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A Fight Among Catholics Over Which Party Best Reflects Church Teachings

By [DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK](#)

As the [Roman Catholic Church](#) observes its annual “respect life” Sunday in this heated presidential election season, the unusually pitched competition for Catholic voters is setting off a round of skirmishes over how to apply the church’s teachings not only on abortion but also on the war in Iraq, [immigration](#) and racism.

In a departure from previous elections, Democrats and liberal Catholic groups are waging a fight within the church, arguing that the [Democratic Party](#) better reflects the full spectrum of church teachings.

It is a contest for credibility among observant Catholics, with each faction describing itself as a defender of “life.” The two sides disagree over how to address the “intrinsic evil” of abortion.

The escalating efforts by more-liberal Catholics are provoking a vigorous backlash from some bishops and the right.

In Scranton, Pa., every Catholic attending Mass this weekend will hear a special homily about the election next month: Bishop Joseph Martino has ordered every priest in the diocese to read a letter warning that voting for a supporter of abortion rights amounts to endorsing “homicide.”

“Being ‘right’ on taxes, education, health care, immigration and the economy fails to make up for the error of disregarding the value of a human life,” the bishop wrote. “It is a tragic irony that ‘pro-choice’ candidates have come to support homicide — the gravest injustice a society can tolerate — in the name of ‘social justice.’ ”

In response, a coalition of liberal lay Catholics is pushing back, criticizing the bishop’s message for neglecting other aspects of “life” talked about in Catholic social teachings, like concern for the poor.

To underscore the point, a nun is collecting the signatures of prominent Catholic leaders there for a newspaper advertisement reminding those who may be wary of voting for Senator [Barack Obama](#) of Illinois, the Democratic nominee for president, that the church also considers racism a sin that threatens the dignity of life.

“Here in Scranton, racist attitudes often prevent us from seeing all of our fellow citizens and candidates for public office as God’s children,” says the petition, circulated by Sister Margaret P. Gannon, a professor at Marywood University.

Scranton, the focus of a disproportionate amount of attention because it was the childhood home of

Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) of Delaware, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, has become a flashpoint in the battle playing out nationwide in weekly homilies, pastoral letters and diocesan newspapers. Scranton is also one of several heavily Catholic, working-class cities in swing states — like Cincinnati; Cleveland; Detroit; Erie, Pa.; Pittsburgh; and St. Louis — where a new network of liberal groups like Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Catholics United are trying to promote the church's social justice teachings.

Catholics make up about a quarter of the electorate nationwide and about a third in many of the most heavily contested states in the Northeast and Midwest, an increasingly central focus of both presidential campaigns.

The campaign of Senator [John McCain](#) of Arizona has dispatched high-profile surrogates like Senator [Sam Brownback](#), Republican of Kansas, to remind Catholic audiences of the Republican candidate's opposition to abortion.

For Mr. Obama, who supports the right to abortion, his campaign has trained its grass-roots organizers in the details of recent policy statements of the Bishops Conference.

Conservatives argue that ending legal protections for abortion outweighs almost all other issues, while liberals contend that social programs can more effectively reduce the abortion rate than trying to overturn [Supreme Court](#) precedents. They cite a 2007 statement from the United States bishops explicitly condoning a vote for a candidate who supports abortion rights if the vote was cast for other "grave" reasons.

The subtleties can be slippery. The Cathedral of St. Peter in Wilmington, Del., where Mr. Biden lives, is promoting a video produced by the conservative Catholic group Fidelis that is intended to persuade Catholic voters to put opposition to abortion rights and [same-sex marriage](#) above all other issues.

"Many issues are at stake," a caption reads as the video displays a fetus and choral music swells. "Some are more important than others."

Brian Burch, president of Fidelis, said the group had created the video as "a voter guide for the 21st century." Many Catholic churches across the country have put it on their Web sites, and Mr. Burch said some statewide advocacy groups had been distributing it to their members.

At the Cathedral of St. Peter, the Rev. Joseph Cocucci has displayed the video prominently on the church's Web page, and at each Mass he is urging parishioners to view it. Father Cocucci noted that the video also features smaller visual references to Catholics carrying peace signs and marching for civil rights.

"The video does say life is the most important issue, but if you notice it isn't only abortion," he said.

In the final push to Election Day, the intrachurch election debate is increasingly spilling into public view.

Last week, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that the head of the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) in Missouri had

stormed out of a Mass because his priest had invoked [Hitler](#)'s name in condemning Democratic support for abortion rights. The Cincinnati Enquirer published a column commending several archbishops for instructing Catholics not to vote for supporters of abortion rights but lamenting that the archbishop there had not done the same.

In the aftermath of the 2004 election, many liberal Catholics complained that parishes had distributed millions of copies of a voter guide created by a group called Catholic Answers that highlighted five "nonnegotiable" issues: abortion, stem-cell research, human cloning, euthanasia and same-sex marriage.

In response, liberal groups like Catholics United and Catholics in Alliance quickly began preparing alternative guides emphasizing a broader spectrum of the church's social justice teachings.

Then the Bishops Conference, perhaps to forestall a blizzard of competing pamphlets, all but banned third-party voter guides from parishes, requiring the explicit endorsement of the presiding bishop.

But some, including the bishop of La Crosse in Wisconsin, a swing state, have nevertheless chosen to authorize distribution of the "nonnegotiable" guides this year. The liberal groups are trying to distribute their material through direct mail and at meetings of lay Catholic groups.

Alexia Kelley, executive director of Catholics in Alliance, said her organization was spending more than \$250,000 on radio, print and billboard advertisements in Scranton and other heavily Catholic areas. The advertisements emphasize what Ms. Kelley described as the broader spectrum of Catholic concerns about the "common good," including health care, jobs and home foreclosures.

Douglas W. Kmiec, a Catholic legal scholar who was a legal counsel in the administrations of President [Ronald Reagan](#) and the first President George Bush, has been telling Catholic audiences in Pennsylvania and other swing states that Mr. Obama's platform better fits Catholic social teaching, including reducing the abortion rate.

Mr. Kmiec, who recently published a book on the subject — "Can a Catholic Support Him? Asking the Big Question about Barack Obama" — was speaking in Scranton last week when Bishop Martino issued his letter rebutting those arguments.

Asked how his former Republican colleagues were responding to his Obama evangelism, Mr. Kmiec acknowledged some resistance. "Some remind me that George Washington gave orders for [Benedict Arnold](#) to be shot on sight," he said.

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