How GOP got Catholicized

By Timothy Stanley, Special to CNN
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A group of Catholic nuns listens to former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum at a rally at a Knights of Columbus Council in Michigan.

Story highlights

- Timothy Stanley: The Republican party was once dominated by Protestants
- He says Catholics and Catholic theology now play a key role in the GOP
- Stanley: Conservative Catholics have led the party's social issues conversation
- He says social issues play a key role in primaries, due to Catholic-evangelical alliance

There was a time when the Republican Party was strictly for White Anglo Saxon Protestants. It was an alliance between Country Club Episcopalians and twice born followers of the Old Time Gospel, all firmly opposed to mass Catholic immigration from Europe. The nativism of the GOP drove Catholics into the welcoming arms of Al Smith, Jack Kennedy, Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Party.

But this year's GOP front-runners are a Mormon and two Catholics -- Rick Santorum (a cradle of Italian descent) and Newt Gingrich (a convert). Roughly one-quarter of Republican primary voters are Catholic. Notable Catholic GOP leaders include John Boehner, Paul Ryan, Christine O'Donnell, Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush. Six out of nine justices of the Supreme Court are Catholics, and five of them are Republicans.

The GOP is undergoing a quiet process of Catholicization. It's one of the reasons why this year's race has focused so much on social issues -- and sex.

Republican outreach to Catholics began in the early 1970s, when Richard Nixon tried to entice blue-collar "white ethnics" to the GOP by taking a tough stand on abortion. Nixon told members of his staff he was tempted to convert to Catholicism himself, but was worried it would be seen as cheap politics: "They would say there goes Tricky Dick Nixon trying to win the Catholic vote. ..."

Timothy Stanley

Nixon genuinely admired the Catholic intellectual tradition and its ability to provide reasonable arguments to defend conservative values at a time when they were undergoing widespread reappraisal. That certainly made the Church an invaluable partner during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s.

When the Moral Majority was established in 1979 to oppose things like abortion and homosexual rights, its evangelical founders did their best to include Catholics. Despite the organization's reputation for being the political voice box of televangelists and peddlers of the apocalypse, by the mid '80s it drew a third of its funding from Catholic donors. Leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson consciously used the Moral Majority (and, later, the Christian Coalition) as an exercise in ecumenical coalition building.

Falwell and Robertson were fans of Pope John Paul II and his resilient anti-communism. But they also recognized, like Nixon, that the Catholic Church had a vast intellectual heritage that could be drawn upon when fighting the liberals. For example, when

debating abortion, evangelicals had hitherto tended to rely on Scripture to make their case. Catholics, on the other hand, had been integrating the concept of "human rights" into their theology since the 1890s.

Under Catholic influence, the pro-life movement evolved from a zealous, theology-heavy rationale to one more couched in the language of human dignity and personhood.

By 2000, Catholic social teaching was a core component of the Republican Party's "compassionate conservatism" agenda. Karl Rove targeted religious Catholics on behalf of George W. Bush, while the president made a big play of his social traditionalism. In the 2004 election, Bush beat John Kerry among Catholics, despite the fact that Kerry described himself as a faithful Catholic who never went anywhere without his rosary beads.

Crucially, Bush's victory among Catholics was made possible by his margin of support among those who attend Mass regularly. Catholics who said they rarely went to church plumped for Kerry. The election heralded a new split within the politics of the communion, between religious and ethnic Catholics. Indeed, it could be argued that just as Republican Protestants have become a little more Catholic in their outlook, so conservative Catholics have become a little more Protestant in theirs.

Take Rick Santorum. Santorum is part of the John Paul II generation of Catholics who reject most of the liberalism that swept the church in the 1960s. He is a member of a suburban church in Great Falls, Virginia, that (unusually, nowadays) offers a Latin Mass each Sunday with a Georgian chant sung by a professional choir.

The church has a "garden for the unborn" and has boasted as worshipers the director of the FBI, the head of the National Rifle Association and Justice Antonin Scalia. Santorum is also an outspoken admirer of Saint Josemaria Escriva, the founder of the conservative lay organization Opus Dei. Opus Dei encourages among its members a work ethic and an effort to "live like a saint" that is strikingly similar to the values and mores of New England's Puritan settlers.

Santorum's political theology has thus moved him so sharply to the right that it's sometimes difficult to culturally identify him as a Catholic. In a March 18 survey, less than half of GOP Catholics actually knew the candidate was himself a Catholic. That might be one of the reasons why Santorum consistently loses to Romney among Catholics in primaries, even during his landmark victories in the Deep South. In contrast, he does very well among evangelicals.

We might speculate that what is emerging is an alliance between ultra-conservative Catholics and tea party evangelicals. Its politics might be antediluvian, but it's an ecumenical breakthrough and a cultural revolution at the grass-roots level.

The coalition's mix of Catholic moral teaching and evangelical fervor has oriented the 2012 GOP race toward fierce social conservatism. During the debate over Obama's

contraception mandate, it was the Catholic conservative leadership who provided the moral objection, but the evangelicals who produced most of the popular opposition to it. And it is evangelical support that has elevated Santorum to his current status in the race. With its ability to shift the agenda and win primaries, the emerging Catholic/evangelical political theology is the most striking conservative innovation of this turbulent campaign season.

The New York Times

How the Evangelicals and Catholics Joined Forces
By LAURIE GOODSTEIN
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IN 1960, the last time a Roman Catholic ran for president on the Democratic ticket, evangelical Protestant leaders warned their flocks that electing John F. Kennedy would be like handing the Oval Office to the Antichrist.

So deep was the antipathy toward Catholics that the president of the National Association of Evangelicals sent a distressed letter to pastors saying: "Public opinion is changing in favor of the church of Rome. We dare not sit idly by - voiceless and voteless." The Rev. Billy Graham's magazine Christianity Today said in an editorial that the Vatican "does all in its power to control the governments of nations."

Forty-four years later, less than a fortnight in Christian history, evangelicals and conservative Catholics have forged an alliance that is reshaping American politics and culture.

Now another Catholic Democrat from Massachusetts, Senator John Kerry, is running for president. But this time evangelicals are cheering on the handful of Catholic bishops who have said they will deny communion to politicians like Mr. Kerry who support abortion rights. In an about-face, Christianity Today says in a June editorial that it is "certainly appropriate" for bishops to expect a Catholic president to submit to Vatican authority.

More than political expediency is at work here. Once blinded by suspicion, evangelical and some Catholic leaders have spent more than a decade laying the groundwork for a religious realignment. Though the old animus is not dead, there has been a rapprochement with both moral and theological dimensions, and broad political implications.

Coalitions of Catholics and evangelicals form the backbone in the fights against gay marriage, stem-cell research and euthanasia, and for religious school vouchers. Catholic and evangelical leaders who forged relationships in the anti-abortion movement, which the Baptist theologian Timothy George has called "the ecumenism of the trenches," are now working side by side in campaigns on other culture war issues, and for Republican candidates.

Catholics, once a solidly Democratic voting bloc, are now fractured. Polls of the 2000 election showed traditionalists and centrists breaking away to join conservative evangelicals in voting for George Bush. "Voting groups are far more fluid than they used to be," said Patrick Allitt, a professor of American history at Emory University.

Mr. Allitt recalls seeing his glimpse of the new alliance at an Operation Rescue anti-abortion rally in Atlanta in the 1980's.

Now conservatives in both groups share the sense that they are fighting a losing battle against secularism, relativism and a trend that the Christianity Today editorial brands "hypermodern individualism." Though miles apart on salvation, they find common ground in the language of moral absolutes. Evangelicals have thoroughly adopted Pope John Paul II's language on the "culture of life" to convey their anti-abortion principles. In a recent poll of evangelicals, the pope had higher favorability ratings (59 percent) than either Jerry Falwell (44 percent) or Pat Robertson (54 percent).

"This is a phenomenal change from the days when the pope was considered by evangelicals who were not on the fringe as the Antichrist," said Rev. Richard Cizik, who handles government affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals.

"There is many an evangelical now who believes that they have more in common with the Catholics down the street than they do with mainline Protestants," he said, a reference to the Presbyterians, Episcopalians or Methodists, whose churches are internally divided over homosexuality.

Evangelicals in past generations were once among the loudest voices calling for separation of church and state, largely as a defense against government financing for Catholic parochial schools. But with evangelicals busy building their own private Christian academies in recent years, they have joined forces with Catholics to push for government vouchers for parents who choose to send their children to private or religious schools.

Audiences of evangelicals and Catholics defied critics and made "The Passion of the Christ" one of most profitable films ever produced. Catholics regard the film as a thoroughly Catholic spectacle, focused as it is on the Virgin Mary and Jesus' suffering. Yet Mel Gibson, a traditionalist Catholic, built an audience with screenings in evangelical megachurches, even hiring Billy Graham's public relations man. Many evangelicals embraced the movie as a way to strike a blow of their own in the culture wars.

Even a decade ago, much of this would have been a surprise. It is true that for Catholics, the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's set the stage for Catholic acceptance of ecumenicism. But the evangelicals still had a long way to go.

Exactly 10 years ago, a group of evangelical and Catholic leaders and scholars released a document called "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." It was the result of a dialogue started by two men: the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic priest in New

York who edits the journal First Things, and Charles Colson, the former Nixon aide who became a born-again Christian while doing time for the Watergate cover-up.

Mr. Colson said in a recent interview that he had reached out to Father Neuhaus because he had admired a book by the priest, "The Naked Public Square," which argued that public life was slowly being stripped of the religious. The two men convened a group of prominent theologians and religious leaders. The evangelical side included the late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, the religious broadcaster Pat Robertson and theologians like James I. Packer. The Catholic side included the late Cardinal John O'Connor of New York and the theologian Avery Dulles, now a cardinal.

Their manifesto was primarily theological, but it included overt political pledges to work together on issues like abortion, government aid for religious schools and strengthening the "traditional family," in part a reaction to the growing gay rights movement.

The document shook the evangelical world. "Friendships and institutions were blown apart," Father Neuhaus recalled in an interview. One hundred evangelical leaders signed a statement denouncing it. Mr. Colson said his organization, Prison Fellowship Ministries, lost about a million dollars in contributions. He received more than a dozen letters a week from angry evangelicals.

But over the next several years, the letters stopped. By 2000, Mr. Colson and James Dobson, the broadcaster who founded Focus on the Family, were invited to the Vatican to address the bishops on the breakdown of the family, the first such appearance ever. Evangelical institutions like Wheaton College in Illinois and Gordon College in Massachusetts began inviting Catholics to speak on campus, Mr. Colson said.

Father Neuhaus said he has been among the Catholic leaders urging bishops to publicly confront Catholic politicians like Mr. Kerry who defy church teaching on abortion. The dialogue group has continued meeting, and is at work on another statement on the meaning of holiness. This is not to say that everyone sees eye to eye. There is plenty of anti-Catholic residue among evangelicals. Christian bookstores still sell books arguing Catholics are apostates. The best-selling "Left Behind" series, so popular among evangelicals, featured a distasteful Catholic cardinal who assists the Antichrist.

On political matters, evangelicals and Catholics will not fall on the same side of the divide on every issue. The Vatican opposed the war in Iraq, while many evangelicals were hawkish. And many Catholics still profess a strong social-justice, pro-union, Democratic orientation that makes them natural antagonists of evangelicals, who largely swing Republican.

Father Neuhaus confided, "There is much in the evangelical culture that grates against me - the overly confident claims to being born again, the forced happiness and joy, the awful music."

But the alliance, he said, is "an extraordinary realignment that if it continues is going to create a very different kind of configuration of Christianity in America."