

Lawmakers Lawbreakers

Even though churches have lost significant influence over society, they do at least retain authority over their own members. A look at churches that are considering the exercise of discipline over pro-abortion politicians.

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“I DON'T BELIEVE IN ABORTION myself,” goes the line, “but other people should have the right to choose for themselves.” Or, in another version, “My religion is against abortion, but I don't have the right to impose my religious beliefs on anyone else.”

The assumption is that moral and religious beliefs are nothing more than individual preferences, that they have no reference to objective reality, to a transcendent authority that reigns over everyone. Christianity affirms that its tenets are true—not just a sentiment inside a person's head but a revelation that is universally valid, like it or not.

So what about a member of a church, particularly a church with a strong pro-life theology, who assumes that personal beliefs are not transferable to the real world? A typical pew-sitter who is mixed up about theology may be just in need of teaching, and a member who falls into sin—such as the sin of abortion—needs to be brought by the church to a state of repentance and forgiveness.

But what about a church member who personally does not get an abortion but runs an abortion clinic? Or what about church-going lawmakers who use the power and authority of their offices to increase the number of unborn children who are legally killed? Shouldn't churches have the right to enforce their beliefs on their own members?

Some of the most adamantly pro-abortion politicians are members of the Roman Catholic Church, an institution with a rigorous, well-defined pro-life theology as well as a tradition of enforcing adherence to its beliefs. Now, a committee of American bishops is devising policies to deal with its renegade politicians, and some bishops are already taking actions to hold Catholic lawmakers accountable.

There are Protestant politicians too, especially in the South, who are members of pro-life churches but promote abortion in their votes and policies. Could church discipline bring them to repentance and a change of heart?

Church discipline might awaken politicians to their spiritual danger in participating in the slaughter of innocents. Or it could result in expelling nominal members who are eager to vaunt their status as Catholics or Baptists while campaigning but who do not believe what their churches teach.

Either way, though the influence of Christianity on society has been weakened, churches at least have authority over their own members. For pro-life churches to keep their position theoretical, without insisting that it be lived out by their members, is to fall into the same belief-without-reality fallacy as their erring members.

Letter from the bishop

Wisconsin State Senator Julie Lassa, a Democrat from Stevens Point, last year received a letter from Raymond L. Burke, the bishop of LaCrosse, who has ecclesiastical oversight over her local parish. Ms. Lassa is not only a consistent supporter of abortion; she went so far as to vote against a measure that would allow healthcare professionals to refuse to participate in medical procedures, such as abortion, that conflict with their religious or moral beliefs. If she had her way, Catholic doctors and nurses would be forced to perform abortions.

The 2-1/2 -page letter admonished her as to what her faith required of her: “As a faithful member of the Catholic Church, you have an obligation to fulfill the duties of your office with regard not only to the laws of the state, but also with regard to the moral law,” wrote the bishop. “You have failed to restrict the evil of abortion when the opportunity presented itself.”

His concern, he said, was pastoral, a concern for her immortal soul. “I call upon you to consider the consequences for your own spiritual well-being, as well as the scandal you risk by leading others into serious sin.”

He included a 26-page booklet, *Living the Gospel of Life*, and asked that she schedule an appointment with him so that they could discuss the booklet and his letter.

Ms. Lassa was not the only one to receive this kind of letter. The bishop also wrote to another state legislator and a U.S. congressional representative. (The diocese did not release any of the names of the recipients. The bishop said that he did not intend that the letters be made public, which means that one or more of the recipients must have made them known. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel obtained a copy of the letter under the state's open records law and published excerpts and other details of the correspondence.)

Ms. Lassa said that she had no intention of meeting with her bishop. What might happen next?

Bishop Burke told a reporter that if the politicians did not change their pattern of voting, “I would simply have to ask them not to present themselves to receive the sacraments because they would not be Catholics in good standing.”

This would be “self-excommunication.” The step after that, presumably, according to historic Catholic practice, would be the formal rite of excommunication, in which the person would be ritually cast out of the church.

Bishop Burke's action grows out of a Vatican edict issued last year titled “The Participation of Catholics in Political Life,” which states that “those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a grave and clear obligation to oppose any law that attacks human life. For them, as for every Catholic, it is impossible to promote such laws or to vote for them.”

In response the conference of American bishops formed a task force on Catholics in Public Life. Last November, they issued a preliminary report, in an ongoing effort to develop guidelines for how bishops should respond to Catholic politicians who defy their church.

But some bishops have moved more quickly. In 1989 Bishop Leo T. Maher of San Diego excommunicated state senator Lucy Killea for her stance on abortion. In 1996 Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb., excommunicated everyone in his jurisdiction who belonged to right-to-die or abortion-rights organizations. And last January Bishop William Weigand of Sacramento called for pro-abortion Catholic politicians to abstain from receiving the sacraments, singling out then-Gov. Gray Davis.

And now Bishop Burke has just been appointed bishop of St. Louis, where there are many more Catholic Democratic politicians.

Church and state?

The reaction of lawmakers and local media was indignation and outrage. “I can't let my religion take precedence over my duties as a legislator,” said Wisconsin State Sen. Lassa.

“I'm concerned that the bishop would pressure legislators to vote according to the dictates of the church instead of the wishes of their constituents because that is not consistent with our Democratic ideals,” she said. “When I was elected, I swore an oath to uphold the Constitution, and that means I have to represent all the people of all faiths in my district.”

U.S. Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.)—widely assumed to be one of the recipients of the letter, which he would neither confirm nor deny—was even more defiant. “Under the Constitution, the public has a right to know that, in the end, the votes I cast are driven by my own independent judgment and conscience,” he said, “not by a set of marching orders given by any church hierarchy, prelate, or associated lobby group.”

Ironically, those Catholic politicians echoed the anti-Catholic rhetoric of an earlier day, when many Protestants worried that if Catholics were elected, they would turn the country over to the pope. They feared the old teachings of papal claims to superiority over earthly rulers. In the 16th century, the pope tried to depose Queen Elizabeth of England and worked for her overthrow.

Four hundred years later, John F. Kennedy became the first Roman Catholic president, but not before he met with a group of Baptist ministers in Dallas and vowed not to let the head of his church usurp the sovereignty of the United States of America.

Although the politicians and the pundits invoked the precedent of President Kennedy, this is surely a different case. The belief that abortion is morally wrong is by no means an exclusively Catholic position. Conservative Protestants also reject abortion, as do adherents of other religions and pro-lifers of no religion.

Furthermore, the opposition to abortion is a moral, not a religious teaching. All major religions affirm the moral law, which is valid for everyone, believer and unbeliever alike. Their differences, in addition to the different gods they worship, have to do mainly with salvation—in the case of Christian theologies, how to find forgiveness for violating that moral law.

It is simply not true that defending the unborn is “imposing your religion on someone else.” The moral law, apart from any religious significance it might have, is necessary for any kind of social order. If there are not morally grounded laws to protect the innocent, society would be, literally, impossible, with sinful human beings tearing each other apart.

Separation of church and state is one thing. But separating morality and state is something completely different, a formula for anarchy, oppression, and totalitarianism. And the need to protect the most innocent and vulnerable life—developing babies, the very purpose of the family, which is the foundation of every other social institution—is the most urgent application of the social contract.

The legacy of the Democrats

Most Roman Catholics came to the United States as immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe. Many of them, at first, were poor, settling in cities and working in factories. Through much of the 20th century, Democrats presented themselves as champions of the working man, and Catholics were highly represented in the Democratic Party. As the former immigrants became assimilated into American society and even as many of them became affluent—for example, the Kennedy family—they kept their Democratic affiliation.

And throughout much of the 20th century, although they erected a welfare state with questionable results, Democrats did reflect the values of ordinary Americans, including their patriotism, their church-going, and their family priorities. Democrats helped fight the Cold War and launched military action against the Communists in Korea and Vietnam.

But then came the 1960s, the counterculture, and the opposition to the Vietnam War. For the political radicals and cultural revolutionaries who took over the party, the great shibboleth, the test of orthodoxy, became abortion. It was the feminist sacrament, the guarantee of sexual liberation.

Democratic politicians had to embrace abortion. Otherwise, they would be villainized and marginalized by the activists who controlled much of the party. Pro-life Democrats had to

change or lose their careers. Al Gore and Dick Gephardt once were pro-life, as was Jesse Jackson. They were forced to recant.

It was not just Catholics who had to deny or suppress their moral beliefs to succeed as Democrats. So did Southern evangelicals.

The South was once solid for the Democrats. Part of this was opposition to the Republicans as the party of Lincoln—and the racist legacy of the Democratic Party in the South is currently one of its darkest secrets. But for most Southerners, being a Democrat was a tribute to President Roosevelt, whom they credited with improving their lives during the Depression. And most of these Democratic Southerners were conservative Protestants.

When Democrats embraced the civil-rights movement, thanks to Lyndon Johnson, their moral authority was unsurpassed. But they lost that moral authority when they embraced abortion.

How could anyone take seriously their claim to champion the weak and the vulnerable, to be crusading for justice and compassion, when their one nonnegotiable dogma promoted death to the weakest and the most vulnerable of all, the blatant negation of justice and compassion?

In the meantime, Democrats essentially abandoned except in rhetoric their old constituencies of “ordinary, hard-working Americans” to appeal instead to the “lifestyle left,” to the growing masses, often of the affluent class, who prize above everything else sexual freedom, including the right to an abortion.

Although many Catholic and evangelical politicians hewed to the new party line, ordinary Catholics and evangelicals—who felt that their party had been stolen from them—turned to Ronald Reagan in 1980 and voted Republican for the first time. Today, largely as a result of the “culture war,” whose central issue is abortion, the South has become nearly solid for Republicans on the national level. And many ambitious pro-abortion politicians are members of pro-life evangelical churches.

A mark of the church?

So the question of church discipline for pro-abortion candidates is just as relevant for Protestants as for Catholics.

This would usually be up to the member's local congregation, of course, not an ecclesiastical hierarchy, as in Catholicism. Today, many congregations are so built around attracting members that they hardly have a mechanism for getting rid of them. In the current religious climate, denominational loyalty is so small that if a member were to as much as feel unwelcome in a particular congregation—let alone be called on a moral or doctrinal issue—there would be no problem in simply going across the street to a different congregation.

Even conservative Christians are often so individualistic in their personal theology that they acknowledge no authorities to which they are answerable, certainly not the authority of their pastors, their congregations, or the larger church body to which they belong.

And yet, Protestant churches have, historically, been willing to discipline their members when they strayed. In the Reformed tradition, church discipline is seen as no less than one of the marks of the church, along with the Word and the Sacraments.

Baptist theologian Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, called on Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., to exert church discipline on one of its members, the president of the United States, Bill Clinton (see *WORLD*, Sept. 19, 1998).

“I do most emphatically believe that church discipline is called for in the case of a church member who defies church teaching or breaks the moral law while in political office,” Mr. Mohler said. He noted that while matters of political judgment would seldom be grounds for church action, advocating abortion crosses the line from politics into a clear sin against God's Word.

“Traditional Baptist polity, affirmed again and again in Baptist history, indicates that Baptists indeed have disciplined members for sins, both private and public,” he said. Mr. Mohler added that the Baptist doctrine of soul competency, which stresses the priesthood of all believers, should not be misused to allow someone to violate the teachings and the moral principles of the church.

Mr. Mohler, whose exhortation to Mr. Clinton's church went unheeded, was not aware of any recent cases of a Baptist congregation disciplining a pro-abortion politician. “This is the tragedy,” he said. “It is not a problem with the polity, but a failure of conviction and courage.... Our churches will either recover biblical church discipline or cease to be churches at all.”

Discipline in the right way

Certainly, church discipline has often been abused and clumsily applied. The goal is not to purge a congregation of sinners. Otherwise, who would be left? Properly understood, church discipline should simply be a part of the church's spiritual care of its members.

A pastor seldom knows about the private sins that his members struggle with, but the proclamation of the Word in the normal functioning of the church can bring them to repentance and forgiveness. Sometimes a sin becomes public—a member getting thrown in jail for drunk driving or embezzlement—whereupon the pastor or elders are obliged to meet with the offenders to help them get right with God. If the sinner spurns this pastoral care, insisting that repentance isn't necessary and that it is none of the church's business, then there is another problem. But the processes of Matthew 18 must be followed, with the purpose of trying to save the sinner's soul.

The goal should never be to expel a member. But if, in the course of spiritual counseling, it is evident that the person rejects the church's ministry and does not believe in what the church believes, it becomes a question of whether the person who rejects what the church believes is really a member at all.

Politicians who are willing to reject their church's teachings about abortion are, of course, unlikely to care much about their church's teachings about church discipline. And if they were to be cast out of their church, they would easily find another one, if it matters to them, since prominent and powerful members are much in demand by socially ambitious congregations.

So churches cracking down will not necessarily change politicians' minds or turn the tide against abortion. God, though, can change their minds, and their conversion can come through the conscientious application of spiritual care, in the classic description of the church's ministry as “the cure of souls.”

But if it comes to the point of casting out the unbeliever, at least the church would have its integrity.

Sin is more than just an individual action. It is a sin to cause someone else to sin. This is why sexual sin is so problematic. It involves not just oneself but the corruption of another person— one's sexual partner or even the pornographic actors being degraded and sexually abused. Sexual immorality is a sin against the love we should have for our neighbors.

Whereas an individual transgression can be repented of and forgiven, causing someone else to stumble has untold consequences. A man may have a fling with a prostitute, who, unknown to him, becomes pregnant and has an abortion, killing his own child. A politician's scope is even wider, as a vote can be turned into a law that enables the slaughter of millions of innocents.

Churches must shape the way their members think about such things, forming them morally and spiritually for their eternal salvation. The problem is not just that some of their members are in need of church discipline. Churches need it.