting their work done.

And the experiences of two of those activists ? Teresa Collett and Kathy Kelly ? demonstrate how different Catholic experience and political life can be these days.

Both are informed by their Catholicism, a catalyst that spurs them to action internationally. Collett is opposed to abortion and Kelly is opposed to the war in Iraq.

Officially, the church places Collett?s issue higher among its concerns. St. Paul and Minneapolis Archbishop John C. Nienstedt, said Church teaching makes it clear why.

?We?re pinned in by our beliefs,? Nienstedt told *NCR*. ?If we believe God made life and it?s sacred, then as a Catholic, that?s what I believe and that?s what I hold. That narrows the field, doesn?t it??

But doesn?t that, by virtue of the Republican?s strong antiabortion platform, virtually leave church members with one voting option?

?We don?t endorse parties and we don?t endorse candidates,? Nienstedt said. ?We speak to the issues. ? If a candidate has taken a position on an issue you don?t agree with, say it?s abortion, there would still be a possibility of voting for a person if there was an equal (reason), I don?t know what that equal would be unless it?s racism.?

Making connections

So when it comes to marshaling the resources and corporate voice of the church, this puts Collett, a professor of law at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis, at a distinct advantage. Collett, a Republican, will be able to use the RNC as an opportunity to connect party leaders with local church leaders who care about abortion.

She attended a reception for Catholic RNC delegates Sunday night, hosted by the archdiocese in the courtyard behind the Cathedral of St. Paul. Today she co-hosts a panel discussion and screening of the movie ?Advise and Dissent? at St. Thomas. And she will be attending the convention itself as a guest.

Collett, who has argued abortion cases both in U.S. courts as well as in international courts, is somewhat optimistic that John McCain?s presidency, and one more conservative Supreme Court justice appointment, could be a potential turning point in her cause.

?Chief Justice Roberts will be very cautious,? Collett said, ?and the only question I see that might present the question directly is the South Dakota initiative (which would ban most abortions), which polling right now says may well pass. If that case were to come up, it would probably take five or six years. And that would be the vehicle to do it.?

When Collett looks across the aisle at the Democratic Party?s platform to reduce the number of abortions in America, she?s complimentary.

?I was just reading some of the proposals on the Democrats for Life Web site today,? Collett said. ?And I think some of those are incredibly valuable. That the change in their platform reflects at least a moderating influence on the celebration of abortion, I think is a good thing. What troubles me is that they had speakers at the convention that represent the two most prominent abortion-on-demand advocacy groups in the country. It sort of belies the platform.?

On the streets

For Kelly, who walked from Chicago to Minneapolis and was jailed in Wisconsin for four days along the way, influence is definitively outside the walls and not quite as orderly. That is certainly true politically, but it?s also true with the church. Kelly, a member of the Chicago Catholic Worker and director of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, said she wishes that bishops would draw people together.

?I think about the idea of the bishop is a symbol of unity,? Kelly said. ?I like to think about Catholics united around the central teachings, which has everything to do with love of neighbor and love of enemy. That isn?t happening.?

But Kelly was hardly alone yesterday, when an estimated 10,000 marchers wound through the streets of St. Paul. They started at the Minnesota state capitol building, walked to the Xcel Center, site of the convention, and back to the capitol.

Kelly says the theme for her group, given their hometown, was the riotous convention of 1968 in Chicago.

?That was in the height of another war that was hugely unpopular,? Kelly says, ?and then it was seen that Democrats allowed that war to continue and now Republicans have allowed this one to continue.?

The St. Paul protests have been much calmer than Chicago, so far. The throngs of official marchers were creative, loud and for the most part peaceful. Early during the march, small bands of mainly young protesters broke some windows and tried to force their way through police lines. Police estimated nearly 300 arrests, almost all away from the main march and most after the march had ended.

Some arrests were simply mayhem control, but others were taken more seriously. Raids and arrests of protest planners from Saturday night by the Ramsey County Sheriff?s Department were still reverberating here. And late yesterday afternoon, three journalists from Democracy Now, including host and producer Amy Goodman, were arrested. Goodman?s crew captured the incident. The video shows riot-geared police telling her to back away from their line and then arresting her for not doing so. (I had a similar incident, but did not get arrested after being warned a second time to move in front of their line.) Goodman was released after three hours, and Democracy Now producers Abdel Kouddous and Nicole Salazar were released later in the evening.

For those along the official march route, the relative calm did not predict any of that. Leading the way were two groups of veterans opposed to the war. Bryan McMahon, a Vietnam vet who traveled to St. Paul from Oregon, says having men and women who?ve seen military operations protest lends credibility.

?Veterans know what war is, know what it does and feels like,? said McMahon. ?So we?re qualified to speak to wrong wars and that?s what this is.?

But that didn?t keep some observers from lashing out at the former vets. One man on the route had to be physically restrained as he shouted at a former Marine who was wearing his uniform.

?They have a right to wear the uniform,? said McMahon, who did not wear his. ?They earned that uniform and this is what democracy is about.?

But while the protest snarled downtown St. Paul traffic and used up a large chunk of the Twin Cities police officers, it was a blip on national television screens. Most of the protest news reported last night was about the small bands of youth who were arrested, though it wasn?t clear what those groups? messages were.

The only network reporter spotted during the nearly two-hour march was from Fox News, who arrived back at the capitol at the end. The reporter for Fox was surrounded by protestors and bombarded with chants about the quality of their newscasts. It was not favorable.

Meanwhile, the televisions in the convention hall were trained on Gustav and the RNC itself. Nothing of the protests could be seen or heard inside.

Kelly is philosophical about the barriers between her message and those fellow Catholics she would like to reach.

?There are people who passionately believe in their political loyalties and I don?t want to say their voice shouldn?t have equally play,? she said. ?But democracy is based on education and I think the bishops have done us a disservice, all of us.?

(Humphery is a freelance writer from Kansas city, MO., and is covering the Republican Party Convention for NCR.)

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