

How We Got Here

The Catholic Review

The late great Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., once deplored what he cited as the penchant of some contemporary Catholics for “excessive and indiscreet compromise.” Without denying the value of open and honest debate, we would do well to beware of the role that such “compromise” played in raising the political tide that washed in our society’s sad acceptance of unrestricted abortion today. Any attempt to compromise Church teaching on abortion in the name of “open mindedness” is deplorable.

In a first-rate address to more than a hundred bishops gathered last February for a workshop conducted by the National Catholic Bioethics Center, Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, referred to a Wall Street Journal opinion piece of January 7 of this year.

Titled “How Support for Abortion Became Kennedy Dogma,” the article goes a long way in explaining how so many Catholic politicians, once pro-life, arrived at a deplorable compromise, abandoned their pro-life convictions, and even became, in too many instances, ardent “pro-choice” proponents.

In 1964, Robert Kennedy was seeking a New York Senate seat and brother Ted was running for re-election to the United States Senate from Massachusetts. Liberal, well-funded pro-abortion groups were gaining traction at the grassroots and targeting politicians in the Northeast as prospective torch-bearers for the movement. The Kennedys knew they would need theological backing to claim that a Catholic politician could support abortion rights “in good conscience” and they turned to a group of six dissident priests.

It was a hot summer day in Hyannisport, Massachusetts, as the Kennedy clan hosted the select group of Catholic theologians to help them come up with the deplorable compromise. The moral theologians were well-known at the time and would for a generation-and more, promote dissent on a number of critical Church teachings.

Among the notables were the Reverends Charles Curran, who has opposed Church teaching on issues ranging from pre-marital sex and contraception to divorce and in-vitro fertilization, Joseph Fuchs, Giles Milhaven, Richard McCormick, later the Rose Kennedy professor of the Kennedy Institute for Bioethics at Georgetown, Robert Drinan, who would go on to become a pro-abortion congressman from Massachusetts and, in 1996, speak out in support of President Clinton's veto of the Partial Birth Abortion Act, and Albert Jonsen. They worked for a day and a half, held a Q and A coaching session with the Kennedys and, as Giles Milhaven related at a 1984 briefing for Catholics for a Free Choice, "Though the theologians disagreed on many a point, they all concurred on certain basics - and that was that a Catholic politician could in good conscience vote in favor of abortion."

The Kennedys sought such theological justification for a pro-abortion stance some nine years before the Roe vs. Wade decision was rendered. It would give "cover" for years to a host of Catholics not only to tolerate but even to promote an aggressive pro-abortion agenda - a far cry from the mantra of keeping abortion "safe, legal and rare." Worse still, it would make it so much more difficult for pro-life politicians to maintain their stand within a strong pro-abortion political party. We commend them for their courage. We hope and pray for such witness on a broader scale from Catholics who deep down know that abortion is wrong.

Perhaps, in those early days there was confusion in the minds of many Catholics. Today, however, far from questioning whether abortion should be legal, we find ourselves actually having to defend the right of medical practitioners to refuse to violate their conscience by participating in abortion. Given the Church's exhaustive efforts to form consciences since then, and the unmitigated rate of abortion that we witness today, it is difficult fathom how otherwise faithful Catholic public servants can refuse to embrace even the most reasonable measures to stem the tide of abortion on-demand.

Representative of countless Church exhortations rejecting the "personally opposed but..." compromises by Catholic officials are the words of Pope Benedict in his 2007 encyclical, *The Sacrament of Love*.

"Worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without

consequences for our relationships with others: it demands public witness to our faith. Evidently this is true for all the baptized, yet it is especially incumbent upon those who, by virtue of their social or political position, must make decisions regarding fundamental values such as respect for human life, its defense from conception until natural death, the family built upon marriage between a man and a woman....”

Good news from two independent pollsters this month reports that the tide might be changing-51 percent of Americans are now opposed to abortion on demand. What that means, practically and politically, is now anyone’s guess.

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ut I think it’s safe to say that those involved in the 1964 Hyannisport cabal have a lot to answer for.