

How nuns have become soldiers in the battle for the White House



Their black-and-white habits stood out in the backdrop of faces seated behind Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan when the Republican presidential ticket campaigned in suburban Detroit recently. The three Catholic nuns, members of an Ann Arbor-based conservative congregation, could be seen on video applauding Romney.

It was a Catholic nun in modern dress who roused Democratic National Convention delegates Wednesday, describing the struggling Americans she encountered during a Nuns on the Bus tour that opposed GOP plans to cut federal aid to poor people. Sister Simone Campbell, who leads the Catholic social justice lobby NETWORK, defended President Barack Obama's health care plan, too.

As the Nov. 6 election looms, these nuns have come to represent the divide among American Catholics, both in the pews and in the voting booth. Both Obama and Romney are battling for the Catholic vote, a crucial slice of the electorate that represents about 1 out of 4 voters nationwide.

"The Obama campaign is going after Catholics who love nuns, who are social justice Catholics, who are concerned about the poor," said the Rev. Thomas Reese, a Georgetown University Jesuit priest and Catholic commentator, referring to Campbell's appearance.

HOW CATHOLICS VOTED IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Exit polls show Catholics voted for the winner of the popular vote in each of the last 10 presidential elections, dating to 1972.

NOTE: Percentages do not always add to 100% because some votes were cast for third-party or write-in candidates.

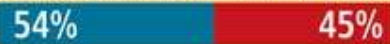
*George W. Bush won Electoral College in disputed result decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, but Democrat Al Gore won the popular vote.

SOURCE: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University

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DEMOCRAT | REPUBLICAN

2008 WINNER: BARACK OBAMA (D)



2004 WINNER: GEORGE W. BUSH (R)



2000 WINNER: GEORGE W. BUSH (R)*



1996 WINNER: BILL CLINTON (D)



1992 WINNER: BILL CLINTON (D)



1988 WINNER: GEORGE BUSH (R)



1984 WINNER: RONALD REAGAN (R)



1980 WINNER: RONALD REAGAN (R)



1976 WINNER: JIMMY CARTER (D)



1972 WINNER: RICHARD NIXON (R)



Republicans are targeting Catholics

who are anti-abortion rights, anti-gay marriage and more conservative, said Reese, so nuns dressed in old-fashioned habits convey those values.

"Catholic Republicans are kind of country-club Republicans," Reese said. "They live in the suburbs. They're professionals and managers in corporations. Romney is one of their neighbors or reminds them of their boss, so they're very comfortable for them," Reese said, and they don't just vote on Catholic values, but on their pocketbooks. That's why such Catholics helped Romney, a Mormon, defeat former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, a conservative Catholic, in the Michigan primary and others.

Romney has invoked the image of the late Pope John Paul II in an ad criticizing Obama's health care plan as infringing on freedom of religion. "When religious freedom is threatened, who do you want to stand with?" intones the announcer.

Catholics -- who were once counted as reliable Democrats -- are now a key swing bloc. In Michigan, Catholics usually constitute 25%-28% of voters, said Bernie Porn of the Lansing-based polling firm EPIC-MRA. In southeastern Michigan, Catholics are concentrated in Macomb County, Downriver and western Wayne County, Porn said.

In the last 10 presidential elections, Catholics have sided with the popular-vote winner every time,

even when the top vote-getter -- Al Gore in 2000 -- didn't win the race, according to exit polls compiled by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

In 2004, even with U.S. Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, a Catholic Democrat, atop the ticket, Republican President George W. Bush won the Catholic vote, 52%-47%. In 2008, Catholics went for Obama, 54%-45%.

Catholics are the single largest religious denomination in the U.S., said Robert Jones, CEO and founder of the Washington-based Public Religion Research Institute.

The Catholic vote also is more visible and relevant this campaign season because both vice presidential nominees -- Vice President Joe Biden and GOP challenger Ryan, a Wisconsin congressman -- are Catholic.

"There are at least two Catholic votes. There's a difference between white Catholic voters and Latino voters," Jones said. "If you look underneath the 2008 vote, the Latino Catholic vote was 73% for Obama. The white Catholic vote was won by McCain, 53%-47%."

Campaigns target Catholics in many ways. This season, Catholic nuns are part of the marketing strategy.

Since modernization efforts in the Catholic church in the 1960s, Jones said a "tug of war" has ensued between one wing of the church -- emphasizing social justice issues -- and the other wing -- stressing anti-abortion rights, anti-birth control and anti-gay marriage issues.

"One of the reasons the nuns have become a lightning rod is ... they gave a face to this kind of social teaching in the church, with the bishops weighing in on the other side," Jones said.

That's especially true this year in the wake of the Vatican issuing a report lambasting the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which represents about 80% of U.S. nuns. The Vatican attacked the LCWR for not doing enough to promote Catholic doctrine against abortion rights and gay marriage, and criticized the NETWORK lobby. The nuns who attended the Romney rally were members of the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist in Ann Arbor. They do not belong to the LCWR.

The Vatican critique generated an outpouring of support for the nuns under attack.

When campaigns can deploy nuns on their behalf, said Jones, it resonates with "a lot of rank-and-file Catholics, who rarely have interactions with their bishops, but have interactions with nuns at schools or hospitals."

Mike Bernacchi, marketing professor at the University of Detroit Mercy, put it this way: "Nuns are popular. ... Nuns are the ones who carry the load. They are the pack mules of Catholicism."

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the leader of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops who has led the church's fight against Obama's health care reforms, delivered the closing prayer at both conventions.

When he accepted the GOP's invitation, Dolan was criticized for favoring one candidate over the other. Dolan said he was nonpartisan and made the same offer to the Democrats and didn't want his benediction to be considered an endorsement.

Dolan conveyed similar sentiments at both conventions, but with a few twists. Before Democrats, who support abortion rights, Dolan prayed for "those waiting to be born, that they may be welcomed and protected," reflecting the church's anti-abortion-rights stance. Before the GOP, which opposes abortion rights, Dolan prayed for the "sacred and inalienable gift of life" without mentioning a need for protection.

Marlene Pierce of Grosse Pointe Park, a mother of a young son, voted for Obama four years ago. Her Catholic faith, she said, factors into how she evaluates candidates, but doesn't necessarily dictate how she votes.

This year, she's leaning toward Romney because she'd like to see government spending cut. But she's also angry about the Obama administration's mandate that religious employers offer health insurance coverage for birth control.

"It's influencing me, and I definitely feel insulted ... and it goes against the grain of what this country was based upon," Pierce said. "Forcing Catholic employers to provide birth control is not the right way. It crosses the line of religion and state."

Joe Coraci, 43, a Catholic who went to Catholic schools and is now a middle-school teacher from White Lake Township, said he's backing Obama.

"I certainly consider what the church has to say, and I have to vote what I know is right," Coraci said. "It doesn't make me any less Catholic. I don't buy all the dogma. You still have to go with your conscience when it comes to the voting booth."

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