

NARAL, Anti-Catholicism and The Roots of the Pro-Abortion Campaign

By Robert P. Lockwood

The public debate over abortion was critical in a resurgent anti-Catholicism in the mid-1960s. With the cooperation of media, abortion became an ongoing battle waged with a war of words mired in anti-Catholicism.

Why did Catholicism become the issue in the abortion debate? It was in many ways a planned effort by the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. Called by the acronym NARAL, it was organized at the First National Conference on Abortion Laws held in Chicago, February 14-16, 1969. It was a conglomeration of abortion referral services, interested state legislators, women's organizations, new feminists and old warriors from the birth control and eugenics crusades.

One of the primary motivations in NARAL's abortion campaign was the anti-Catholicism of its founder and first executive director, Lawrence Lader. Lader would effectively harness and use anti-Catholicism as a fundamental aspect of NARAL in abortion politics, legislating, public debate and media coverage. According to a recent interview with the Catholic League's Louis Giovino, Dr. Bernard Nathanson, one of NARAL's original members and a close confidant of Lader, this anti-Catholicism "was probably the most effective strategy we had."

In his book "Aborting America," Dr. Nathanson had described an early conversation he had with Lader. Nathanson had operated the largest abortion clinic in the world. But by 1974, he had begun to seriously reconsider his support for legalized abortion. He would later become a leading figure in the pro-

life movement.

According to Nathanson, he and Lader were discussing the overall strategy for legalizing abortion in the United States in October, 1967, six years before the Supreme Court would knock down all state laws that criminalized abortion in its *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions and two years before the formation of NARAL. Lader, as recalled by Nathanson, "brought out his favorite whipping boy":

"...(A)nd the other thing we've got to do is bring the Catholic hierarchy out where we can fight them. That's the *real* enemy. The biggest single obstacle to peace and decency throughout all of history.'"

Nathanson continued, "He held forth on that theme through most of the drive home. It was a comprehensive and chilling indictment of the poisonous influence of Catholicism in secular affairs from its inception until the day before yesterday. I was far from an admirer of the church's role in the world chronicle, but his insistent, uncompromising recitation brought to mind the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. It passed through my mind that if one had substituted 'Jewish' for 'Catholic,' it would have been the most vicious anti-Semitic tirade imaginable.'"

Lader had come to the abortion issue through his involvement with various leftist causes in New York politics after World War II. According to Nathanson, "[Lader] had a long history of being ultra-radical and anti-Catholic. He was for a time a political aide to Vito Marcantonio, who was the only card-carrying Communist ever elected to Congress."

Vito Marcantonio (1902-1954) was considered the most radical congressman to ever serve consecutive terms and ran in Communist circles. Representing New York's East Harlem from 1935-1937, 1939-1950, he espoused various radical causes and defended America's Communist Party. He ran for office when

abandoned by Republicans and Democrats under the American Labor Party, which was considered a Communist front group. Through this early involvement with Marcantonio and extreme leftist circles, Lader was, according to Nathanson, "inoculated with the anti-Catholicism virus" years before he was involved in the abortion movement.

Lader, who came from a wealthy family, became a wandering journalist developing articles on different causes until he joined Margaret Sanger's birth control crusade in the 1950s. In 1955 he authored his first book, "Margaret Sanger and the Fight for Birth Control," which nurtured his animus toward Catholics. In addition to Sanger, Lader was no doubt influenced to bring anti-Catholicism to the forefront of the abortion debate by Paul Blanshard, another veteran of the post-war New York leftist circles. Lader's writings on the Church echoed Blanshard's anti-Catholic theories.

In his landmark best-selling 1949 book, "American Freedom and Catholic Power," Blanshard argued that there was an ascendant Catholic Church in America, dominated by the hierarchy, that was becoming a majority through the uncontrolled breeding of the laity. When Catholics became a majority, they would amend the Constitution making Catholicism the official religion, require the teaching of Catholic morality in public schools, and impose on America Catholic beliefs on marriage, divorce and birth control, Blanshard charged.

This was foundational to Lader and was re-stated in his 1987 book, "Politics, Power & the Church": "The development of Catholic power – the influence of its religious morality and political aims on American society – has followed a careful design...By 1980, with the election of President Ronald Reagan, the Catholic church achieved what it had only grasped for before: national power that gave the bishops more access to the White House than any other religion, and made them one of the most awesome lobbying blocs on Capitol Hill."

These would be the ideas that permeated the abortion debate in the United States. As many pro-life activists would discover early on, through Lader and NARAL the debate would not focus on abortion itself. Pro-abortion activists raised the specter of "Catholic power" threatening civil liberties, and the machinations of the "Catholic hierarchy" and their "unquestioning constituents" marching in lockstep. It was more appealing to argue against Catholicism than for abortion. This strategy, Nathanson confirmed, "was strictly out of NARAL."

Lader's thesis was that Catholic pro-life activities were in opposition to true American "pluralism": "The attack on the U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion...seems to threaten our whole pluralist tradition and could damage our social cohesiveness...Catholic power, allied with Fundamentalism, has threatened the American tenet of church-state separation and shaken the fragile balance of our pluralistic society."

Under Lader's leadership, NARAL would quickly move to make the abortion debate appear to be a "Catholic" issue. The strategy was simple: convince the media and the public that this was a case of the Catholic hierarchy attempting to impose its will on America. Portray all opposition from Catholics to legalized abortion as a power play by the Church with the laity marching in lockstep to its clerical overlords. Accuse the Church of abusing its tax exemption for a political power-grab. Paint legislators who were Catholics and pro-life as ignorant dupes of the bishops; those Catholic legislators who were pro-legalization were painted as heroes who refused to impose their beliefs on non-Catholic neighbors.

The NARAL anti-Catholic strategy took hold. Catholics addressing the issue publicly were portrayed as being sent out by the pope to foist Catholicism on democracy. From the late 1960s on, abortion was presented in the media as a peculiarly Catholic issue. In newspaper reports, pro-life legislators or pro-life spokesmen were consistently identified by their

religion if they were Catholic, though no one else would be so identified. To newspapers and television reporters, abortion was a “religious” rather than a social issue, and the pro-life movement simply the vanguard of a repressive Catholic Church hierarchy.

In 1973, the Supreme Court would wipe away the entire debate in the states by voiding every state law against abortion. In the majority decision in *Roe v. Wade*, Justice Blackmun would favorably cite Lawrence Lader’s 1966 book “Abortion” eight times. At the end of his book “Abortion II” in 1973, the executive director of NARAL spelled out the attitude toward the Catholic Church. “What the Church fears is the rejection of its dogma by a large proportion of its communicants and the increasing use of abortion by Catholics as a backup to contraception. Concomitantly, it fears a sharp decline in the size of Catholic families...The whole structure of authority is further threatened when the single Catholic woman need no longer be forced into marriage against her will, or bear an illegitimate child for a Catholic foundling home – children that often become priests and nuns, who, when adopted, become the source of considerable financial contributions to the Church from adopting parents.”

In 1975, Lader was forced out of his position as Executive Director at NARAL. He would go on to organize Abortion Rights Mobilization (ARM) whose primary function in the beginning was to attempt to have the Catholic Church’s tax exemption removed because of its activities in opposition to abortion. The case was rejected for lack of standing by the Supreme Court in 1990. Lader then went on to campaign for the legalization and the distribution of the abortion drug, RU 486. His anti-Catholic strategies never left him, and he began to make a jumbled attack on a “Catholic-Fundamentalist” alliance which he claimed to have elected Ronald Reagan in 1980.

NARAL, of course, has continued as the leading pro-abortion organization in the United States. After *Roe v. Wade* it

changed its name to the National Abortion Rights Action League and now calls itself the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, but has always maintained the same acronym. It is currently strongly involved in a series of attacks on Catholic hospitals for refusing “reproductive services” and has been fighting conscience clauses that would exempt Catholic organizations from being forced to provide abortion coverage in medical insurance.