

Can One Serve God And Caesar, Too?

Second of a three-part series
By Liz Schevtchuk
NC News Service

A priest politician from the Canadian prairies is one of the highest-level clerics to hold elected office today.

Now, Father Bob Ogle, a member of Canada's Parliament, awaits word from the Vatican about his future in politics.

He is only one of a number of priests, nuns and brothers in North America and elsewhere who have pondered the merits of merging a religious vocation with public office.

Father Ogle said he became concerned about his position because of the stipulations of the new Code of Canon Law. With his superior, Bishop James Mahoney of Saskatoon, Sask., he sought clarification from the Holy See. Bishop Mahoney backs Father Ogle's involvement in Parliament.

Father Ogle, who has served in the Canadian Parliament since 1979, met with Cardinal Silvio Oddi, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, on April 2 to seek clarification of his status. As of June 9, no word had come.

"It's not uncommon to wait long times for answers," he said. He said that, based on his discussions with Cardinal Oddi, he thinks Cardinal Oddi believes that a priest may hold office under the new code as long as he has his bishop's approval. In fact "he (Cardinal Oddi) was surprised that I was concerned," Father Ogle said. "The indication is that I am free to run again" in Canada's next election, he said. He cautioned, however, that his views are only his personal reading of the situation.

Father Ogle is a member of the New Democratic Party, a left-of-center party regarded in Canada as a socialist party and founded in part by Christian ministers from the prairies. It is akin to the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the United States, especially those elements influenced by the populist movements earlier in this century.

At a party convention, the NDP adopted a resolution calling for the pro-choice position on abortion — a position at odds with Father Ogle's pro-life stance.

Michigan's funding of abortion, handled by the Department of Social Services, prompted a dispute between church authorities and then-Sister Agnes Mary Mansour, department director. Ms. Mansour subsequently left the Sisters of Mercy of the Union rather than relinquish the state post as church officials had demanded. Church authorities said the abortion issue was so important that Pope John Paul II himself was involved in the case.

Another case of a Religious in public office (who also had a controversial position on abortion) arose in 1980, when the Vatican said that Jesuit Father Robert Drinan, who refused to vote for limits on abortion, should quit politics.

Father Drinan, a Massachusetts Democrat who served five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, was told by Jesuit officials not to run for re-election in 1980. Jesuit Father Pedro Arrupe, superior general of the order, said the directive came at "the express wish" of Pope John Paul II.

Father Drinan declined to discuss his case and the issue of clerics and Religious in politics.

A former Democratic congressman from Wisconsin, Norbertine Father Robert Cornell, like Father Ogle in Canada, was a candidate for a national political party that has a pro-choice position on abortion. Like Father Ogle, he maintains a pro-life political position, but Father Cornell is no longer active in national politics.

Father Cornell served two terms in Congress, was defeated, and attempted a comeback in 1980. He dropped out of that race at the bidding of Bishop Aloysius Wycislo of Green Bay, Wis., after being informed of the Drinan case and in

anticipation of a supposedly forthcoming Vatican decree preventing political involvement by priests. No such decree came and Father Cornell later received a letter from the apostolic delegation in the United States apologizing for the confusion. But by then his plans for a political comeback had been scrapped.

Meanwhile, another priest, Father Donald Fraser of Hailey, Idaho, a Democratic candidate for the state legislature and city council member, also dropped his political plans. "I thought I'd be asked to" quit, he said. He said he was "heavily influenced" by the Drinan case. "I was influenced by but not directed by church officials" to quit campaigning, he said. He added that his Republican opponent then won the race with no opposition.

Whether the Drinan directive applied to only the Massachusetts priest or to all priest-politicians was and is not entirely clear.

In Rome in 1980, the Jesuits said the order only applied to Father Drinan and not to priest-politicians in general.

Nonetheless, a Vatican source close to the issue of priests in politics said recently that the Drinan-case proscription against political involvement was general and not limited to Father Drinan. "It was the application of the general law of the church to a particular individual," he told NC News in Rome. Father Drinan was picked because "you have to start somewhere," he said.

The source said the proscription went beyond merely a ban on priests being involved without the permission of their bishops. According to the Vatican official, the pope meant that priests were to be identified first as priests and should not run for political office at all. However, because the new code does seem to leave at least a little latitude for clerical political involvement, the issue is still not resolved.

Another well-placed Vatican source familiar with the priests-in-politics issue said that the new code seems to be more restrictive than the old because it says permission for political involvement must be provided by the "competent ecclesiastical authority" — instead of merely saying the local bishop's permission is necessary. This source said that canon law experts inside and outside of the Vatican think the "competent ecclesiastical authority" will mean the Vatican itself — perhaps the Congregation for the Clergy — and not the local bishop. Leaving such a decision to local bishops leads to "varying criteria" while the policy on the issue "should be more uniform," the source said.

Yet, other sources suggested that the bishop could be the "ecclesiastical authority" required.

The situation of several priests in the Nicaraguan government is also sticky. They are Maryknoll Father Miguel D'Escoto, foreign minister; Father Ernesto Cardenal, minister of culture; Father Edgar Parrales, ambassador to the Organization of American States; Jesuit Father Fernando Cardenal, vice coordinator of the Sandinista youth movement; and Jesuit Father Alvaro Arguello, representative to the council of state.

Through a 1981 agreement with the Nicaraguan bishops, the priests (except Father Arguello, on the council of state, whose position is technically not a government post because he was elected to it by other clergymen) are allowed to keep their government jobs temporarily (with no cutoff) as long as they "abstain in public and private from the exercise of their priestly ministry."

The Vatican and the Nicaraguan bishops have pressured strongly for the priests to leave the government but so far the clerics have refused.

NEXT: Is public service Church service?



Sister Elizabeth Morancy, a Democratic member of the Rhode Island State Legislature, said she votes her conscience on abortion but opposes pro-life bills because she feels they are "clearly unconstitutional." (NC Photo)

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Fr. Paul Cuddy

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