

BRENDA PROVES THEM WRONG

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It's often been said that it's wise for friends and family members to avoid discussions about religion and politics. These are volatile issues in any given year, but they have become more so this year because of the presidential campaigns of President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry. And by reading this issue of *Catalyst*, Catholic League members will discover that we've been drawn into the debate big time.

It's worth restating that the Catholic League is a non-profit organization that is forbidden by law from endorsing candidates or parties. We can discuss any public policy issue we want, but we can't formally back anyone. That's fine by us because we are decidedly non-partisan by choice: we don't want to align ourselves with any political party.

The principal reason for our political agnosticism is that it would only weaken the Catholic League if we were to be thought of as the Catholic arm of the Republicans or Democrats; we would be taken for granted, thus neutralizing our impact. There is another reason as well: our job is to fight anti-Catholicism, and that means we have to go where the action is, sparing no one.

Some members have asked which party I belong to. None. For the record, I started as a Democrat, then I became a Republican, and for more than a decade I've been a registered Independent. I have no intention of rejoining either party.

One of the most intense political fights we've ever engaged in was the controversy over the House Chaplain in 2000. This pitted the Catholic League against leading Republicans. Some Republican Evangelicals had intervened to stop the appointment of a Catholic priest as the new House Chaplain (never had a Catholic priest ever held this post) and we entered the fray

on the side of the priest. While that particular priest did not get the job, another priest did.

In the last presidential election campaign, we were highly critical of then Governor George W. Bush's visit to Bob Jones University, a profoundly anti-Catholic institution. After Bush apologized to Cardinal John O'Connor for offending Catholic sensibilities, I went on the "Today Show" to discuss the issue and effectively put it to rest by accepting Bush's apology as sincere.

This time we're doing battle with the Democrats. John Kerry and the Democratic National Committee (DNC) have insulted people of faith by hiring religious outreach leaders who are way out of touch with observant Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims. As I've said many times to the press, they would never hire a gay basher to reach out to homosexuals. So why would they hire the likes of Mara Vanderslice and Rev. Brenda Bartella Peterson to be in charge of religious outreach?

To understand what is happening, the first thing to realize is that the average Democrat, like the average Republican, believes in God and is proud to be a member of the faithful. But this is not true of many of the most senior officials running the DNC and the Kerry campaign. Instead, they are devout secularists, people for whom "The Passion of the Christ" was not their kind of movie. They would prefer to watch "Fahrenheit 9/11," and the last time they were in church or synagogue was when a family member died.

In other words, too many in the top echelons of the Democratic Party have lost their religious moorings and look at religious people as if they had two heads. That's why they hire people like Vanderslice and Peterson.

After we knocked off Peterson, the media were calling asking all kinds of questions about the Catholic League. They wanted to know how many people work here and what our budget is. They

were uniformly astonished to learn that we employ only twelve people and have an annual budget of approximately \$3 million. Interestingly, when the DNC elite found this out, they were furious. How could it be, they exclaimed, that such a small organization has such enormous clout? Somehow, they reasoned this was unfair.

For her part, Rev. Peterson claimed victim status. "The whirlwind was more than I could just about stand. It was amazing." What's truly amazing is her naiveté. Did she really believe that no one would find out about her opposition to the words "under God" in the Pledge? And did she really believe that once the public learned of this they would just shake it off? If so, she lives in a bubble. Ditto for all her friends at the Clergy Leadership Council, from where she came.

The DNC knew what it was getting because Peterson worked right across the street from its headquarters. As soon as she was hired, Peterson went on the PBS show, "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly," and said, "We plan to go all over the nation." Little did she know that she would never make it off the block. Thus did Brenda prove them wrong: You really can go home again.