

# Christian Coalition's "Road to Victory"

By Karen Lynn Krugh

Washington, D.C. was again the site for the national conference of the Christian Coalition. Nearly 3,500 attendees were on hand to hear senators and congressmen, priests and pastors, doctors and lawyers, and grass-roots activists from around the country promoting traditional values.

Sentiments like "family values," "choice in education," "back to basics," "pro-family" and "pro-life movement" dominated the speeches. In fact, many speakers made a point of including such phrases so as to demonstrate how absurd it is to label the Christian Coalition a far-right extremist group. A comparison repeated numerous times over the weekend was that this group was about as extreme as Ozzie and Harriet. The Christian Coalition's newspaper, the *Christian American*, quoted a Los Angeles Times poll which lent further support to the Coalition's assertion that it represents the views of the average American.

To further broaden the Coalition's appeal, great strides have been made to reach out to Catholics and Jews. It was in answer to this call that the Catholic League responded by hosting an information booth at the conference; we displayed our subway ads and handed out a variety of literature on the work of the League. We enjoyed tremendous success and made contacts with both old and new friends of the Catholic League.

Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, and Michael Novak, editor of *Crisis*, were on hand to represent the Catholic voice. Other Catholics in attendance included Kate Walsh O'Beirne, vice president of Government Relations at The Heritage Foundation and a Catholic League board member. Kate

participated in a panel discussion, and another board member, Bill Lindner, assisted in staffing our booth. Rabbi Daniel Lapin of Toward Tradition, and Don Feder, a columnist for the *Boston Herald*, were among the Jewish representatives speaking at the conference.

Perhaps the biggest development to come out of the conference was the discussion of the revision of the pro-life platform of the Republican party. While none of the speakers advocated dropping a pro-life position (as New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman has), Phyllis Schlafly suggested language that would retain the party's commitment to the unborn without tying it exclusively to an endorsement of the constitutional amendment strategy.

Ironically enough, the same issue that made headlines at the conference has brought the coalition under fire. The Coalition recently has gone on record for backing candidates who were not strongly pro-life or were not the most conservative candidates running. This change is a result of a slightly revised script now being put forth by Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed, Jr.

In short, the Coalition wants to win, and it wants the votes it's working so hard to get to count for something. As such, it would rather support a strong candidate who is sympathetic and willing to listen than a weak candidate who has no chance of winning but votes the party line 100% of the time. This new strategy, while bringing the Coalition more into the mainstream and thus broadening its appeal, may cause some at the grassroots level to feel abandoned. It is for this reason that the *National Catholic Reporter* calls the Christian Coalition, "a house divided."

Rather than seeming divided, however, it appears the Coalition has matured. Obviously, in endorsing political candidates, one of the primary tasks of the Coalition, it would prefer to back only those with whom it is in complete agreement. But perfect

candidates can be few and far between so, as Paul Weyrich, president of Free Congress, pointed out, you've got to "make the best of what you've got."

It's been five years since Pat Robertson gathered friends and supporters together to launch what has today become the Christian Coalition, arguably the most successful grass-roots movement of our time. And, as with most fairly young organizations, the Coalition is still seeking the right niche, trying to firm up its identity. But it's fighting the good fight, and it's in it to win.