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Among Catholics, Political Rifts Over Abortion Have Grown

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JENKINTOWN, Pa. -- Mary Anne Burke's voice was full of emotion as she left her 31st message of the night, this one for a parishioner of the Church of Immaculate Conception.

"I'm a member of Our Lady Help of Christians in Abington," she said, "calling with a request that you support McCain-Palin on one nonnegotiable issue. The issue is life -- life from birth to death. Hopefully, prayerfully, you will consider it."

Burke, 76, a volunteer for the Pro-Life Union of Southeastern Pennsylvania, has been an active opponent of abortion rights for three decades, but "it's never been this intense," she said, putting the phone down. "They are muddying it up."

By "they," she means Democrats who are reaching out more aggressively to Catholics than she can ever remember. Rather than argue over the morality of abortion, these Democrats contend that the church's teachings on social justice and such issues as poverty, the environment, health care and unjust warfare should guide Catholic voters as much as abortion.

The Democratic effort includes antiabortion Catholic scholars who have come out in favor of [Sen. Barack Obama](#), a proliferation of progressive Catholic organizations that have sprung up contending that Catholic teachings do not forbid voting for a pro-choice politician, and such high-profile Catholic Democrats as [Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), the party's vice presidential nominee, and [House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#).

"The stakes here are just so much greater," said Alan Wolfe, director of the [Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life](#) at [Boston College](#). "If you're one of those Catholics who makes abortion the absolute priority -- the issue of all issues -- and Obama wins, you could say goodbye for the rest of your life to *Roe v. Wade* being overturned. At the same time, [people] . . . also think there are other issues and that the last eight years of the Bush administration have raised questions about economic and social justice -- core Catholic issues -- that simply have to be addressed."

In the final trek to Election Day, it is a debate making its way to the center of

the presidential contest in states such as Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan, home to large and influential Catholic populations. It is a debate [McCain](#) appears to be winning. The latest [Washington Post-ABC News](#) poll shows Catholics supporting McCain by 54 to 41 percent -- a significantly wider margin than a month earlier. But white Catholics are also more apt than other voters to say they could change their minds or remain uncommitted before Election Day, making them a target for both campaigns.

Obama's Catholic outreach team has trained field staff members to be comfortable talking to people about faith, and has run phone banks targeting parishes, as well as held Sunday brunches after mass and house parties to push the message that Obama is a Christian man who welcomes religious voters and who wants to reduce the number of abortions by providing social services to women and children.

McCain's staff has connected with groups such as Pro-Life Union, which also worked hard to elect [President Bush](#) as part of a reliable volunteer network of eager conservative Catholics, along with evangelicals. They are buoyed by the growing backlash from conservatives to the outreach by Democrats, and volunteers push McCain's long history of voting against abortion rights.

More significant to Burke is the role of Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin](#), who has begun frequently talking about her opposition to abortion, pounding Obama on the issue at campaign stops, something McCain has not done. Palin is already a hero to antiabortion advocates, as a mother of five children, including a Down syndrome baby and a pregnant teenage daughter, Burke said.

Catholics are fairly divided over the issue of legalized abortion, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll, with slightly more saying it should be legal in most or all cases. As a whole, they rank the economy as the top issue in this election, and at a recent stop in Johnstown, Pa., Palin spoke directly to such voters.

"In times like these, with wars and a financial crisis, it's easy to forget even as deep and abiding a concern as the right to life. And it seems our opponent hopes that you will forget," Palin said. "Like so much else in his agenda, he hopes you won't notice how radical his ideas and record are until it's too late."

The jockeying by the candidates and the conflict among Catholics this year stand in stark contrast to 2004, when a handful of bishops threatened to deny Holy Communion to [Sen. John F. Kerry](#), the Democratic presidential candidate, and encountered little organized opposition from other Catholics.

This time, high-profile antiabortion Catholic scholars have come out in favor of Obama, and a number of progressive Catholic organizations have sprung up, contending that Catholic teachings do not forbid voting for a pro-choice politician. Catholics United, a nonpartisan group promoting the message of

social justice, and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, which calls for a "consistent ethic of life" on such issues as poverty and capital punishment, argue that economic policies may be the most effective way to combat abortion by providing social services, such as affordable health care, for pregnant women.

Douglas W. Kmiec, a law professor at [Pepperdine University](#) who served in the [Ronald Reagan](#) and [George H.W. Bush](#) administrations, is one of the antiabortion scholars who has endorsed Obama. In his recent book, "Can a Catholic Support Him? Asking the Big Questions About Barack Obama," he contends that overturning *Roe v. Wade* would not end abortion, and that the bigger priority should be addressing "the economic and cultural and social circumstances that force women to believe that they must make a choice against life."

Another scholar, Nicholas Cafardi, former dean of the Duquesne University School of Law and a Catholic canon lawyer, announced his support for Obama despite his belief that abortion is "an unspeakable evil."

Cafardi subsequently stepped down from the board of Franciscan University after the university issued a statement distancing itself from his endorsement of Obama. InsideCatholic.com, a Web site directed by a former adviser to George W. Bush, Deal W. Hudson, posted a parody of Cafardi's article under a photo of a Klansman and titled it, "I'm Catholic, Staunchly Anti-Racist, and Support David Duke."

Hudson wrote a comment below the article saying that the implied question of the article is that if "support of a racist is shocking so why isn't it shocking for a pro-lifer to support Obama."

In Pennsylvania, Pat Stanton, whose father founded Pro-Life Union of Southeastern Pennsylvania, has been handing out brochures outside of churches that read "Catholics have a moral obligation to withhold their vote from Barack Obama," and he organized the phone drive Burke worked on to pressure Catholic voters to "do the right thing."

"It's people who are wishy-washy about their faith that would vote for Obama," he said. "How can you be a Catholic and vote for Obama? You can't honestly do it. I don't buy it for a second."

But the debate continues. At a "Theology on Tap" discussion in a pub in Philadelphia's Manayunk neighborhood recently, several dozen young Catholics turned out to hear Jerry Beyer, an assistant professor of theology at St. Joseph's University try to explain how a Catholic could hew closely to the teachings of the church and still fairly conclude that there are other issues as important as protecting human life.

"Reasonable people can disagree about how best to implement the values and

principles of the Catholic tradition in concrete circumstances. If you disagree on this level, it doesn't make you a bad Catholic," Beyer said, using a document issued by the U.S. Catholic Bishops on political participation to explain that Catholics have a responsibility to "form their own conscience properly" and choose the best candidate.

He is backing Obama, and so is a 36-year-old mother of three who sat at a table near the bar, but she is not advertising her support for the Democratic nominee.

"We are being told explicitly don't publish things about Obama on [Facebook](#) because it could cost us a job," she said, asking later that her name be withheld because her husband is an untenured faculty member at a Catholic university, and she worried he could be fired. "It really is charged. You just have to sit there and just ride through the times. It's a shame, because our church has historically been united, and now it's not."

Burke said she hopes the rifts will heal when the election is over. She understands how young Catholics could favor Obama in a historic election and wonders aloud if she would feel differently were she younger.

"Oh, there's a lot of division, but God is with us," she said. "He's going to protect the church for all time. We're all sinners."

Then she called another member of Church of the Immaculate Conception, and left her final message of the night.

Polling analyst Jennifer Agiesta contributed to this report.

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