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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Voting Our Conscience, Not Our Religion

By **MARK W. ROCHE**

South Bend, Ind. — For more than a century, from the wave of immigrants in the 19th century to the election of the first Catholic president in 1960, American Catholics overwhelmingly identified with the Democratic Party. In the past few decades, however, that allegiance has largely faded. Now Catholics are prototypical "swing voters": in 2000, they split almost evenly between Al Gore and George W. Bush, and recent polls show Mr. Bush ahead of Senator John Kerry, himself a Catholic, among white Catholics.

There are compelling reasons - cultural, socioeconomic and political - for this shift. But if Catholic voters honestly examine the issues of consequence in this election, they may find themselves returning to their Democratic roots in 2004.

The parties appeal to Catholics in different ways. The Republican Party opposes abortion and the destruction of embryos for stem-cell research, both positions in accord with Catholic doctrine. Also, Republican support of various faith-based initiatives, including school vouchers, tends to resonate with Catholic voters.

Members of the Democratic Party, meanwhile, are more likely to criticize the handling of the war in Iraq, to oppose capital punishment and to support universal health care, environmental stewardship, a just welfare state and more equitable taxes. These stances are also in harmony with Catholic teachings, even if they may be less popular among individual Catholics.

When values come into conflict, it is useful to develop principles that help place those values in a hierarchy. One reasonable principle is that issues of life and death are more important than other issues. This seems to be the strategy of some Catholic and church leaders, who directly or indirectly support the Republican Party because of its unambiguous critique of abortion. Indeed, many Catholics seem to think that if they are truly religious, they must cast their ballots for Republicans.

This position has two problems. First, abortion is not the only life-and-death issue in this election. While the Republicans line up with the Catholic stance on abortion and stem-cell research, the Democrats are closer to the Catholic position on the death penalty, universal health care and environmental protection.

More important, given the most distinctive issue of the current election, Catholics who support President Bush must reckon with the Catholic doctrine of "just war." This doctrine stipulates that a war is just only if all possible alternative strategies have been pursued to their ultimate conclusion; the war is conducted in accordance with moral

principles (for example, the avoidance of unnecessary civilian casualties and the treatment of prisoners with dignity); and the war leads to a more moral state of affairs than existed before it began. While Mr. Kerry, like many other Democrats, voted for the war, he has since objected to the way it was planned and waged.

Second, politics is the art of the possible. During the eight years of the Reagan presidency, the number of legal abortions increased by more than 5 percent; during the eight years of the Clinton presidency, the number dropped by 19 percent. The overall abortion rate (calculated as the number of abortions per 1,000 women between the ages of 15 and 44) was more or less stable during the Reagan years, but during the Clinton presidency it dropped by 11 percent.

There are many reasons for this shift. Yet surely the traditional Democratic concern with the social safety net makes it easier for pregnant women to make responsible decisions and for young life to flourish; among the most economically disadvantaged, abortion rates have always been and remain the highest. The world's lowest abortion rates are in Belgium and the Netherlands, where abortion is legal but where the welfare state is strong. Latin America, where almost all abortions are illegal, has one of the highest rates in the world.

None of this is to argue that abortion should be acceptable. History will judge our society's support of abortion in much the same way we view earlier generations' support of torture and slavery - it will be universally condemned. The moral condemnation of abortion, however, need not lead to the conclusion that criminal prosecution is the best way to limit the number of abortions. Those who view abortion as the most significant issue in this campaign may well want to supplement their abstract desire for moral rectitude with a more realistic focus on how best to ensure that fewer abortions take place.

In many ways, Catholic voters' growing political independence has led to a profusion of moral dilemmas: they often feel they must abandon one good for the sake of another. But while they may be dismayed at John Kerry's position on abortion and stem-cell research, they should be no less troubled by George W. Bush's stance on the death penalty, health care, the environment and just war. Given the recent history of higher rates of abortion with Republicans in the White House, along with the tradition of Democratic support of equitable taxes and greater integration into the world community, more Catholics may want to reaffirm their tradition of allegiance to the Democratic Party in 2004.

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