

# Was voting for Clinton a mortal sin?

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

What role did Catholics play in this year's election?

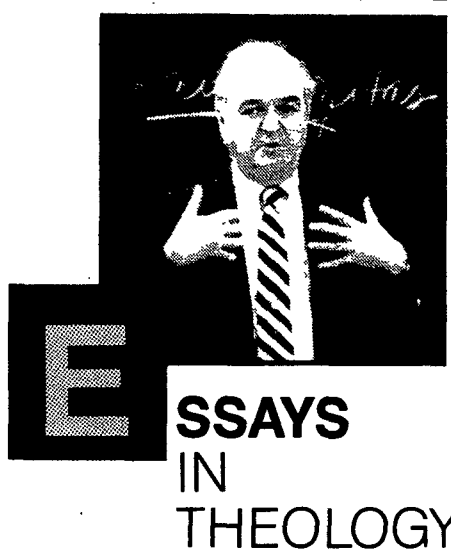
After three consecutive presidential contests in which they broke from their traditional Democratic ranks to support Ronald Reagan twice (50 percent to 42 percent in 1980; 54 percent to 45 percent in 1984) and George Bush once (52 percent to 47 percent in 1988), Catholics voted for Bill Clinton this year by a margin of 44 percent to 36 percent. Meanwhile, 20 percent of the Catholic electorate voted for Ross Perot. (By contrast, the overall national percentages were 43-38-19.)

All this in spite of printed warnings stuffed under car windshield wipers in church parking lots just before the election: "To Vote for Bill Clinton is to Sin Against God."

A pro-life activist cited in the hand-out warned fellow Catholics that a vote for Clinton would render them unworthy to receive the sacraments. A priest provided the reason: any Catholic who votes for Clinton, knowing his record, is guilty of mortal sin.

But with Catholics making up 27 percent of this year's electorate and with 44 percent of them voting for President-elect Clinton, that translates into about 12,000,000 possible mortal sins and God-only-knows how many sacraments unworthily received.

Actually the figures are greater than that. In a not-so-subtle act of political partisanship, the ultra-right pamphleteers excluded Perot from their moral strictures — even though he is no less pro-choice than Clinton.



Since 20 percent of the Catholic electorate voted for Perot, we should have to add another 5,500,000 possible mortal sins to the list, for a grand total of about 17,500,000.

One assumes that parish priests are bracing for an onslaught of pre-Christmas confessions from millions of Clinton and Perot supporters. If not, they'll surely have to devise some strategies to prevent sacrilegious receptions of Holy Communion by the uncontrite.

This all seems quite silly, of course, but there is also a serious side to it. When church representatives allow or encourage the distribution of politically biased materials on church property or through other ecclesiastical channels, their behavior threatens the church's tax-exempt status.

This was the very position taken in a memorandum issued July 14, 1988, by the United States Catholic Confer-

ence's general counsel. The memorandum, which can be found in the Sept. 1, 1988, issue of *Origins*, discussed the legal requirements governing political campaign activities by such tax-exempt organizations as dioceses, parishes and Catholic newspapers.

An exempt organization, "the memorandum warned, "may not distribute campaign literature that supports or opposes a particular candidate or political party. In addition, distribution of campaign literature on the premises of an exempt organization should be avoided. Such activity could expose the organization to the charge that it has engaged in political campaign activity."

"Third-party distribution of campaign literature on public property (e.g., on the street outside of a church) should not be imputed to the exempt organization, since it lacks authority to control access to public property. Inviting such a distribution, however, could raise complaints about political campaign activity."

The memo defined material as "biased" when it "indicates or implies (a) that a politician agrees or disagrees with the church's position or (b) that the church agrees or disagrees with a legislator's vote."

If there were violations of these guidelines in a diocese, parish, school or diocesan newspaper during the recent election campaign, they should be brought to the attention of the appropriate ecclesiastical authorities. If they are not, such practices will be repeated two years from now in the congressional elections and then again in the next presidential campaign.

But what of the claim that a Catholic may have committed a mortal sin by voting for President-elect Clinton or Perot? The claim is nonsensical on its face. Had any such question of sin been involved in this election, the U.S. bishops would have been morally obliged to issue an explicit warning to Catholics prior to the election. They did not do so.

On the contrary, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops remained politically neutral throughout the campaign, and that is what they intended.

In their quadrennial statement on the presidential campaign, issued in October, 1991 (Oct. 24, 1991, *Origins*), the bishops acknowledged with satisfaction that the Catholic community is "remarkably diverse." We are Democrats, Republicans and Independents; liberals, conservatives and centrists.

To tell Catholics how to vote, the bishops declared, "would be, in our view, pastorally inappropriate, theologically unsound and politically unwise."

Their only instruction was that Catholics "should examine the positions of candidates on the full range of issues," because a "consistent ethic of life should be the moral framework from which we address all issues in the political arena."

On that basis, almost 10,000,000 Catholics decided that George Bush deserved re-election; about 5,500,000 thought Perot earned support; and about 12,000,000 gave the nod to President-elect Clinton.

Their votes were acts of political judgment — good, bad and indifferent. Sin had nothing to do with it.

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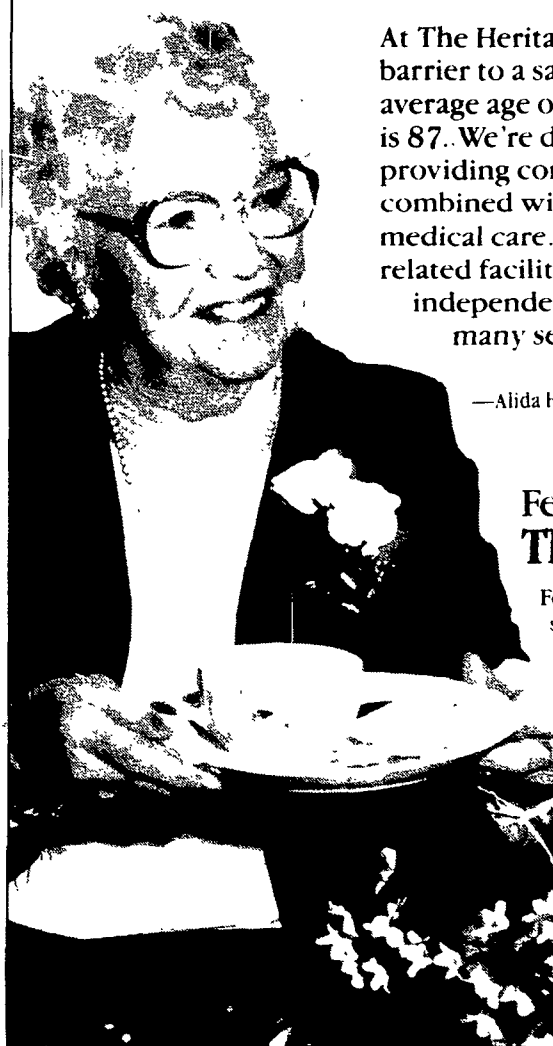
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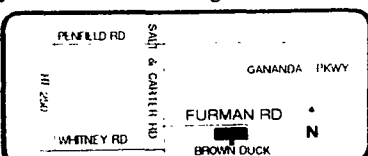
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