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Obama campaign unveils its 'Catholics for Obama' 2012 team

David Gibson Religion News Service | Aug. 14, 2012

The Obama campaign unveiled its "Catholics for Obama" team for 2012 on Monday in an effort to burnish its credentials with a key voting bloc whose leaders have increasingly voiced their opposition to the administration over issues like gay marriage and abortion rights.

The roll-out had been months in the making and long expected, given the importance of the Catholic vote -- nearly one quarter of the electorate, concentrated in battleground states.

But it also comes on the heels of Mitt Romney's announcement Saturday that he was picking Paul Ryan, a Catholic known for budget-cutting ideas that have drawn fire from many Catholic leaders, as his running mate on the Republican presidential ticket. The various developments could make the debate over Catholic teachings on social justice and the common good an important subtext in the November election.

Obama's 21-member team includes a number of Catholics who are well-known to the public but not always welcome to the hierarchy, such as Victoria Reggie Kennedy, the widow of Sen. Edward Kennedy. Last May, a Catholic college in Massachusetts was told by the local bishop to bar Kennedy from delivering a commencement address.

Also on the committee are politicians like Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro of Connecticut, Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois and Gov. Martin O'Malley of Maryland, who pushed for that state's law legalizing gay marriage.

In addition, there are Catholic scholars and theologians: Sr. Jamie Phelps, director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans; Nicholas Cafardi, a canon and civil lawyer who teaches at the Duquesne Law School in Pittsburgh; Thomas Groome of Boston College, a theologian and popular writer

on the church; and Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at Catholic University of America.

"What's distinctive about Catholics and politics is our ancient idea of the common good," Schneck said. "We measure that by how the working class and poorest among us are doing. Government, for us Catholics, is obliged to be caring. It's obliged to serve and to help build the country as whole. President Obama 'gets' this at a deep level."

Schneck seemed to be taking aim at Rep. Ryan's controversial budget plan -- a focus of Democratic efforts since Ryan was named Saturday -- when he stressed that the GOP ticket "embraces policies that would decimate programs that serve the vulnerable and seniors while giving more tax cuts to the wealthy."

The announcement made no mention of the controversial birth control mandate for health insurers that has focused the bishops longstanding anger at Obama and turned them into one of his most vocal opponents.

So far, however, the hierarchy's efforts do not seem to have swayed Catholics, who often agree with the bishops on some issues but still tend to support Obama over Romney. And in October, just before the election, Obama is set to appear with Romney at a high-profile charity dinner hosted by New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan -- a platform some conservatives fear could give Obama a boost with Catholics. That has led to unusual criticism of Dolan from the right.

Obama's Catholic sponsors provide an interesting contrast to the "Catholics for Romney" team unveiled two weeks ago. The six national co-chairs are all former ambassadors to the Vatican.

Here are the "Catholics for Obama" national co-chairs:

Former State Rep. Polly Baca, Colorado
Ambassador Elizabeth Frawley Bagley, Washington, D.C.
Rep. Xavier Becerra, California
Nicholas Cafardi, Pennsylvania
Former Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper, Pennsylvania
Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro, Connecticut
Sen. Dick Durbin, Illinois
Miguel Foster, Michigan
Thomas Groome, Massachusetts
Rep. Marcy Kaptur, Ohio
Victoria Reggie Kennedy, Massachusetts
Victoria Kovari, Michigan
Sr. Jamie Phelps, Louisiana
Gov. Martin O'Malley, Maryland
Former Rep. James Oberstar, Minnesota
Lawrence Parks, Washington, D.C.
Fred Rotondaro, Washington, D.C.
Rep. Tim Ryan, Ohio
Stephen Schneck, Washington, D.C.
John Sweeney, Maryland
Mark Tuohey, Washington, D.C.

The Obama campaign said state co-chairs will be announced in the coming weeks.

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