

PULPIT POLITICS

On Palm Sunday, Senator John Kerry attended services at Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston's Roxbury district. Inexplicably, he took communion at the Protestant church. Just as disconcerting was what Rev. Gregory G. Groover said from the pulpit. He introduced Kerry as "the next president of the United States."

We pointed out to the media that it is illegal for a member of the clergy to endorse a candidate for public office from the pulpit. This, however, mattered not a whit to Rev. Groover or to candidate Kerry. Nor did it seem to matter to most members of the media. But if President Bush were to be endorsed by a Roman Catholic priest—the way Kerry was endorsed by this minister—all those who sat silent about what happened on Palm Sunday would no doubt have exploded in anger. Indeed, the IRS would be on the case in a New York minute.

The IRS has a *Tax Guide for Churches and Religious Organizations* that spells out, in great detail, what is permissible and what is not. It says that religious leaders are free to speak about any political matter "*as individuals*" (its emphasis). But the IRS also says that "religious leaders cannot make partisan comments in official organization publications or *at official church functions*" (our emphasis). Being introduced from the pulpit as "the next president of the United States" is therefore a clear violation of the law.

There is a bill before the Congress by Rep. Walter Jones that would allow the clergy to speak openly about political matters in a house of worship, without impunity. Congressman Jones argues that it was Lyndon Baines Johnson who pushed through a law in the 1950s that curtailed the freedom of speech by members of the clergy; LBJ was then serving in the Congress. Jones wants the law repealed so the clergy can be free to say what they want.

The Catholic League appreciates the concerns of Rep. Jones, but it is wary about opening the door to pulpit politics. What cannot stand, however, is the current duplicity: the media say nothing about Protestant ministers, especially those in black churches, who endorse candidates in front of their congregations, but protest to high heaven homilies by Catholic priests who merely discuss public policy issues from the pulpit.

There has got to be a level playing field, especially in this area.