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Catholics giving governor a pass on abortion?

Pro-rights Democrats attacked for same view

By Bill Ainsworth

STAFF WRITER

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SACRAMENTO – In January 2003, Sacramento Roman Catholic Bishop William Wiegand publicly chastised then-Gov. Gray Davis for supporting abortion rights while professing to be a Catholic.

- [Bible study leader stirs controversy](#)

Wiegand delivered a homily saying the Democrat and any other Catholic who "thinks it is acceptable for a Catholic to be pro-abortion is in very great error" and "puts his or her soul at risk." He recommended that Davis refrain from taking Communion.

In recent months, a variety of conservative Catholic groups have launched a campaign against presumptive Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, a Catholic who favors abortion rights. Some bishops have criticized Kerry and other Catholic politicians who support such rights, saying they should be denied Communion.

Yet the Sacramento bishop and other conservative Catholics have steered clear of publicly attacking Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, perhaps the nation's most prominent Republican Catholic who favors abortion rights.

"Schwarzenegger is getting special treatment from those bishops in California. I don't know why," said Judie Brown, president of the American Life League, a conservative Catholic group based in Virginia.

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The league has launched a \$500,000 advertising campaign calling on bishops across the nation to deny Communion to Catholic politicians who favor abortion rights.

The group didn't mention Schwarzenegger in its recent campaign. Instead, it singled out only Democrats, including Kerry; House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco and Schwarzenegger's relative by marriage; and Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, the uncle of Schwarzenegger's wife, Maria Shriver.

Brown said that in the past her group has aimed advertisements at Republicans. Davis and Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, a Democrat.

Still, John Green, a political scientist from the University of Akron in Ohio who studies religion and politics, said the bishops and conservatives have mostly targeted Democrats while largely ignoring Republicans.

"A lot of people are wondering why is it that every Catholic the bishops are being hard on happens to be a Democrat," he said.

Green believes it might be because Catholic Democrats tend to be more vocal about their support for abortion rights than do Catholic Republicans.

Schwarzenegger's communications director, Rob Stutzman, agrees. He thinks the governor has for the most part avoided attacks because he doesn't talk much about abortion. "It's not something that's part of his discourse," Stutzman said.

Davis, by contrast, frequently touted his pro-abortion-rights stance during his three gubernatorial campaigns.

Schwarzenegger's position in favor of abortion rights and gay rights helped give him credentials as a moderate. In California, polls show strong public support for both positions.

Schwarzenegger, who grew up Catholic, now attends St. Monica Catholic Church in Santa Monica. Cardinal Roger Mahony, archbishop of Los Angeles, has made it clear that he does not believe in denying Communion to people who support abortion rights.

But Brown, president of the American Life League, insisted that "the Catholic bishops have not done enough."

"We're simply asking them to enforce church law," she said.

To back her position, she cites Canon 915, which states in part: "Those who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin are

not to be admitted to Communion."

Such criticisms aren't new.

The late San Diego Bishop Leo Maher brought the issue to the nation's attention in a 1989 special election for the state Senate when he barred Democrat Lucy Killea from receiving Communion in local parishes. Killea, who favors abortion rights, won the election.

The issue has gained momentum in recent years, in part because the Catholic leadership under Pope John Paul II has become increasingly conservative. In 2003, the church issued a document calling on Catholic legislators to support church positions in office.

Brown said that among the 260 U.S. Catholic bishops, about 15 agree that politicians who support abortion rights should be denied Communion. Last month, a bishop in Oregon joined the movement.

"It's a growing group," Brown said.

Her organization has in the past targeted California lawmakers, including Assemblyman Juan Vargas, D-San Diego, a former Jesuit seminarian who supports abortion rights, despite his personal view. Vargas, who is married with two children, said he believes abortion is the wrong choice.

"Abortion isn't something we ever would have chosen for us," he said. "However, if you believe in free will, which is a very strong religious concept, God gives you the ability to make choices. Those choices are sometimes right and sometimes wrong. Those are choices you get to make."

Vargas believes the campaign against Catholics who support abortion rights is misguided because it politicizes the church. "I go to church quietly and prayerfully with my family," he said.

San Diego Roman Catholic Bishop Robert Brom isn't taking any action on this issue, a representative said. Instead, he's waiting for a report on the matter from a task force of bishops.

Joseph Giganti, media director of the American Life League, said his group isn't trying to punish politicians; it wants them to change their views so they don't mislead others.

"At its most basic level, it's a form of tough love," he said.

But many Catholics who support abortion rights think this campaign will backfire. Numerous polls show that a majority

of Catholic voters already support some abortion rights.

"Catholics, as a whole, look a lot like the rest of the country," said Green, who has studied polls on religion and politics.

Rosemary Stasek, who heads California Catholics for Free Choice, believes that most Catholics strongly support separation of church and state.

"Many American Catholics find it rather demeaning and insulting, the idea that American Catholic officials should answer to their bishops rather than their constituents," she said.

Forty-four years ago, John F. Kennedy, who later became the nation's only Catholic president, told voters he wouldn't take orders from the pope. Many analysts believed those assurances helped him win a close election in a nation marked by a history of anti-Catholicism.

The current campaign against Kerry has inspired a different question.

"In John F. Kennedy's day, the question was, 'Is he too Catholic?' " said Green. "Now the question for John Kerry is whether he's Catholic enough."

But Stasek, a Mountain View city councilwoman who supports abortion rights, says the current campaign could reinforce the old fear that Catholic politicians aren't independent from the church.

Furthermore, she believes this campaign leaves out politicians who violate church views on other issues, including support for the death penalty. The church opposes capital punishment in all but the rarest cases.

"Why are they zeroing in on this issue with extreme sanctions?" Stasek said. "This effort lacks theological credibility."

For conservative Catholics, however, abortion is a higher priority than the death penalty. "Abortion is not one of many issues," Brown said. "The right to life is fundamental."

Brown also thinks President Kennedy made a big mistake in distancing himself from the church. He opened the door for the many Catholic politicians who now defy church teachings, she said.

"He put his Catholic faith in his pocket," Brown said. "If you're a Catholic, you have to be a Catholic 24 hours a day. Otherwise, you're a hypocrite."

Schwarzenegger doesn't spend much time talking about his religion, his spokesman said. "Religious practice is a very private matter for him," Stutzman said.

Today the governor is expected to address the California Prayer Breakfast, an annual religious event for Sacramento politicians.

Born in the predominantly Catholic nation of Austria, Schwarzenegger said he attended Mass each week.

"My mother was the one that was the spiritual leader in our house, so she took us. It was not even an option. So that's the way I grew up. I pray and I, you know, I communicate with God," he said last fall on Fox News' "Hannity & Colmes" program.

But in a 1999 interview, Schwarzenegger said he rebelled against religion while a young adult. "I never went to church. I thought the whole thing was absurd," he told CrankyCritic.com, a film-review Web site.

The governor began attending church again when he and Shriver, also a Catholic, had the first of their four children. "All of a sudden you start thinking back to what your parents taught you and what you rebelled against. And suddenly it makes sense, and you teach it to your kids," he said in the 1999 interview.

Now Schwarzenegger and his family attend the historic St. Monica Catholic Church in Santa Monica, which counts among its parishioners such stars and prominent politicians as Martin Sheen, Tony Danza and former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan. The church was used as the location for "Going My Way," a 1944 film starring Bing Crosby as a priest.

Wiegand, the Sacramento bishop who confronted Davis last year, hasn't said anything about Schwarzenegger.

However, a diocese spokeswoman said his recommendation that politicians who favor abortion rights voluntarily refrain from taking Communion applies to the new governor as well.

Despite the publicity last year, Davis wasn't bothered by the criticism, said his former spokesman, Roger Salazar. "He understood that religion and politics are separate entities," Salazar said.

In his homily last year, Wiegand also praised the Sacramento parish priest who initiated the clash with Davis. The Rev. Edward Kavanaugh, who oversees St. Patrick's orphanage, barred Davis from delivering Christmas gifts to children in December 2002 because of his stance on abortion rights.

Kavanaugh, in a recent interview, said he has no personal animosity toward Kerry, Schwarzenegger or anyone else who favors abortion rights.

"I have nothing against him or Senator Kerry," he said.

But what would happen if either the governor or senator tried to come to Kavanaugh's church?

"I'd say they're not allowed on the property. 'Get lost,' " he said.

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