

March 19, 2006
The Nation

Rift on Immigration Widens for Conservatives and Cardinals

By RACHEL L. SWARNS
The New York Times

WASHINGTON

THE fierce battle over the future of America's immigration system is spilling from Capitol Hill onto the airwaves, as conservatives accuse Democrats, human rights groups and even some labor unions of trying to stymie Republican efforts to stem the tide of illegal immigration.

But in recent weeks, some commentators and prominent Republicans have turned their swords against another formidable foe in their battle to tighten the borders: the Roman Catholic Church.

Immigration has long caused friction between the church, with its advocacy for migrants, and conservatives, who want to slow illegal crossings over the Mexican border. But as Congress wrestles with the fate of the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants, that tension has escalated into a sharp war of words, highlighting the divide among some Republicans and Catholics who have fought side by side on other issues like abortion and same-sex marriage.

In December, after the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a tough border security bill that, among other things, would make it a crime to assist illegal immigrants, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops assailed it as extremely punitive and called on its flock to oppose it. Church officials have sent lobbyists to Congress and this month parishes sent members to rallies in Chicago and Washington to push for legislation that would legalize undocumented immigrants and put them on the path to citizenship.

Some Republicans are firing back.

In February, Representative Tom Tancredo, a Colorado Republican who opposes illegal immigration, took issue with Catholic bishops, among other religious leaders, "for invoking God when arguing for a blanket amnesty" for illegal immigrants. This month, two powerful Republican representatives, Peter King of New York and F. James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, the co-sponsors of the border security bill, criticized the church leadership on "The O'Reilly Factor" on Fox News Channel, particularly Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, who has said he would instruct his priests and parishioners to defy the legislation if it ever became law.

Meanwhile, cable news commentators Tucker Carlson and Lou Dobbs have questioned whether the church should maintain its tax-exempt status, given its political activism on immigration. And in an interview, Mr. King accused church leaders of "committing the sin of hypocrisy" in their campaign to sway Congress and Catholic voters.

"This is the left wing of the Catholic Church — these are the frustrated social workers," said Mr. King, who described himself as a practicing Catholic. "They're giving an incentive for more illegals to come here. I don't think it's right."

In fact, the Catholic leadership is united on this issue, and includes several bishops who strongly suggested in 2004 that Catholics should vote for President Bush because of his opposition to abortion. Both sides say they

will continue to work together on those campaigns. But the pointed attacks by some Republicans are notable, given that the party has worked hard to woo Catholic voters in recent years. Some analysts warn that such criticism of the church and of immigrants may alienate a critical voting bloc of largely immigrant origins. But others point out that, unlike their clergy, most white, non-Hispanic Catholics remain deeply divided over immigration, and a battle seems to be emerging for their hearts and minds.

There are political implications. In preparation for the 2004 presidential election, the Bush administration cultivated church leaders, organized more than 50,000 volunteers and hired staff members to reach out to Catholic voters. The goal was to break the traditional allegiance to the Democratic Party, an affiliation that began to crumble with Ronald Reagan.

The campaign bore fruit: In 2004, a majority of Catholics voted for a Republican presidential candidate for the first time in 16 years.

But some analysts warn that Republicans need to tread carefully when they criticize the church and illegal immigrants. "The danger of this situation politically is that you'll have an entire season in which Republican politicians are saying critical things about the Catholic hierarchy," said Deal Hudson, the Republican architect of the effort to court Catholic voters in 2004. "That's not going to be helpful in terms of keeping the coalition together."

But the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, a conservative journal about religion and public life, said he doubted that the disagreement would have much impact on Catholics. He said the sexual abuse scandals had already weakened the credibility of the church leadership in the minds of some Catholics.

Republicans and the Catholic clergy have differed before on other issues — like the war in Iraq and the death penalty — without deeply affecting parishioners. And Mr. Neuhaus noted that while Catholics often connect deeply with their immigrant history, some make clear distinctions between their parents and grandparents and the more recent arrivals from Latin America.

"My hunch is that if you remove from the bracket the approximately one-third of the Catholic population that is Hispanic, that probably most other Catholics would divide on this questions pretty much as the general population does," Father Neuhaus said.

The Catholic leaders are keenly aware of the divisions among the faithful on this issue. Seventy of the 197 Catholic dioceses have formally committed to the immigration campaign, and officials are working hard to recruit the others.

Leo Anchondo, who directs the immigrant campaign on behalf of the Catholic Conference of Bishops, said the cardinals and bishops were not surprised there was a backlash against such efforts.

"Immigration has unfortunately become a very controversial topic," he said.

But Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick of Washington said he and other leaders decided they could not stay silent after witnessing the hardships endured by illegal immigrants, particularly as the wave from Latin America has surged. "This is a justice issue," he said. "We feel you have to take care of people."

Mr. Sensenbrenner, the Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said Republicans had an obligation to clamp down on the border. To do otherwise, he said, would likely transform illegal immigrants into a permanent underclass in the United States.

That, he pointed out on "The O'Reilly Factor," was an undesirable option. "And I don't think it's Christian either," he said.