

COLUMNISTS

Politics in church 'debases' liturgy

Two days before the March 5th Georgia primary, Republican presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan preached at Sunday services at Northside Independent Methodist Church, a conservative evangelical congregation in a suburb north of Atlanta. According to the report in *The New York Times*, the assembled worshippers greeted Mr. Buchanan's "sermon" (the word used by the *Times*) with nods and "Amens."

Of the 15 people interviewed after the service, 13 said they would vote for Buchanan in Tuesday's primary election, and the other two said they were undecided but were still considering him. (Patrick Buchanan later came in second in the Georgia primary, about five percentage points behind Senator Robert Dole.)

One parishioner, an 83-year-old woman, was not at all happy about the morning's service. She left midway through it and wept when asked about Buchanan.

"We think that we don't like politics in church," she said, but then "they canceled our Communion service to let a politician speak in church. You can't pray in school, so how can you have politics in church?"

Her remarkably trenchant observation points up a strange paradox in today's religio-political situation. At the very same time that religiously conservative Americans are diligently trying to get prayer back in the public schools, some of them are pushing



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

prayer out of their own churches — at least at election time — in order to provide ideologically congenial politicians with a friendly campaign forum.

What seems to be a growing practice in these conservative churches has been common for many years in African-American churches, where liberal politicians were (and still are) not only invited to speak from the pulpit during Sunday services but where collections have even been taken up in support of their campaigns. Those who have had no problem with the practice in politically liberal black churches have no tenable basis for challenging the more recent development in politically conservative fundamentalist, evangelical, and Pentecostal churches.

Consistency requires that one either approves the practice in both churches, or disapproves of it in both churches. It cannot be acceptable (or unac-

ceptable) in one, but not the other. This week's column stands with those who disapprove of the practice across the political and religious spectra.

To say that the church has a role to play in the political order means that it has a right and duty to speak out on political issues that have a significant moral content, but without becoming directly involved in partisan politics as one political force, movement, or party among many.

This is essentially the position taken by the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (n. 76) and followed by the U.S. Catholic bishops in their pastoral letters, their quadrennial statements on issues facing the nation prior to each presidential election campaign, and their official appearances before congressional committees to comment on pending legislation.

But the bishops also have an explicit policy against allowing the pulpit to be used by politicians for political purposes and against permitting the parish to become a distribution center for campaign literature, including comparative voting records — even if the central issue in question were abortion.

When a church replaces an integral element of its Sunday worship service with a partisan political component, it debases the liturgy and compromises its capacity for disinterested (and, therefore, credible) moral witness on a

broad range of issues of public concern.

It also makes the efforts of such churches to impose prayer (usually Christian) on public school students and teachers seem even more dangerous — dangerous not only to the body politic and its First Amendment guarantees but also to the freedom and independence of the church itself. If the line of separation between religion and politics were completely erased so that we had prayer in public schools and politics in private churches, that may seem at first glance to be a boon to the church because of the wider access it would have to the political process and to society at large.

But that ignores that fact that such access would be reciprocal. If the line or "wall," if you prefer, were erased or taken down, the State would have as much opportunity to interfere in, or to manipulate, the business of the church as the church would have to say its prayers, make its proclamations, and erect its many symbols in "the public square."

The woman in north Atlanta was wiser even than her 83 years when she recognized and wept over the paradox: "You can't pray in school, so how can you have politics in church?"

How, indeed? Unless, of course, you throw consistency and good sense out the window.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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