

Clinton's Catholic Problem

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Recently, when someone from the White House called to defend the Clinton administration on the charge of anti-Catholicism, I waited to hear something persuasive. But as I will reveal, nothing he said proved very convincing. There were a few comments that sounded convincing, which I recount here.

President Clinton is responsible for recapturing the Reagan Democrats, a goodly number of whom are Catholic, and he is the first president ever to have graduated from a Catholic college. One of his primary themes has been the role of religion – not only in his life but in the life of the nation – and he is an avid reader of the Bible. His prayer breakfasts have been many and his support for the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is well-known. He has met with the pope and shared programs with Mother Teresa. Fond of quoting from Stephen Carter's book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, President Clinton has frequently objected to the strict separationist positions favored by extreme civil libertarians. Indeed, he has charged that "The fact that we have freedom of religion doesn't mean we need to have to try to have freedom from religion." So with all this going for him, why does the president still have a problem with Catholics?

Bill Clinton's problem with Catholics began exactly two days after his inauguration: January 22, 1993 marked the 20th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. It was also the day that President Clinton signed executive orders reversing the following policies: (a) regulations that prohibited abortion counseling in federally funded family planning clinics; (b) a ban on

fetal research; (c) restrictions on access to abortion in U.S. military hospitals overseas; and (d) the "Mexico City Policy" which denied U.S. foreign aid programs overseas that promoted abortion. Now it was one thing for President Clinton not to address the March for Life on January 22, quite another to issue executive orders expanding abortion rights the same day. This act was seen by pro-lifers, and the millions of Catholics who dominate their ranks, as an "in your face" kind of move – the type of statement that speaks volumes about one's priorities; it certainly sent an unmistakable message to Catholics. Not only did Clinton sign these executive orders, he ordered a study of the French abortion pill RU-486, stating that his goal was to make abortion "safe and legal, but rare." He did not explain how his executive orders, or RU- 486, could in any way be interpreted as making abortion more rare, but that didn't seem to matter. It took the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, less than 24 hours to charge that the Clinton administration had started down "the pathway of death and violence."

Catholics also felt a little salt in the wounds when the Clintons decided to enroll their daughter, Chelsea, in a private school. They could tolerate a Jimmy Carter who opposed vouchers because, at least, the Carters did not put their daughter in a private school. They could accept the decision of the Reagans and the Bushs to send their children to private schools because they both supported vouchers. But the situation with the Clintons was different.

For Hillary and Bill to oppose vouchers was one thing, but for them to send their child to a wealthy private school – without ever previewing a single public school in the District of Columbia – and at the same time to deny to those less fortunate than themselves the chance to send their children to a non-public school, this was not something that sat well with many Catholics. Catholics, after all, have led the fight for vouchers. The Clintons made it clear from the start, however,

that what they meant by pro-choice was not what Catholics understood by the term.

Clinton's early decision to lift the ban on gays in the military got him into trouble with Archbishop Joseph T. Dimino, head of the Archdiocese for the Military Services U.S.A. Archbishop Dimino warned the president that such a policy might signal acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle and would therefore have "disastrous consequences for all concerned." And "all concerned" surely meant Catholics, as Catholics constitute over half of all the men and women in the armed forces. It is a safe bet, too, that virtually none of the Reagan Democrats voted for Clinton because they wanted gays in the military.

Part of Clinton's problem with Catholics can be explained by the relatively few Catholics he has working for him. Reagan employed 7 Catholics in his Cabinet while Bush had 8 – Clinton has 3. And even though Catholics have been targeted since 1973 as a category that qualifies for affirmative action in the federal government, and even though Clinton defends affirmative action, his administration has not shown much interest in seeing to it that Catholics are accorded proportionate representation. When pressed, Clinton can always cite Donna Shalala, a Catholic whose values are about as representative of the Catholic community as that of Anna Quindlen's or Phil Donahue's. But it was the appointment of Dr. Joycelyn Elders that told Catholics where they really stood with the president. Her recent firing, coupled with Clinton's scrapping of NIH embryo research, suggests the president is beginning to recognize his problem.

Dr. Elders made headlines even before she became Surgeon General. She is a long-time advocate of condom distribution in the schools, notwithstanding the fact that under her leadership as director of the Arkansas Health Department, the teen pregnancy rate increased; it had actually decreased in the period prior to her tenure. However, it is her cavalier

attitude toward condoms that is most interesting. "I tell every girl that when she goes out on a date," says Dr. Elders, "put a condom in her purse." The woman who sports a "condom plant" on her desk also had this to say: "We have had driver's ed for kids. We've taught them what to do in the front seat of the car, but not what to do in the back seat of the car."

It was on the subject of abortion that Dr. Elders got into big trouble, especially with Catholics. She sees those who oppose abortion as "non-Christians with slave-master mentalities," and believes that those who are pro-life "love little babies so long as they are in someone else's uterus." In fact, she says that pro-lifers should get over their "love affair with the fetus."

The antipathy that Dr. Elders has for the Catholic Church has been well-recorded. She has made public statements charging the Catholic Church for being "silent" and doing "nothing" about the Holocaust, a lie so bald that no one but a bigot or a fool would make it. The Catholic Church has also been blamed by Dr. Elders for slavery, the condition of the Native American and the disenfranchisement of women, making inexplicable her reluctance to blame water pollution on Catholics as well. That no other religious group seems to incur her wrath is a fact not lost on millions of Catholics.

Dr. Elders chooses to label the Catholic Church a "celibate, male-dominated" institution, and expects not to be chided for doing so. Yet if someone were to call the National Organization for Women a "lesbian dominated" institution, no one would be convinced that this was just a descriptive tag. But to the Clintonites, all this is just talk and can be explained away as overheated rhetoric. That is why Clinton pursued her nomination even though everything just mentioned about her was said before she became Surgeon General and after the *Washington Post* agreed with the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights that Dr. Elders was an anti-Catholic bigot.

Dr. Elders has since managed to draw the enmity of Cardinal James Hickey for her defense of homosexuality, which extends to gay and lesbian adoption, and has survived a "modified woodshed" beating by White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta for her statements regarding the Catholic Church.

The U.N. International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo brought to a head a strain between Clinton and Catholics that had long been brewing. Much of the strain revolved around the subject of abortion. Even before Cairo, the Clinton administration was busy tampering with the Hyde Amendment's ban on federal funding for abortion, promoting funding for fetal tissue research, pushing for embryo research and endorsing the Freedom of Choice Act, a law that would deny to the states the right to place limits on abortion.

The Cairo conference definitely put the lie to the assertion that the Clinton administration wanted to make abortion "rare." From the beginning, it was evident that the expansion of abortion rights all over the globe was the number one priority of the Clintonites. Oh, yes, terms like "reproductive rights" and "fertility regulation" were commonly invoked, but, as any honest observer will admit, these terms are nothing but code for abortion-on-demand. In the end, however, the president pulled a Clinton and backed off, thus adding to the list of equivocations that has become the signature of his administration. The damage, of course, was done, and no group felt more abused than Catholics.

Toying with the definition of the family also got the Clinton administration into trouble in Cairo. Clintonites were active in the move to change the wording of a draft document that called the family *the* basic unit of society to one that downgraded it to *a* basic unit. This led to another battle with the Holy See and another loss for the Clinton administration – the original wording of the document was restored.

Anti-Catholicism was evident at both the Cairo conference and the Preparatory Session that preceded it at the U.N. Since nearly all of the Catholic-bashing came from the non-governmental organizations (NGO's), and since the Clinton administration worked closely with the offending NGO's, it is fair to say that the Clintonites shared responsibility for what happened. From the hoots and howls that greeted representatives of the Holy See, to the anti-Catholic buttons and literature that were distributed at the conferences, it was obvious that Catholics were not welcome. Indeed, well-funded letterhead front groups like Catholics for a Free Choice were accorded more respect by the Clintonites than delegates from the Vatican.

It was left to State Department spokeswoman Faith Mitchell to deliver the most telling low-blow. She charged that the Vatican's disagreement over the Cairo conference "has more to do with the fact that the conference is really calling for a new role for women, calling for girls' education and improving the status of women." The statement so outraged Harvard Law Professor Mary Ann Glendon that she wrote an open letter to the president registering her concerns; it was signed by the leaders of organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Catholic women and was published in the *New York Times* under the sponsorship of the Catholic League. Damage control expert Leon Panetta admitted that White House discipline was required to deal with the level of Catholic-bashing that had surfaced in Cairo.

About a month after the Cairo conference ended, I received a call from Jim Castelli of the Office of Public Liaison in the White House. He was disturbed to see that the Catholic League journal, *Catalyst*, featured a story entitled "League Assails Clinton Administration for Bigotry." This, coming on the heels of the *New York Times* open letter, was found to be troubling. Castelli began by stating that he could "cite chapter and verse" why the Clinton administration was not anti-Catholic. I

accepted the challenge and began by first listing my reasons why I think Clinton has a problem with Catholics.

The conversation, though cordial, was strange. It was strange because I am not accustomed to talking to people who are self-identified "fellow travelers in Catholic circles." I've met lots of self-confessed "lapsed Catholics," but never before had I run across someone who was a "fellow traveler in Catholic circles." Perhaps that's what happens to Catholics when they write for the *National Catholic Reporter*, as Castelli did. In any event, Castelli just doesn't get it. Even the Clinton administration's own Ambassador to the Vatican, Ray Flynn, has blasted the administration for anti-Catholic bigotry. In a letter to President Clinton dated July 6, 1994, Flynn wrote that he was "embarrassed" about the "ugly anti-Catholic bias that is shown by prominent members of Congress and the administration." Flynn told me personally that he stands by the statement.

It is not likely that Clinton's Catholic problem will disappear as long as he surrounds himself with people like Castelli. It was in the Office of Public Liaison, after all, that the Clinton administration hosted the infamous meeting of dissident Catholic groups in July 1993. When the likes of CORPUS, a group of resigned married priests, the Women's Ordination Conference, Catholics for a Free Choice and Catholics Speak Out are invited to impart their words of wisdom, that explains why executive agencies like the Equal Opportunity Commission can develop guidelines that trample on religious freedom and receive no resistance from Catholics in the administration. Quite simply, this is an administration that listens to the fringe more than it does the middle.

In addition to firing Elders, there are some signs that Clinton may be trying to appease Catholics. The president has intervened to reverse a decision that would have committed the administration to challenge a child pornography conviction; he has told the Justice Department to withdraw a brief that would

have put the administration on the side of those who would seize funds donated to an Evangelical church by a couple filing for bankruptcy; and he has succeeded in reversing a decision by the Postal Service banning the popular Madonna and Child stamp series. His flip-flop on the school prayer amendment, however, suggests that he is still capable of waffling.

Over the second half of his term, President Clinton will surely be keeping a close watch on the Catholic community. And with good reason: in 1996, most Protestants will vote Republican and most Jews will vote Democratic, just as they always do. But what about Catholics? In 1988, Bush won the Catholic vote 52-47 over Dukakis, only to lose it to Clinton 44-36 (Perot got 20 percent). Which way the Catholic vote goes in 1996 will decide which way the country goes. Whether the next two years proves to be a gold mine or a mine field with Catholics will be determined by Clinton. The ball's in his court.