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Politics could get ugly in parish parking lots this weekend

Dennis Coday NCR Staff | Nov. 1, 2008

This final weekend before the 2008 Election Day could see parishioners, police and political activists mingling in church parking lots as the struggle to influence the highly valued Catholic vote takes on new urgency in the waning days of this election.

One group, Priests for Life, an antiabortion group founded and head by Fr. Frank Pavone, has called on supporters to use weekend Masses to distribute leaflets in the parking lots and streets around Catholic churches this weekend.

Priests for Life hosted a teleconference call to supporters Oct. 27 with detailed instructions on what to do this weekend. The group said more than 3,000 people were on the line. Listeners were told: ?Go to politicalrespondibilty.com (one of the group?s web sites) and download the nonpartisan voters? guide that is available for distribution there.

"Print out enough copies for a church parking lot and show up at the church services -- whether it?s your church or another church in town -- and distribute them. Those people are very likely to be in the voting booth (on Election Day) and they are very likely to support our values.?

Listeners are warned that they may face trespass charges if they distribute leaflets on church grounds.

Pavone said, ?I call this coming weekend ?National Get Kicked out of the Church Parking Lot Sunday,? ? and we are going to talk about some ways to counteract that.?

Responding to Pavone?s call, Catholics United ? which claims to represent progressive Catholics ? alerted their own network with e-mails and blog announcements about a ?Protect Catholic Churches from Political Manipulation? campaign.

Catholics United told their supporters to contact their pastors or parish administrations about ?the religious far right? calling on its activists ?to defy the U.S. Catholic Bishops? order to keep unapproved election materials from church property by doing a 'literature drop' at parishes across the country.?

The group provides suggestions supporters can give to pastors ?to protect? their parishes from ?divisive political literature.? Their alert tells supporters:

- ?Inform your parish staff and volunteers about the Bishops? guidelines and enlist their help in keeping church property clear of unauthorized voter education information.?
- ?Be especially watchful for leafleting on Church grounds during Mass, including efforts to place such materials on car windshields. These groups are telling their activists to begin papering Church parking lots twenty minutes after Mass begins.?
- ?You have a right to remove unauthorized literature form car windshields on Church property, ask partisan activists to leave Church property, and to call local law enforcement if they continue to trespass.?
- ?Post a message in the church and the parish bulletin reminding parishioners that the Church does not support or oppose any political candidates, and does not authorize the distribution of partisan political materials on parish property.?

Listeners to the Priest for Life teleconference are encouraged to use church newsletters, bulletins and announcements to distribute the prolife message. The conference call also encourages people to join Election Day get out the vote efforts, like transporting people to the polls, and joining poll watch groups.

In the teleconference Pavone is careful not to name particular parties or candidates. He says things like ?donate to the candidates of your choice,? ?contact the campaigns for the candidate of your choice,? and display yard signs and bumper-stickers for ?your candidate.?

Whenever one speaker in the teleseminar recommended volunteering with a campaign, he gave contact information for the McCain and the Obama campaigns and the Democratic and Republican parties.

The listeners were read testimonials from people who followed Priests for Life suggestions during the last presidential election. The testimonials gave long lists of prolife activities in their parish and local communities. They also included specific references to working with Republican Party election efforts and even donating to the Bush-Cheney reelection campaign as part of promoting a prolife agenda.

Pavone said, ?That?s the zeal, that?s the fervor, that?s the kind of person to person activity that won the last presidential election and that is exactly what we are saying to you tonight will win this one.?

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