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John Kerry's Faith—A Closer Look [Part Two]

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As a senator and as a presidential candidate, John Kerry has consistently taken a pro-abortion and pro-homosexual line. Just this past week he made a rare return to the Senate chamber in order to cast a vote against the Unborn Victims of Violence Act [signed into law by President Bush just yesterday]. He was one of only a handful of senators who voted against the Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA] in 1996. This has not escaped the notice of concerned Catholics and other conservative Christians.

Of course, John Kerry is not the first Roman Catholic politician to feel the heat on these issues. The Vatican went public with its frustration when former Rep. Geraldine Ferraro, running in 1984 as the Democratic candidate for Vice President, claimed to be pro-life even as she supported a pro-abortion political platform and had a pro-abortion record in Congress. Perhaps the most famous recent politician to engage in public conflict with the Vatican was former New York Governor Mario Cuomo. Never one to run from a debate, Cuomo went to the University of Notre Dame in 1984 and delivered an address entitled, "Religious Belief and Public Morality: A Catholic Governor's Perspective." Rather than deny a potential conflict of conscience as Kennedy had done, Cuomo seemed almost to revel in his conflict with the Vatican. "My church and my conscience require me to believe certain things about divorce, birth control and abortion," Cuomo acknowledged. "My church does not order me—under pain of sin or expulsion—to pursue my salvific mission according to a precisely defined political plan."

That second sentence is either dishonest or disingenuous. Catholic moral teaching does indeed call for specific support for pro-life legislation and cannot possibly be construed to allow a Catholic politician to grant political and legal support to abortion. In a brilliant retort, Robert P. George and William L. Saunders—both Catholics—took Cuomo to task. "Cuomo prides himself on being something of an intellectual, and there is no denying that he is a bright fellow. He must know then that, at its root, this is utter nonsense. He must be aware that the Church's teaching on abortion truly does 'translate' straightforwardly into a specific public policy—the unborn, like the rest of us, are to be afforded equal protection under law; abortion is to be generally prohibited and never publicly promoted—in a way that her teachings regarding care for the poor or the requirement of fairness and distributing tax liability, for example, simply do not." As they explained, "Cuomo's Notre Dame speech provided a virtual playbook for pro-abortion Catholic politicians who wished to claim their public support for 'the right to choose' abortion was not inconsistent with their personal moral opposition to deliberate feticide."

In recent years, the Vatican has explicitly condemned the practice of Catholic politicians violating Catholic moral teaching in public policy. In 2002, the Vatican released a "Doctrinal Note" instructing that Catholics may not live double

lives. Catholic politicians must be “morally coherent,” the document instructs. “There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called ‘spiritual life’, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called ‘secular’ life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social responsibilities, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture.” In other words, a Catholic politician is obligated to support legislation that defends life, and must not support the Culture of Death.

Just last year, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released a statement entitled, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons.” This official Catholic mandate instructs “that all Catholics are obliged to oppose the legal recognition of homosexual unions.” Furthermore, “Catholic politicians are obliged to do so in a particular way, in keeping with their responsibility as politicians. Faced with legislative proposals in favor of homosexual unions, Catholic politicians are to remain faithful to the teachings of the Church.”

The presidential campaign will reveal how America’s Roman Catholics will respond to John Kerry. In the meantime, the candidate faces some rather awkward challenges from within the hierarchy of his church. When Kerry campaigned recently in Missouri, St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke publicly warned him not to present himself for Communion, citing Canon Law 915, which deals with “those who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin.” Kerry was undeterred, and told TIME, “I certainly intend to take Communion and continue to go to Mass as a Catholic.”

Boston Archbishop Sean O’Malley has given Kerry Communion in the past, but recently warned that Catholic politicians out of line with church teachings “shouldn’t dare come to Communion.”

This is exactly what Robert P. George and William L. Saunders called for in their article criticizing Catholic political leadership. “The shunning of antilife politicians would vividly remind ordinary lay Catholics of the seriousness of the Church’s teachings regarding the sanctity of human life and would send the clear message that Catholics and other Christians who serve the ‘Culture of Death’ are tragically weakening their relationship with Christ and alienating themselves from the community of Christian faith.”

This is not merely a “Catholic issue,” of course, for Evangelical Christians face the same dilemma in dealing with candidates who claim to be Evangelical, but support same-sex unions and abortion. Have we really reached the point when candidates must just “happen” to be Evangelical Christians, Jews, or Roman Catholics? This implies that faith is nothing more than a matter of ethnicity or privatized belief.

Political maturity—and Christian conviction—must require that we judge a candidate by consistency of character as well as by the eagerness of identification with one faith or another. We should look for integrity of heart and consistency in political judgment. In other words, we should hope for Catholic politicians who are genuinely Catholic and Evangelicals who are authentically Evangelical. This is especially true when dealing with issues of life and death, marriage and family, war and peace.

There is no getting around the reality that candidates who merely “happen” to be Christian and make no connection between their faith and public policy will produce a nation that “happens” to be fully secularized. That’s just the way it is. Or, as John Kerry might prefer to put it, faith without works is dead.

