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Catholic vs. Catholic

Ken Briggs | Feb. 26, 2012 NCR Today

Rick Santorum's attack on John F. Kennedy's clarion call for church-state separation completes an eerie cycle.

JFK personified the rising success of American Catholics against the backdrop of lingering insecurity about Catholicism's place in a traditionally Protestant nation.

To allay suspicions of his church, Kennedy made his famous speech to the gathered throng of Houston clergy. Separation made religious freedom possible, he argued. The Catholic church had no more business dictating public policy than other religious institution and that helped guarantee free exercise for everyone.

Rick Santorum claims that ideal has created an attack on Catholicism and all religion precisely because it has prevented faith groups from playing a justified role in that mythological place called the "public square."

To those favoring the system of privileges that has been practiced toward religious groups that have dominated certain regions -- Baptists in Dallas, Catholics in New York -- strict separation means a loss of power. That's happened as society has become less overtly religious.

But nothing in the Obama contraception proposal or otherwise suggests reneging on the First Amendment. Truth is, small, unpopular religious movements have always faced degrees of oppression, but that's not what Santorum is concerned about. He voices no worry about the little guys. It's the establishment players like his own that have been rightly shorn of some perks.

Catholics have been a vital, vigorous component in national politics as individuals and as coalitions promoting moral values. That is a proud tradition which was given fresh impulse by Kennedy's assurance that Catholics only wanted to play by the same rules as everyone else. Santorum wants to turn the clock back to favoritism rather than affirm First Amendment principle.

The political disputes among Catholics have grown and deepened during this political season. Bishops have long publicly criticized political figures who support choice on abortion and the death penalty, but the latest disputes among lay Catholics and lay Catholics and bishops have exposed how deeply the divisions exist.

The current political story line assumes the vituperative attacks by Republican candidates on each other are inflicting harm on the party. A religious story is related. Santorum and Newt Gingrich have indicted fellow Catholics over contraception and Santorum has not only slighted Obama's religious character but sounded at times like the very kind of moral enforcer from whom John Kennedy sought to distance himself.

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