

Can Religious Serve Both Church and State?

Last in a Series
By Liz Schevtchuk
NC News Service

Priests, nuns and brothers in public office think they can merge calls to serve in government with their religious vocations.

The official Church, expressing itself in the new Code of Canon Law, seems to be more skeptical.

Canon 285 of the revised code, to take effect later this year, states that "clerics are forbidden to assume public offices which carry with them a sharing in the exercise of civil power." Subsequently Canon 287 seems to open the door somewhat by suggesting that if the good of the Church or the common good require it, clerics might "take an active role in political factions" if the "competent ecclesiastical authority" agrees. One interpretation of the new code is that it also would apply such restrictions to Religious as well.

Yet, priests, brothers and nuns in such jobs say that their public service stems from their Church service.

"It's really been a ministry, a form of public service to me," said Sister Barbara Sullivan of the Sisters of Mercy, Belmont, N.C., who serves on the Belmont city council. "It's an extension of my service in the community," she said of the non-partisan post. "Unless you're in decision-making jobs, you don't have much to say" — for example, about policies to help the poor or elderly — she said.

"It's just a continuity of what I was doing before," said Father Bob Ogle, a member of the Canadian Parliament, and

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, diocesan priest and former missionary.

"It absolutely is a political ministry," said Sister Ardeth Platte, a Grand Rapids Dominican and non-partisan member of the Saginaw, Mich., city council. "We can change one policy" and help many people more effectively than by doing other service-oriented work, said Sister Platte, who also has been involved in educational programs for ex-offenders and school drop-outs.

Christian Brother Richard Emenecker, superintendent of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Cable Communications, said his city government job evolved from years of teaching communications. "I said I believe I can be of service to the broader community" and still be a religious brother, he said. "It wasn't as if I was abandoning the Church. I was making a professional move that would involve me more with a broader community."

Norbertaine Father Robert Cornell, former Democratic congressman from Wisconsin, said that one argument frequently cited against Religious and clerics in politics is that they will have to compromise Catholic belief on some issue, such as abortion. Both he and Father Ogle disagree.

"The only area in which I'm at odds with the party is abortion," said Father Ogle, whose party, the New Democratic Party, has adopted a pro-choice stance. Father Ogle has a pro-life position. "I make my stand very clear," he said. "I'm quite sure I've never voted against my conscience. I

wouldn't vote against my conscience."

Father Cornell had similar comments. "I never faced a situation where I felt I had to make any compromise on a moral issue. I surely wouldn't make it," the Wisconsin priest said.

"If I had problems, I'd bow out," added Sister Barbara Sullivan. "I wouldn't compromise Church principles or my own principles."

Sister Elizabeth Morancy, a Sister of Mercy of the Union, and Democratic state representative in Rhode Island, also votes in accordance with her conscience on abortion — but she votes to oppose pro-life bills.

"Most of the abortion bills they (pro-lifers) put in are clearly unconstitutional," she said. "Irrespective of the issue, I'm not going to pass bills that are blatantly unconstitutional and are not going to stand up in court."

The elected and appointed officials also say they can provide a special form of service because it is often difficult (in small towns, especially) to find people to seek office; because, being single, they have time lay people do not always have; because they can hold the often low-paying jobs (\$5 a city council meeting or \$300 a year for a

state legislator, in just two cases) middle-class and poor people can't afford to take; and because of their work with the poor they can bring a special sensitivity and awareness to public office that others lack.

Some suggested the Vatican and Pope John Paul II need to rethink Church policies.

"I surely think that it should be determined on an individual case basis," said Father Cornell, who would like to run again if possible. "I think that some of the Church leaders feel that if clergy got involved we'd have too many" out campaigning, he said. But, "you're not going to have all the clergy running for public office."

"Political ministry must remain as an option for Religious and laity" alike, especially women, said Sister Platte.

She thinks the Church may eventually change its position. "What we're seeing now as the prohibitions come out is the tension necessary to bring about change. No new building can be built until the old building crumbles," she said. She added that she is not talking about "eradicating the Church off the face of the earth."

"I'm talking about making a better Church."

Along the Way

Bishop Clark's column, "Along the Way," does not appear this week, but will resume in the next edition.

Pio Groups

Washington, N.J. (NC) — The first American National Congress of Padre Pio Prayer Groups will convene for prayer and reparation to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on Aug. 27 at the Blue Army Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Washington, N.J.

Fight's Not Over, Pro-Lifers Vow

By Liz Schevtchuk

Washington (NC) — They may have lost the Senate battle over the Hatch-Eagleton anti-abortion amendment, defeated 50-49 on June 28, but they haven't lost the war, pro-lifers asserted after the vote.

Some pro-life groups claimed a form of victory in the defeat. Others, however, in an action highlighting the rift between anti-abortion groups over tactics, criticized the amendment and its supporters on the grounds that Hatch-Eagleton was not strong enough. One pro-life activist even called for the resignations of leaders of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' pro-life office and the National Right to Life Committee because of the amendment's defeat.

Nonetheless, both wings of the pro-life camp emphasized that their efforts to end abortion will continue.

Pro-choice groups, meanwhile, expressed elation over the Senate vote, coming soon after a Supreme Court decision overturning abortion restrictions, although, they, too, noted that the war over abortion is not over.

"Although the outcome was expected, it is disappointing in the short run," said Father Edward Bryce, director of the Office of Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. "But the fact that the Senate has finally begun to address this issue head-on marks a distinct step forward in the process of reversing the (Supreme Court) abortion decisions. The disappointment of pro-life Americans is therefore tempered by optimism about the future."

"Pro-life Americans must and will continue to raise their voices in defense of the unborn until the right to life is re-established as a matter of law," the priest added. "Few struggles are more worthy or more necessary than this one. It will continue until it succeeds."

Pro-life leaders are "undaunted," the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment Inc., said. "We got this bill out of committee and onto the floor of the Senate, which is much further than any bill of this kind has gotten to date," said Ernie Ohlhoff, the group's executive director. "There is no further question but that we made a very impressive showing."

He added that "we will be back next year, the year after and every year until this issue is resolved."

Dr. John C. Wilke, president of the National Right to Life Committee, termed the Hatch debate and vote a "landmark event for the right-to-life movement in America."

He said it was expected that the measure would fail to win a two-thirds majority and that the 50-to-49 vote indicates the Senate is almost evenly split on the issue. "The pro-life movement will now redouble its efforts in the electoral process. We will also seek enactment of other pro-life measures in Congress," Wilke said. "Those who voted against this amendment voted to continue this holocaust" — the abortion of one of every three babies conceived, he said.

Some pro-life groups which did not favor the amendment used its defeat to attack their anti-abortion colleagues who backed it.

Paul Brown, director of the Life Amendment Political Action Committee, demanded the resignations of Father Bryce and Wilke because they had "led their

supporters to slaughter."

"By pushing this futile amendment to the floor of the Senate, the National Right to Life Committee and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops have accomplished what the National Abortion Rights Action League and the Planned Parenthood Federation of America have not been able to do," Brown said. "They have handed the pro-life movement the greatest single legislative setback in its 10-year history and have driven a mammoth wedge into the movement itself."

Father Bryce was not immediately available to respond to Brown's charge. The National Right to Life Committee had no comment.

Another group, the American Life Lobby, headed by Paul Brown's wife, Judie, said the Hatch-Eagleton vote was "not a decisive vote." Without mentioning them as such, Mrs. Brown also chastized supporters of Hatch-Eagleton. "Some have wasted precious time in promoting this doomed federalism approach, which deteriorated to nothing more than an exercise in futility," she said. "We demand that they re-assess their goals...and support legislation which can be passed and will do something to stop this dreadful slaughter."

The Ad Hoc Committee in Defense of Life described Hatch-Eagleton as a "sordid attempt to bring up a constitutional amendment before the votes were there" and as "a dismal failure," which means further action in the Supreme Court and in politics is necessary.

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