

POLITICS AND RELIGION: THE DOUBLE STANDARD

We spend much of our time at the Catholic League fighting double standards: there seems to be one set of rules for those who are not Catholic and another for those who are. Nowhere is this more true than in the old battleground of politics and religion.

On September 22, Rev. Al Sharpton formally announced that he wanted to be the next mayor of New York. Fine, let him enter the ring. But he was wrong to do this from the pulpit of Canaan Baptist Church in Harlem.

Imagine for one moment what the reaction would be if a Catholic priest declared his candidacy for public office from a church (forget for a moment that Church rules bar the clergy from running for office). The media would be in a frenzy. Or just think how crazy the press would be if a Catholic priest turned over his Sunday Mass to a politician running for office. But Protestant churches get away with this all the time, and no one seems to care. Here are some examples.

When Rev. Jesse Jackson ran for president in 1984 and 1988, he did so by stumping in churches. Indeed, in 1988, he raised monies for his campaign inside black churches. No one said a word.

In August 1993, while New York Mayor David Dinkins was speaking at the Church of the Intercession, challenger Rudolph Giuliani was giving his political pitch from Harlem's Safe Mission Christian Fellowship Church. Neither Dinkins nor Giuliani was criticized for doing so.

In September 1993, the National Baptist Convention met in Madison Square Garden. Invited to speak were New York Governor Mario Cuomo, New Jersey Governor Jim Florio, Connecticut

Governor Lowell Weicker, and Illinois Senator Carol Mosely Braun. No one carped. But if a Catholic conference had opened its doors to a bunch of politicians, the press would have been howling.

Furthermore, just think of the outcry that would have greeted a Catholic conference if it had given \$10,000 to a candidate running for public office. But nothing was said when at the same National Baptist Convention Mayor Dinkins of New York received just such a contribution!

In the fall of 1994, President Clinton urged the congregation at Bethel Church in Harlem to vote for Mario Cuomo. No one from the media protested. Nor did anyone object that fall when Governor George Pataki spoke at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

In 1995, President Clinton's own Foundry Methodist Church was known to distribute literature denouncing the Republican's Contract with America, but no one thought this objectionable. In July of this year, Hillary Clinton spoke at the

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, arguing that Jesus would have liked her health plan. Again, no one chided her for doing so.

The lesson is clear: if Catholic churches become a forum for electioneering, that's a violation of church and state, but if Protestant churches are used for political purposes, that's okay.

Why the double standard? There is still the sneaking suspicion that Catholics have a hidden agenda to Catholicize the nation. If you don't believe me, then write to the National Conference (formally National Conference of Christians and Jews) and ask for last year's survey of the American people. In it you will find that America's number one prejudice is held by non-Catholics against Catholics. The majority of the American people (55%) believe that Catholics "want to impose their own

ideas of morality on the larger society.”

The evidence, of course, is not supportive of this prejudice. It is true that the Catholic Church proposes ideas to the public, not all of which are accepted by Catholics (never mind others), but in no way can it be said that these proposals take the form of an imposition. If anything, as we have seen, it is Protestants, not Catholics, who use churches to advance political objectives. But evidence means little to those who harbor deep prejudices.

The argument to be made here is not that Catholic churches should become more like Protestant churches in this regard, but just the opposite: Protestant churches should mimic Catholic churches. If church and state lines mean anything, they mean that churches, synagogues, mosques and other houses of worship should be free from raw politics. Let the candidates meet in church basements, if necessary, but by all means bar the church door from political huckstering.