

The Catholic Conundrum

Between pro-choice Kerry and pro-war Bush, these voters are torn.

By Daniel McCarthy

THE FAITHFUL CATHOLIC confronts a dilemma this election. Come November, he can cast his ballot for a nominal Catholic who spectacularly flouts Church teaching on abortion. Or he can vote for the incumbent who signed the ban on partial-birth abortion—but who waged a war of choice in Iraq that has been roundly criticized by the Vatican and whose backing for some embryonic stem-cell research and unflinching support for the death penalty call into question his own respect for the sanctity of human life.

While conscientious Catholics grapple with the ethics of this election, the Bush and Kerry camps face complexities of another kind: untangling the demographics of the Catholic vote. As a bloc, voters in communion with Rome make quite a prize: over 20 percent of the total electorate, with especially high concentrations in such battleground states as Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New Mexico. A shift of a few hundred or a few thousand Catholic ballots in those states could decide the election.

Courting the Catholic vote, Democrats start with an advantage—but not the kind of advantage they once had. For the first time in history, one of America's major parties has Catholics for its leaders in both chambers of Congress and in the race for the White House. But Kerry, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi all defy the Church's social teachings, and none can count on the kind of support that John F. Kennedy received in 1960, when he won 78 percent of the Catholic vote. Today, accord-

ing to a study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 44 percent of non-Latino Catholics self-identify as Democrats, just three percent more than call themselves Republicans.

Sharp differences between the Church and the Democratic Party over abortion do not account entirely for this sea change. But those differences caused considerable embarrassment for the Kerry campaign earlier this year. In January, Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis said he would deny Holy Communion to pro-abortion politicians like Kerry. This touched off a controversy among American bishops, who lined up on different sides of the question of when—if ever—to withhold Communion. The debate grew to encompass whether Catholics who vote for such politicians should also be barred from receiving the sacrament, with Archbishop Burke and Michael Sheridan, bishop of Colorado Springs, telling abortion-rights supporters to repent or forego Communion. Some Catholic conservatives, meanwhile, suggested that pro-abortion politicians should be excommunicated outright.

By summer, the battle had come to an end if not a resolution. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a report in June announcing that bishops can set their own policies for refusing Communion. And following the advice of the Vatican's Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the bishops acknowledged that faithful Catholics can, in limited circumstances, vote for candidates who are at

variance with Church teaching on abortion, provided there are "proportionate reasons" for doing so. What such reasons might be remains a matter of dispute.

For most Catholic voters it may not matter. An August Pew study found that 72 percent of Catholics oppose denying Communion to pro-abortion politicians. Even among those who attend mass at least once a week—presumably the most orthodox segment of the flock—63 percent do not think Kerry should be refused Communion. This becomes less surprising in light of overall Catholic attitudes toward abortion: according to the Pew Forum's "American Religious Landscape and Politics, 2004" study, only 48 percent of non-Latino Catholics believe that abortion should be illegal in most or all circumstances; a narrow majority of Catholics is pro-choice. This tide has been turning, however. Twelve years ago, just 40 percent were pro-life.

The same study finds that cultural issues in general are less important to Catholic voters than economics and foreign policy. This holds true even for those the Pew study designates as "traditionalist Catholics," 39 percent of whom chose economic and welfare issues as their top political priority, versus 29 percent for foreign policy and 25 percent for cultural issues. Accordingly, the Bush campaign has not relied too heavily on the culture war to win the Catholic vote. Instead, Bush has tailored his rhetoric of compassionate conservatism to appeal especially to this bloc, and even in foreign affairs, while adopting a policy contrary to the Vatican's

wishes, Bush has taken pains to soothe Catholic sensibilities.

Enter Deal Hudson, publisher of *Crisis* and the man who has been called the architect of Bush's Catholic outreach. A Baptist convert to Catholicism, Hudson wanted to know why orthodox Catholics did not behave like similarly devout evangelicals at the ballot box. To answer that, in 1998 Hudson commissioned Steven Wagner of the polling firm QEV Analytics to undertake an in-depth study of Catholic voter demographics. The results proved of great interest to Governor Bush's nascent presidential campaign, and Hudson became an advisor to Bush—until this August, when the revelation of a decade-old sex scandal forced Hudson to resign. (He has announced his impending resignation as publisher of *Crisis* as well. Hudson declined to be interviewed for this story, citing a busy schedule.)

Wagner's research confirmed that Catholics who attend mass once a week or more are more likely than less devout Catholics to vote Republican. This by itself is unremarkable: the same holds true for other denominations. But Wagner's analysis went deeper, elaborating upon several key ideological tendencies of churchgoing Catholics: they oppose affirmative action and believe in absolute morals, they are not anti-government and not enamored of *laissez-faire* capitalism, they believe in American exceptionalism but are not necessarily pro-military, and they are concerned about the poor. From these findings, Hudson and Rove hatched a plan.

Although Bush narrowly lost the Catholic vote to Al Gore in 2000, Hudson credits "the *Crisis* model" with improving Bush's performance. In an Aug. 20 electronic newsletter to *Crisis* readers, he boasted, "Employing this strategy, Governor Bush received ten percent more of the Catholic vote in 2000 than Senator Dole had in 1996." With Bush in

the White House, Hudson became a rain-maker and gatekeeper, acting as liaison between the administration and Catholic leaders, both lay and religious. Steven Wagner also found a role with the Bush administration, serving for a time as director of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Such faith-based initiatives are central to Bush's efforts to attract Catholics. According to David Leege, emeritus professor of political science at Notre Dame and an expert on Catholic voting patterns, Catholics are especially sympathetic to partnerships between the Church and government—"All kinds of Catholics," says Leege, "both conservative and post-Vatican II Catholics." And as important as the policies themselves is the language in which Bush couches his proposals: the very term faith-based initiative, says Leege, is "a labeling choice that appeals to Catholics."

Leege's research finds Catholic voting trends to be somewhat more complicated than they may seem from Wagner's analysis. In particular, Leege notes the existence of generation and gender gaps within the Catholic vote that may be more significant indicators of partisan tilt than church attendance. Indeed, among the youngest cohort of Catholic voters, a paradox emerges: young Catholic men are more likely to vote Republican even though they are less likely to attend mass regularly than young Catholic women, who tend to be more Democratic and liberal. Overall, younger Catholics tend to be more Republican than previous generations. "Think of it as a battle between the stork and the Grim Reaper," says Leege, as the Democratic generation dies off and the rising generation of Catholics increasingly sides with the Republican Party.

A further complication arises from the Iraq War. As Deal Hudson remarked in the March 2003 issue of *Crisis*, "In a

departure from the usual trend, support [for Bush's position] is greater among inactive Catholics on this issue." And Leege has observed Catholic disaffection on this point, too: "the research I've seen is that Catholics were more troubled by the Iraq War than any of the other categories" of Christian denomination. Even in going to war with Iraq, however, the president was careful to mollify Catholic opinion. In a recent paper Leege notes, "On the decision to invade Iraq, [Bush] refused to see main-line Protestant opponents of the war but received the papal nuncio to hear of the Holy Father's opposition to conducting a war at this time. His actual decision ran contrary to the Pope's advice, but he had visibly heard him out..."

A majority of Catholics did, in fact, support the war, and the president's supporters are quick to point out that war, unlike abortion, is sometimes permissible under Catholic doctrine. Even wars of choice and non-defensive wars can be just. Of course, they can also be unjust. The Iraq War is not likely to cost Bush the Catholic vote this season, but ironically it does dampen, however marginally, the president's support among the active Catholics who are otherwise his likeliest voters within the Church.

Leege and other experts predict that Catholics this year will vote much as they did in 2000 and much like the electorate as a whole. Whichever way they break, they are unlikely to be won by either candidate in a landslide. But seismic changes in the political landscape rarely happen overnight: the trends to watch for in the Catholic vote are in the long term. Catholics may cease to exist as a significant, distinct voting bloc, or they might continue their realignment toward the GOP. A third possibility is more remote: even if Kerry should win the Catholic vote this year, it is difficult to see the Democratic Party returning to the days of John F. Kennedy any time soon. ■

[Bush's gift]

The War Bin Laden Wanted

How the U.S. played into the terrorist's plan

By Paul W. Schroeder

GEORGE W. BUSH'S re-election campaign rests on three claims, distinct but always run together: that the United States is at war against terror, that it is winning the war, and that it can ultimately achieve victory but only under his leadership.

The second and third propositions are hotly debated. Critics of Bush contend that the U.S. is losing the struggle against terror on the most important fronts and that only new leadership can bring victory, but except for a few radicals, no one denies that the struggle against international terrorism in general and groups like al-Qaeda in particular constitutes a real war. The question comes up in the campaign only when Republicans such as Vice President Cheney charge that Democrats view terrorists as mere criminals and do not recognize that the country is at war. The charge, though false—no Democratic leader would commit political suicide by even hinting this—is effective politically.

Some experts on international law and foreign policy object to calling the struggle against terrorism a war, pointing for example to the legal problem of whether under international law a state can declare war on a non-state movement and claim the rights of war, or arguing that terrorism constitutes a tactic and that no one declares war against a tactic. Both arguments indicate the sloppy thinking that pervades

the rhetoric of the War on Terror. The first point, moreover, has important practical consequences for such questions as the treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and elsewhere, and for our relations with allies, other states, and the UN. Yet these kinds of arguments seem too academic to matter. The general public can hardly understand them, much less let them influence their votes.

Other reasons, however—different, more powerful, highly practical, and astonishingly overlooked—argue against conceiving of the struggle as a war and, more important still, waging it as such. The reasons and the logic behind them are somewhat complicated, but the overall conclusion is simple: by conceiving of the struggle against international terrorism as a war, loudly proclaiming it as such, and waging it as one, we have given our enemies the war they wanted and aimed to provoke but could not get unless the United States gave it to them.

This conclusion is not about semantics or language but has enormous implications. It points to fundamentally faulty thinking as one of the central reasons that America is currently losing the struggle, and it means that a change in leadership in Washington, though essential, will not by itself turn the course of events. What is required is a new, different way of thinking about the struggle

against terrorism and from that a different way of waging it.

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda repeatedly and publicly declared war on the United States and waged frequent attacks against its property, territory (including embassies abroad), and citizens for years before the spectacular attack on 9/11. This admission would seem to destroy my case at the outset and end the discussion. If bin Laden and al-Qaeda declared war on the United States and committed unmistakable acts of war against it, then obviously the U.S. had no choice but to declare war in reply, just as it had to do so against Japan after Pearl Harbor.

No, not really. Some other obvious facts also need consideration. First, states frequently wage real, serious wars of the conventional sort against other states without declaring war or putting their countries on a war footing. In the latter 20th century, this practice became the rule rather than the exception. Korea and Vietnam are only two of many examples. Second, revolutionary and terrorist organizations and movements have for centuries declared war on the governments or societies they wished to subvert and overthrow. Yet even while fighting them ruthlessly, states rarely made formal declarations of war against such movements. Instead, they treated these groups as criminals, revolutionaries, rebels, or tools of a hostile foreign