

Abortion foes protest at Bishops' conference

Several pro-life groups held a candlelight vigil Nov. 11 near the Baltimore hotel where the U.S. bishops were conducting their fall general assembly, protesting statements made by some Catholic leaders who called the victorious campaign of President-elect Barack Obama a step forward in stamping out racism.

About 25 candle-holding activists braved the cold night air along Baltimore's waterfront to tell the bishops that Obama's support for legal abortion was more critical than any other qualities he might bring to the presidency.

They also called on the bishops to use their political clout in an effort to outlaw abortion in the U.S., shut down Planned Parenthood and rid all American schools of sex education.

Armed with a portable altar, an amplified podium, musical instruments and religious symbols, members of the American Life League, the Catholic Media Coalition, STOP Planned Parenthood, Maryland Right to Life and the Baltimore-based Defend Life also pushed for the bishops to punish Catholic lawmakers who support legal abortion by refusing them Communion or through excommunication.

"Barack Obama is the most pro-abortion candidate to ever run for the presidency, yet 54 percent of Catholics voted for him," said Jim Sedlak, vice president of the American Life League. "The bishops have said they will try and work with him. Archbishop (Donald W.) Wuerl (of Washington) said he wouldn't seek to deny (Vice President-elect Joseph) Biden Eucharist. Is it any wonder why 54 percent of the Catholic congregation felt like it was OK to vote for Barack Obama?"

Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Catholic bishops, sent letters of congratulations to Obama on his “historic election” Nov. 4 as the first black man to win the White House.

Inside their hotel, during a lengthy discussion Nov. 11 on what an Obama administration and a Democratic-dominated Congress might mean to the U.S. Catholic Church’s pro-life cause, several bishops expressed fears that potential legislation and executive orders may relax federal policies related to abortion and embryonic stem-cell research.

Cardinal George said the church’s position on abortion is clear, that it is evil and all Catholics should voice their opposition to it.

However, Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco said there is no unilateral rule that forbids U.S. Catholic politicians who vote in favor of legal abortion measures from receiving Communion, and said the decision of who should or shouldn’t receive the Eucharist should be “left up to the pastoral sensitivity, to the individual bishop” of each diocese.

Mr. Sedlak told those participating in the protest that thousands of Catholics are confused because they witness politicians who support legal abortion going to Mass and receiving the Eucharist on a regular basis.

“This is in direct conflict with canon law,” he said. “These politicians are guilty of the gravest of sins – facilitating the death of innocent children – and yet so many present themselves for Communion week after week. It’s causing scandal and confusion in the church and this must cease.”

During a press conference Nov. 11, Cardinal George said there is much debate about this particular canon, because some argue that a Catholic politician may only be guilty of formal cooperation in evil if he promotes the killing of innocent life and not

by merely voting to keep the abortion procedure legal.

Marie Hahnenberg, a researcher for STOP Planned Parenthood, also urged the bishops to use their influence to close down Planned Parenthood clinics nationwide.

She said Planned Parenthood routinely counsels its clients to have abortions and promotes teaching sex education to kindergartners in an effort to “turn them into future clients.”

A smaller group of protesters organized by Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry also gathered in front of the bishop’s Baltimore venue Nov. 9-10.