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Religious affiliation ignites debate

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

On July 1, 1991, President George Bush nominated Judge Clarence Thomas to fill the vacancy created by Justice Thurgood Marshall's retirement from the Supreme Court.

One day later, Governor L. Douglas Wilder of Virginia ignited a firestorm of religious controversy by suggesting that Thomas be asked how he would vote on such cases as those pertaining to abortion.

Wilder made the suggestion because Thomas was raised as a Catholic, and once attended a seminary.

Although Wilder apologized the next day to anyone who may have been offended by his remarks, the governor opened a can of worms by implying that allegiance to the pope might influence Thomas' rulings.

Ironically, Thomas currently belongs to an Episcopalian church.

Anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism and racism are the "consistent prejudice" in the United States, Auxiliary Bishop Placido Rodriguez of Chicago told a rally in Chicago two weeks ago.

Bishop Rodriguez, a member of the Claretian order, told demonstrators at a rally against religious bigotry in Richard J. Daley Plaza that "we must unmake" prejudice.

The rally was organized by area members of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights in response to Wilder's remarks.

Demonstrators marched through the plaza carrying signs saying: "Equal rights for Catholics," "Anti-Catholicism is un-American" and "Say No to Religious Bigotry."

Tom O'Connell, executive director of the Midwest chapter of the Catholic League, said Catholics, particularly priests and nuns, and Catholic teachings are ridiculed in cartoons, editorials and popular entertainment.

"In 1991, we find ourselves called to task in an increasingly secular society," O'Connell said. "We finally say, enough. Enough of slander."

Regardless of their validity, Wilder's remarks bring to mind other times in U.S. history when Catholics were persecuted for their personal religious beliefs.

In the early 1800s, for example, the American Party — known among its detractors as the Know-Nothing Party — tried to deny Irish and German Catholic immigrants the right to vote.

The Know-Nothings failed to gain political control in the United States and faded away by the end of the Civil War. Yet the party's attempt to withhold voting rights from Catholics "had enough reality in it to drive a deep sense of alienation from the American mainstream into the American Catholic subconscious," according to Father James Hennessey, SJ, author of *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*.

That sense of alienation became more blatant during the first half of the 20th century, when membership in the Ku Klux Klan peaked at five million Klansmen. The group actively spread its anti-Catholic and racist views throughout southern, midwestern and mid-Atlantic states.

During the Klan's heyday, the Democratic Party three times denied its presidential nomination to then New York Gov. Alfred E.

Smith. Smith's bid for the nomination was rejected at the Democratic conventions of 1924, 1928 and 1932.

Smith made no secret of his religious beliefs, and historians speculate that the governor's religious affiliation was the primary reason for his defeats.

The tides of anti-Catholicism began to turn nearly three decades later, carrying John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960. Even so, some Americans continued to fear that Kennedy's Catholic faith would cloud his decision-making abilities, according to Garry Wills, author of *Under God: Religion and American Politics*.

"Kennedy ... had frightened some evangelicals, who thought the pope would rule America from Rome," Wills wrote.

As a presidential candidate, Kennedy came under strong pressure to reassure voters of his belief in the separation of church and state. He told the American people that any conflict between his Catholic faith and his presidential duty would be resolved in favor of duty.

The prospect of papal intervention has provided a clear focus for anti-Catholicism in U.S. politics. But Catholics are not the only politicians compelled to reconcile their religious beliefs with their political duties, according to Judge John Manning Regan of Rochester.

"The problem of religious affiliation is not limited to Catholics," Regan explained. "Jews suffer from religious discrimination, as do certain other religious sects, such as the Amish and the Mormons."

With the exception of efforts by the Know-

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