

COLUMNISTS

Republicans misread the Catholic vote

A year before the 1996 U.S. presidential election, the Christian Coalition, a conservative political movement consisting mainly of evangelical, Pentecostal and fundamentalist Protestants, attempted to draw Catholics into their loop by launching a sub-group called the Catholic Alliance. The move was a flop.

Because of its tie-in with a Protestant organization whose views on a number of issues were at odds with the social teachings of the church, only a handful of bishops supported the alliance. Others publicly criticized it. The alliance eventually split off from the Christian Coalition, and Raymond Flynn, former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, became its new head. Flynn, a Democrat, had hoped to shape the Catholic Alliance into an instrument of political support for the candidacy of George W. Bush. He insisted that he had not left the Democratic Party; the party, he said, had left him and countless other Catholics by adopting a pro-choice position on abortion.

Ambassador Flynn reaffirmed his support of the Bush candidacy in a speech last fall in Pittsburgh, where he was introduced by Brian Tierney, head of Catholics for Bush. Tierney had been instrumental in arranging Bush's visit with Pittsburgh Bishop Donald Wuerl — one of many such



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

visits with members of the Catholic hierarchy before and since the election. During the campaign, using lists purchased from private vendors, Tierney had also directed targeted mailings to Catholics identified as independents and conservatives. Tierney claimed that the Bush campaign's internal polls showed him, on the eve of the election, leading among Catholic voters "by almost double digits."

But the polling commissioned by Catholics for a Free Choice, a controversial organization that supports abortion rights, proved to be more accurate than Governor Bush's. The CFC poll found that the nation's Catholic voters were evenly split between the major party nominees. And the final results bore this out.

Catholics voted for Al Gore over Bush by a slight margin of 3 percent. The dou-

ble-digit figures cited by Tierney and the Bush campaign were way off base. Looking toward the next election, the Republican Party and the president himself are currently engaged in a concerted effort to reverse those statistics. But they are going about the job in the wrong way.

Instead of also talking and listening to mainline Catholic Democrats, moderates and liberals, the Bush people and their Catholic allies have apparently decided that the way to win a majority of the Catholic vote is by cultivating socially conservative and religiously traditional Catholics.

According to the president's Catholic advisers, the churchgoing Catholic, found in church every Sunday morning, not the stay-at-home Catholic, is ripe for Republican picking.

But Catholics for a Free Choice that got the polling numbers almost exactly right just before the election is challenging the assumptions that there are only two categories of Catholics, churchgoers and nonchurchgoers, and that churchgoing Catholics tend to vote Republican and stay-at-homes tend to vote Democratic.

The CFC's polling last fall found that Mass attendance and party affiliation do not correlate as clearly as some Republican strategists claim. Less than half (46 percent) of Catholics who attend Mass

weekly identify as Republicans, while 42 percent say they are Democrats. Only 12 percent are self-described independents.

Of the many Catholics who attend Mass less frequently than once a week, 37 percent are Republicans, 43 percent are Democrats, and 20 percent are independents. The largest number of Catholic swing voters, therefore, are to be found among this group. The same surveys also disclosed that Catholics, generally, are not so socially conservative as some Republican strategists have assumed. The issues that concerned most Catholics in last fall's election were preserving Social Security and Medicare, and improving the health care and public education systems. The recent resignation of John Dilulio, a conservative Catholic Democrat, after only a half-year as head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, should prompt the White House and its politically homogeneous circle of Catholic advisers to rethink their approach to, and assumptions about, the wider U.S. Catholic community.

For starters, they could open lines of communication with a broader range of American Catholics.

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

Our faith is sufficient for our tasks

27th Sunday of the Year (Oct. 7): (R3) Luke 17:5-10; (R1) Hebrews 1:2-3, 2:2-4; (R2) 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14.

You've been to a circus, I'm sure, and have seen a skilled high-wire artist. He accomplished so many marvelous feats that the audience came to believe that he could do almost anything. Often the ringmaster would address the crowd: "Ladies and gentlemen, how many of you believe that this daring man can ride safely over the high wire on his bicycle while carrying someone on his shoulders? If you believe he can do it, please raise your hand." Most everyone would raise their hands. "Very well, then," the ringmaster would say, "now, who would like to volunteer to sit on his shoulders?"

The difference between belief and faith is a difference between staying in our seats and volunteering to climb the shoulders of the high-wire artist.

The disciples had been following Jesus for some time. They experienced his teachings firsthand. They witnessed his miracles. They saw his confrontations with religious officials. And they saw people walk away because they were unwilling to do what he wanted them to do. It wasn't easy being a disciple of Jesus. They had left family and friends. At



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

times they were frustrated, often confused, uncertain, even afraid. They had listened to his teachings, had witnessed his miracles, and they thought to themselves, "Wow, I could never do that!" Out of a sense of inadequacy, the disciples said to Jesus, "Increase our faith!"

It seemed like a reasonable request. Maybe if they had more faith they would not feel as frustrated and inadequate.

In answer to their request, Jesus said, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this sycamore, 'Be uprooted and transplanted into the sea,' and it would obey you." It was not a question of increasing their faith, because the disciples already possessed the faith necessary to accomplish everything that was expected of them. Jesus' response

showed his confidence in them. "You already have faith," Jesus was telling them. The disciples had to learn to use the faith that they already possessed.

And that is Jesus' word to us, as well. In times of confusion, when everything seems to be falling apart, we have the faith deep within us to carry us through. It's not a question of how much faith we have but rather finding ways to use the faith we have. Even a small amount of faith opens one up to a tremendous amount of power.

One day in her religion class a teacher showed the class a stick of chewing gum and told them that it was special. It was like faith and could help solve their problems. All they had to do was chew it. The teacher asked them to chew the piece of gum she had given each of them. But they told the teacher that she hadn't given them any gum. She insisted that she had and asked how many believed her. No one seemed to believe her until one student finally began to look around her seat for any sign of gum. Another student stood up, turned his chair over and found a stick of gum taped to the bottom. Others did the same and also found gum. They were so sure they didn't have it because they hadn't actually seen the

teacher give it to them.

Faith enables us to do the things Jesus wants us to do. It is not a question of increasing our faith but rather of using the faith we already have. True faith always leads to greater service. With it we can change the world.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, October 8

Jonah 1:1-2:1, 11; (Ps) Jonah 2:2-5, 8; Luke 10:25-37

Tuesday, October 9

Jonah 3:1-10; Psalms 130:1-4AB, 7-8; Luke 10:38-42

Wednesday, October 10

Jonah 4:1-11; Psalms 86:3-6, 9-10; Luke 11:1-4

Thursday, October 11

Malachi 3:13-20A; Psalms 1:1-4, 6; Luke 11:5-13

Friday, October 12

Joel 1:13-15, 2:1-2; Psalms 9:2-3, 6, 8-9, 16; Luke 11:15-26

Saturday, October 13

Joel 4:12-21; Psalms 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12; Luke 11:27-28

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