News
News
Religious Life



People in the Brookland neighborhood of Washington, D.C., wait in line to vote Oct. 27. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Soli Salgado

View Author Profile
ssalgado@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

October 27, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As Americans cast their ballots for president in the waning days of a bitterly contentious election, they've been bombarded by messages from campaigns, interest groups, the media and church pulpits — including the lingering, contrasting portraits of two women religious who took the stage when the parties officially nominated their candidates.

Both Catholic sisters — one in a nun's habit — elevated Catholic concerns at the August Democratic and Republican conventions. They diverged in how they presented their messages, yet they both illustrate the line women and men religious must navigate while publicly engaging in politics as well as how this campaign season is different.

First up was Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, the executive director of Network. A lawyer and lobbyist who promotes issues that reflect Catholic social justice, Campbell's prayer on the final night of the Democratic National Convention, Aug. 20, called for a divine inspiration that stirs people and their leaders to "fight for a vision" that cares for the marginalized and the planet.

On the third night of the Republican National Convention, Aug. 26, Sr. Deirdre Byrne, a physician and member of the Little Workers of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary , stood at a podium adorned with a "Trump 2020" banner and called President Donald Trump "the most pro-life president that this nation has ever had." Whereas former Vice President Joe Biden, she said, represents "the most anti-life presidential ticket ever," falsely accusing him of supporting infanticide.

"Because of his courage and conviction, President Trump has earned his support of the pro-life community," Byrne said. "Moreover, he has a nationwide of religious standing behind him."

PBS NewsHour clip on YouTube of Sr. Deirdre Byrne's speech at the 2020 Republican National Convention

While the presence of men or women religious at a political event may already "telegraph" their belief that a particular candidate or campaign is "worth listening to," St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk said, "There's a wisdom in not outright endorsing any one candidate."

The wisdom of not endorsing contains practical as well as prophetic reasons: for example, sisters' roles as pastoral leaders who are effective and inclusive, as well as the need to be cautious in not associating too closely with candidates who are unpredictable. (It is to the discretion of one's immediate superior to discipline the cleric or religious who violate this code.)

An explicit endorsement "sends the impression that God's on their side," said Schenk, an NCR columnist and co-founder FutureChurch. "We're a big-tent church, and we need to be available and approachable by Catholics in every political stripe. ... People need to feel that they can approach their religious leadership as they are."

Byrne, a retired colonel in the U.S. Army Medical Corps who also served as a missionary surgeon to refugees, told GSR that she doesn't consider her RNC speech an endorsement of Trump so much as a "thank you." (Though Campbell did not mention either candidate during her DNC appearance, she later endorsed Biden at a Catholics for Biden event.)

"I'm not only pro-life, but eternal life, and my mission is to bring as many people to Christ," Byrne said, adding that in the months following the convention, she's been inundated with a variety of responses — some angry, though the majority grateful.



St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk (Provided photo)

David Gibson, director of Fordham University's Center on Religion and Culture, told Global Sisters Report that the "chief goal" of Christian spiritual leaders is ultimately "to bring people to salvation through Jesus Christ — not elect the mayor or governor or president." For a religious leader to offer a political endorsement risks not just his or her own witness with the people, he said, but the witness of the church, as well.

The guiding principle should be to focus on issues rather than parties or candidates, he said.

"We can also get a little too precious about the whole issue of an endorsement," Gibson said.

Bishops and cardinals often still make clear where they stand by promoting the need to vote against or for a single issue, he added.

Canon law codes 287 and 672 state clerics and religious, respectively, "are not to have an active part in political parties and in governing labor unions unless, in the judgment of competent ecclesiastical authority, the protection of the rights of the Church or the promotion of the common good requires it."

Though Schenk said she finds the codes prudent and necessary overall, she said too often, church leaders have "erred on the side of doing nothing when particular issues are crying out to be addressed by moral leadership."

Religious have prophetic responsibilities in addition to pastoral, she added, which will "invariably lead us to the political realm." (Schenk is a board member of National Catholic Reporter.)

Advertisement

Definitions of politics

Before founding the Social Service Sisters in 1923, Margaret Slachta was inspired by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor") — widely considered the foundational text of Catholic social teaching, as it called the church to take an active role in a world demanding justice. Slachta, who lived in Hungary, then began a congregation whose charism would focus on the social mission of the church and the dignity of every person.

She also became the first female member of a European parliament, fighting as a legislator for public policies that would protect those who were vulnerable and exploited in the increasingly industrial society. (In the 1980s, Pope John Paul II prohibited religious from public office.)

As a society of apostolic life, the Sisters of Social Service are not considered a religious congregation and are therefore not bound by the canon law that prohibits them from wielding civil authority.

Many of Slachta's fellow Social Service sisters over the past 100 years followed her tradition of being engaged in civic issues — including Campbell.

Network Lobby clip on YouTube of Sr. Simone Cambell's invocation at the 2020 Democratic National Convention

Social Service Sr. Maribeth Larkin said Campbell is "in a totally appropriate role by doing what she's doing."

Larkin, who spent 40 years in community organizing before becoming general director of her Los Angeles community, noted that Campbell's work ultimately encourages "the current vehicle," the party in power, to adopt more just policies on a range of issues.

This year, however, Network strayed from its tradition by opposing Trump's reelection, a decision Campbell said its board reached after prayerful discernment following the separation of children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border. She told GSR that they believed that to be a "the tipping point from bad policy to horrifying policy," one that "violates our conscience, violates every principle of Catholic social teaching."

Many sisters told GSR that the Catholic hierarchy has become fixated on single-issue political engagement with respect to outlawing abortion rather than embracing the whole host of Catholic social teaching, which gives the impression that the church implicitly supports the one party that shares its position against abortion.

Larkin said the hierarchy's narrow preoccupation with abortion without recognizing the interconnectivity of all issues "is a huge problem for us who are trying to live out the social teachings of the Catholic Church and the social mission of the church."

Schenk said the canon law that keeps religious from being active in politics keeps church leaders from speaking out on "the equally sacred" issues, such as people who live in poverty, the environment, and racism.

Schenk said in her 18 years as a nurse midwife, she's seen the complexity of abortion firsthand, counseling women to choose life while hearing their concerns for not being able to feed the children they already have.

"It's a harder issue than just having the child be born," she said.

Byrne said immigration, health care and tending to the poor are important, but to her, "these are issues that can be solved from different angles."

Citing the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' voting guide, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," she said the "non-negotiables" for a voting Catholic include the sanctity of life from conception to natural death; the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman; and the sanctity of religious freedom.

"Those are the three things that a Catholic should really reflect and pray about to discern in this upcoming election who they should vote for," she said.

Tweet Oct. 24 from Kathleen McKinley showing Children of Mary Sisters from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati attending a Donald Trump rally in Circleville, Ohio, Oct. 24

Michael Murphy, director of the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University Chicago, said the voting guide, already 40 years old, needs to be revised to include contemporary issues, such as climate change and immigration, with some bishops wanting to start from scratch.

Schenk said what's missing in the bishops' conference is a panel of expert theologians who can provide guidance on appropriate ways to speak publicly on Catholic social teaching and balance the multitude of issues.

"The official voice of the Catholic Church is basically missing in action on every major social justice issue except for the life of the unborn," she said, adding that its focus on issues around sexuality compromises the church's moral credibility.

Because only one of the two major U.S. political parties campaigns against legalized abortion, church leadership is often seen as tipping the scales toward the Republican Party, sometimes saying Catholics can't vote for a Democrat because of his or her position on abortion or denying the Eucharist to pro-choice candidates, Gibson said.

Though not an explicit endorsement, he said, "Isn't that the same thing?"

Byrne disagrees.



David Gibson (Provided photo)

"I feel that many priests and religious who have spoken out in support of the life movement (and other critical issues, such as religious freedom) are not being political. They're speaking truth to the magisterium of the church," she said. "Thou shalt not kill. ... Life is the foundation of all other issues. Without life, we cannot experience any other rights given to us, such as (in our Constitution) liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

As for keeping with one's pastoral duties, Campbell said she doesn't believe her active role in politics has made her unapproachable. On the contrary, she said: "My experience is much more about people appreciating candor, people appreciating being able to have conversations," noting the town halls that Network's Nuns on the Bus has hosted this month.

"So many people have expressed gratitude for being able to have a space where we can have conversation," she continued. "I think it's serving a really important pastoral need."

"I've been silent way too long on this. For me, it's important to speak out. It's a matter of morality. It's a matter of faith and morals. It's a matter of caring for those on the margins. And Pope Francis does say good Catholics do meddle in politics. So we're just following our pope."

Moral authority on issues, not candidates

The Catholic Church knows how to advocate for issues well and can bring its "moral authority" to the table, said Sr. Amy Hereford, a canon lawyer and Sister of St. Joseph.

And though "it may be a short step from issue to candidate," she said, "no candidate perfectly represents either the Catholic position or the Gospel values." Because politics is the art of the possible, "it's always a tradeoff on measured value."



St. Joseph Sr. Amy Hereford (Provided photo)

"You wouldn't want to stand beside a candidate only to find out later that they endorse some really harsh position," Hereford said of the logic to the canon law. "And that's where I say, 'Advocate issues.' ... We've got moral authority, and we've got a lot of experience and an intellectual tradition to bring to bear on that, whereas advocating for an individual candidate — we always have flawed candidates."

Larkin said she believes "putting a rubber stamp" on a candidate or political party is simply an ineffective way to carry out the social gospel. "We're not going to get there in that vehicle."

American Catholics are evenly split politically, and Murphy said he believes they tend to identify with their politics before their religion. "I don't know how many Catholics are thinking about their priest or valued woman religious when they're voting."

Gibson said he doubts how much backing by religious figures even matters.

"Does anyone pay attention to endorsements?" he said. "I think it would turn off as many people as it would attract, and in the end, it would only undermine the church's witness.

"Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's; you don't go campaigning for Caesar. The church's witness is best served by its independence."

[Soli Salgado is a staff writer for Global Sisters Report. Follow her on Twitter @soli_salgado. Her email address is ssalgado@ncronline.org.]