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

Geraldine Ferraro, the bishops, and abortion

Phyllis Zagano | Mar. 30, 2011 Just Catholic

Not long before the 1984 elections in the U.S., someone handed the new archbishop of New York an old letter signed by the Catholic woman vice-presidential candidate that passed along opinions from the group Catholics for a Free Choice to members of Congress.

And, the fight was on.

Now Geraldine Ferraro is dead and gone, and so is John Cardinal O?Connor. But the memory lingers on.

I think O?Connor regretted starting the argument, for a lot of reasons. First and foremost, Ferrraro did not live in his archdiocese of New York, but across the river in the Brooklyn diocese. It seems her pastor there told her there were lots of Catholic arguments going on about abortion, as well there were. As the news story percolated, the question became whether Catholic opinion was ?monolithic? on abortion.

Then on October 4, 1984, Catholics for a Free Choice upped the ante with an ad in *The New York Times*. No longer was the question about differing Catholic opinions. The carefully-worded ad -- signed by theologians, priests and religious -- said Catholic tradition included more than one legitimate viewpoint.

Things got both nasty and complicated. Who could Catholics vote for? What if Catholic politicians supported the fact of legal abortion, even as they abhorred the practice?

That?s not easy to parse in political philosophy, especially for a member (or a potential member) of the executive branch of government. Laws come from the legislative branch and legal decisions from the judiciary. The executive branch has responsibility for the bureaucracy. The law of the land is what it is, and only rarely is it directly influenced by the vice-president.

The Catholic-politician-and-abortion argument was angry but less nuanced in 1984. Through it all, Ferraro ran for vice president of the United States, and more than 37 million voters thought she?d do just fine. She didn?t win, of course, but the fact it took another 25 years before there was another major party women VP candidate spotlights the mountain she was climbing.

Those who knew her tell me Ferraro was privately and personally most kind and generous. We?ll never know how much she did for others. We do know she served on boards for the National Breast Cancer Research Fund, the Easter Seal Society, and several others.

She also never quite got away from the Klieg lights. Ferraro twice tried to win election for the U.S. Senate from New York. She represented the U.S. on human rights issues to the United Nations. She belonged to the Council on Foreign Relations, and was a founding member of the National Organization of Italian-American Women.

Unfortunately, the abortion lobby claimed her as its own. Frances Kissling, who headed Catholics for a Free Choice from 1982-2007, probably gave Ferraro?s staffer the research that began the front page shouting match.

Was Ferraro the victim of bad information? Kissling blogged in Ferraro?s honor the other day and included three factual errors in her first two sentences.

For the record, Geraldine Ferraro was born in the Hudson River city of Newburgh, NY. She was a boarding student at the Marymount Academy, then at Marymount College, both in Tarrytown, NY. She finished her undergraduate degree as a commuter at Marymount Manhattan College, where her professional papers are archived. Her law degree is from Fordham.

Of course the bloggers to the right are quoting canon law about her funeral at St. Vincent Ferrer?s in Manhattan, where she went to 8:00 a.m. Mass most Sundays. The opinions of the communion police cross those of the bishops of New York State, who seem to believe the Mass is not a place for confrontation. At least that?s what Albany Bishop Howard Hubbard said, when asked about New York Governor Cuomo?s marital situation and political views. The discussion, he said, is between the politician and his pastor.

You have to hope that attitude will spread across the land. We cannot keep knocking off Catholic politicians, nor should we allow media to make them one-issue candidates.

At the 1984 Democratic National Convention, she introduced herself. "My name is Geraldine Ferraro.? Reports say her speech launched eight minutes of cheers, foot stomping, and tears.

I watched that speech on television. I never really met her, but I shook her hand once at a campaign function. The last time I saw her, she was across the aisle at a sister?s funeral at Marymount in Tarrytown.

I wonder how many Masses and ceremonies she attended there, through her school days until now. Outside that chapel stand two life-sized marble angels on pedestals, welcoming and announcing all comers with long slender trumpets.

I like to think as death approached in Massachusetts General Hospital (Cue angels) and she who broke so many barriers for women approached those Pearly Gates (Raise trumpets) she only had to say: ?My name is Geraldine Ferraro.?

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