POLITICALLY HOMELESS CATHOLICS

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Historically, the Republican Party has been associated with Protestants, and the Democrats have been the choice of Catholics. “From the 1840s, when Democratic ward-heelers greeted the first great waves of Catholic immigrants on the wharves of New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and other East Coast cities,” writes political scientist George McKenna, “Catholics found a congenial home in the Democratic Party, one that permitted them at first a seat at the table of a great national Party and finally a chance to preside over it, divvying out the patronage and the power throughout much of the North.”

Another reason why Catholics were drawn to the Democrats was the fierce anti-Catholicism of the abolitionists. “By the late 1840s antislavery activists frequently denounced slavery and Catholicism as parallel despotic systems, opposed to education, free speech, and political liberty in predictable synchronicity,” says historian John T. McGreevy. Among the Catholic bashers were Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass.

The Republican Party, born in the mid-1850s, was home to Protestants who entertained the Reformation theology that associated the pope with the Whore of Babylon. Obviously, there was no room for Catholics in this Party, nor was there any room in the virulently anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party. Though Lincoln was appealing to many Catholics, the Democrats still had more to offer: it was the Democrats who opposed religious tests for state office and who showed tolerance for Catholicism. Catholics would remain with the Democrats well into the 20th century.

It was the antipathy between mid-Western Republican Protestants and the Northeastern urban Catholic Democrats that resulted in Prohibition, the former proving triumphant over the latter. The 1920s also saw Republican anti-Catholicism peak with the presidential election of 1928.

Al Smith, the New York Catholic Democrat, was considered "the captive of Tammany Hall," and Tammany Hall, as Catholic observer George J. Marlin notes, was considered by Republican Protestants as "a brothel whose allegiance was pledged to the 'Whore of Babylon'—the Pope of Rome." The *New York Times* admitted that "Most of [the votes] were cast against the Democratic candidate because he was a Catholic," and a Midwestern newspaper reported the defeat of Smith with the headline, "THANK GOD, AMERICA IS SAVED." Reverend Bob Jones, founder of Bob Jones University, spoke for many Protestants when he said of Al Smith, "I would rather see a saloon on every corner than a Catholic in the White House. I'd rather see a nigger as President."

Catholics gravitated toward FDR's New Deal, remaining staunch Democrats, notwithstanding a rift after the war with Eleanor Roosevelt over public aid to parochial schools. But as Baruch College political scientists Louis Bolce and Gerald De Maio have observed, the feud between the former First Lady and New York's Cardinal Spellman over this issue "exposed fissures in the Democratic Party between its culturally traditional Catholic wing and the then-nascent culturally liberal secularist minority that would deepen over time and eventually split the Party two decades later during the 1968 and 1972 national conventions."

Another sign that things were changing was the election of America's first Catholic as president, John F. Kennedy. Though he overcame some Protestant suspicions in 1960, he did so by downplaying his religion to a remarkable extent. "I never even once discussed religion with John F. Kennedy," recalls Theodore H. White, the great chronicler of presidential

elections, “except in the practical political terms that made it a campaign issue in 1960.”

If Kennedy dumbed-down his religious affiliation for prudential reasons, secular forces within his Party were starting to flex their muscles, and by 1968 New Left radicals mounted a strong challenge to conventional liberalism. When the 1972 presidential campaign unfolded, it was clear that the anti-traditionalists had succeeded in penetrating the Democratic Party, leaving Catholics with a sense of homelessness: they never felt welcomed by Republicans and now they felt abandoned by the Democrats.

“Secularists first appeared as a political force within a major Party at the 1972 Democratic National Convention,” note Bolce and De Maio. “Prior to then,” they say, “neither Party contained many secularists nor showed many signs of moral or cultural progressivism.”

Catholic author David Carlin understands what was happening. There had long been “FDR liberals” in the Democratic Party, men and women identified with the interest of labor unions and the working class, in general. “Civil rights liberals” were another important strand, activists and their supporters who stood for racial equality. As Carlin sees, the years between 1968 and 1972 witnessed the arrival of a third group, the “Moral/cultural liberals.” They pushed the boundaries of sexual freedom by embracing everything from abortion to homosexuality. Unlike the other segments of the Party, the sexual free-spirits alienated many veteran members of the Democratic Party. Count Catholics among them.

So Catholics are politically homeless. Practicing Catholics tend to be Republicans, and non-practicing Catholics tend to be Democrats. Hispanics, now more than a third of Catholics, are overwhelmingly drawn to the Democrats. In many ways, Catholics are as divided among themselves as the nation is as a whole. Not a pretty sight.