

## INTRODUCTION

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TO BE SURE, I am not a political scientist or theologian; nor do I study religion's role in politics with an academic's eye. But as a public official, a Democrat, and a Catholic, I do experience it firsthand on an almost daily basis. And so this article is not to be any kind of final analysis but rather something closer to a work in progress: I intend to offer a snapshot of my own faith and its effect on my work as a policy maker today. In the process, I hope to provide a practitioner's opinion on the role that religion ought to play in American democracy.

Religion is an integral part of our national discourse, and there is no doubt that it has played a key role in the last three presidential elections. It is clear that the perspectives and influence of religious communities weigh heavily on our policy debates, whether the issue is poverty, war, the environment, stem-cell research, or reproductive health. Often, this can be a constructive thing; these trends, in no small part, moved Catholic Democrats in the House of Representatives, including me, to draft a Statement of Principles declaring that our faith does have bearing on the broad range of issues that we champion in the Congress and in our communities. It also moved me to work with my colleague, Representative Tim Ryan of Ohio, to draft legislation that seeks common ground on the sensitive issue of abortion.

Other recent developments at the intersection of religion and public life, however, give me reason for concern: legitimate scientific conclusions manipulated toward ideological ends; religiously affiliated organizations allowed to discriminate with taxpayer dollars; and a communion controversy that flared up in 2004 and continues to threaten every Catholic politician's ability to participate in our faith's most sacred ritual. Indeed, too often religious faith has been used cynically as a political weapon and an election-day wedge. Our challenge today—in the Congress, in academia, and even for those in the Church's hierarchy—is to respond by presenting a better alternative.

As a result, I believe that religious faith can and should inform the work of our democracy. It can and should restore government's moral role in society—as long as it respects and promotes the dignity of every human person, calls us to work for the common good, unifies us into a community, and works within the confines of our Constitution and a pluralistic society.

Although these are simple and clear goals, it is also important to recognize that we pursue them in a complicated world and one that is experiencing a significant rise in religious extremism and intolerance. In his essay “Theologies of Democracy in a New Century,” E. J. Dionne expressed the dilemma this way: “Religion can create community, and it can divide communities. It can lead to searing self-criticism, and it can promote a pompous self-satisfaction. It can encourage dissent and conformity, generosity and narrow-mindedness.”

Those conflicting religious tendencies to unite and divide us are, in the public sphere, essentially tied up with government’s own contradictory impulses—its potential to bring people together and its history of tearing them apart. We policy makers and elected officials have a responsibility to confront and grapple with these tensions, to navigate this complicated territory deliberately and thoughtfully. And in the end, if we are able to integrate our religious principles into a public way of life—in other words, put our faith into action—we will then surely bring our faith and values into our public service.

Whether I realized it or not, that process began for me at an early age. I attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through college, where I learned to nourish my mind and my heart—to reach out, to work hard, to fulfill my potential, and to be whatever I wanted to be. But my Catholic upbringing and education also taught me the importance of trying to make a difference in my community and in the lives of our neighbors. In a bigger sense, it taught me the importance of giving something back to my world and to the people of that world.

### GROWING UP CATHOLIC IN THE 1960S

As the daughter of Italian immigrants growing up in New Haven’s Wooster Square neighborhood, I saw that it was the Church that bound us together as a community—in our schools and in our hospitals. Practicing our faith was important in my family. My father received communion daily and lived his faith with commitment. Our local parish was our community center where people gathered to share their lives and help one another. Every night around my family’s kitchen table, I saw how the Church could serve as the nexus between family and community. And I witnessed firsthand how my parents helped solve our neighbors’ problems.

Both my mother and father went on to serve as elected officials on the New Haven City Council—my mom for thirty-five years, finally retiring at age eighty-five as its longest-serving member. From their example, I learned the vital connections among family, faith, responsibility, and working for the common good. It was the idea that the values I learned at home and at church reached beyond those two places. I saw that we

could effect positive change at the community level. With that experience also came the understanding that government can and must play a critical role in lifting people up, helping them to make the most of their own abilities and to meet their responsibilities to one another.

In many ways, my own story is hardly unique. I believe that these shared values have helped guide America's policy makers over the course of our nation's history. Indeed, many of the economic and social achievements of the past century have their roots in a vision of opportunity and community and in a recognition of our obligations to one another. From the GI Bill to Medicaid and Medicare; from Head Start to food stamps; from the child tax credit to the Family Medical Leave Act, each was motivated by the need to ensure the common good.

I often point to the example of Social Security and the philosophy behind it, born in part out of FDR's appreciation for Catholic social teaching and Monsignor John Ryan's advocacy based on the social letters of Pope Pius XI and particularly Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, which served to inspire the progressive politics of the day. It read: "Among the several purposes of a society, one should try to arrange for . . . a fund out of which the members may be effectually helped in their needs, not only in the cases of accident, but also in sickness, old age, and distress."

Social Security is the public policy embodiment of those teachings—a declaration that our human rights are realized in community. Such sentiments are also expressed by FDR's own words to the Congress in 1934: "We are compelled to employ the active interest of the Nation as a whole through government in order to encourage a greater security for each individual who composes it."

For FDR, Social Security was one way we could promote and maintain our shared values, rewarding work and ensuring a decent retirement for those who have worked a lifetime. And by encouraging younger generations to take responsibility, Social Security reinforced the idea that, in America, we do not leave every man or woman to fend for himself or herself—and we do not tolerate the impoverishment of our senior population. In America, we meet our shared responsibility to one another.

By the time I came of age in the 1960s, these principles, this idea of the common good, had already taken hold both on the national stage and in my own heart and mind. This was a decade of great cultural and social change—a period that saw the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Great Society as well as the Second Vatican Council.

Of course, the decade began with the election of a new kind of leader, President John F. Kennedy. Indeed, if President Kennedy inspired a whole generation to take their civic duties seriously, he also created our operating norms for questions of faith in public life when he broke down the barriers that kept Catholics from the highest office of the land.

On September 12, 1960, then-Senator Kennedy answered skeptics worried about his Catholicism in a now-famous speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. He said simply, “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the President . . . how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote.”

He continued, “I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish—where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches, or any other ecclesiastical source.” His election affirmed the principle that our public life is enriched by the diversity of views and values that are nurtured in civil society and that are arbitrated in politics to a national conclusion.

I remember the tremendous optimism that accompanied so many momentous steps under Kennedy’s leadership to control nuclear arms, advance racial and gender equity, and ameliorate poverty. Both those goals and the values underpinning them would ultimately inspire me and my generation to bring our Catholic identities and values into our public lives for decades to come.

During the same period that our nation elected its first Catholic President, the Church undertook its own transformation. With the Second Vatican Council, we were called to integrate all aspects of our lives—called to live out our Christian vocation in the world and to address the urgent social and economic problems of our time. The temporal order of our lay lives was at once interconnected with our vocation as Christians.

As written in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*,

Let there, then, be no such pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on the one hand and religious life on the other. Christians who shirk their temporal duties shirk their duties towards his neighbor, neglect God himself, and endanger their eternal salvation. (GS43)

After the Second Vatican Council, things would never be the same, not just with the liturgical changes brought about by the Council but also in the way we understood church as “people of God” and the role of the laity. It was a profound call to be active participants in public life and agents of Christian living *in* the world, not away from it.

That made sense to me: I had seen it as a child. As committed Catholics, my parents lived out their faith in this way. They helped their neighbors, understanding that community was central and being in the right relationship with others was a sign of an active faith. They believed that faith was more about action and works than about words. The model

I grew up with is the model that inspired me to follow a life in public service.

#### THE POLITICS OF DIVISION: THE ELECTION OF 2004

A lot changed in the four decades that followed Kennedy's presidency and the Second Vatican Council—nothing more so than the relationship between faith and politics.

Whether you supported him or not, it is hard to deny that President George W. Bush's comfort with evangelical language and principles has affected our public discourse. Ever since he responded, in 1999, that Jesus Christ was the political philosopher and thinker with whom he most identified, it was clear that religion would become integral to the politics of his administration.

This was not the case when I came of age politically. According to the Pew Forum, in 1968, only 40 percent of Americans believed their houses of worship should express views on day-to-day social and political questions; 53 percent believed organized religion should keep out of politics. But something changed. Nearly three decades later, by the late 1990s, those numbers had flipped: 54 percent felt their churches had a role in politics, while only 43 percent said they should refrain from discussing politics from the pulpit.

Of course, by now the marriage of convenience between the religious right and the Republican Party has been well documented. But as Democratic members of Congress, we struggled to recognize and respond to that phenomenon. And by 2004, a new religious discourse reached its height of influence at the same time that many Democratic leaders had fallen out of practice in communicating their faith and connecting with religious communities. I never imagined how dramatically those trends would affect the way we elect a president.

To be sure, none of this came about overnight. The issue of abortion, for example, had long been at the center of discussions surrounding faith and politics. For years, many of my colleagues had lived with the issue in the most vivid ways. Since taking office, I had consistently voted to maintain a woman's right to choose an abortion—affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court; guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution; and supported by the majority of American voters.

Yet because of my legislative record on this one issue, I had been asked to resign from the board of a Catholic Women's High School and was even disinvited from events including a communion breakfast at a local parish. These incidents were hurtful. Although I did not challenge the Church's teaching on this critical issue, I was troubled by the Church's decision to use abortion and make it the sole issue of importance.

In the years preceding 2004, I had worked to raise awareness among my colleagues about faith's implications not just on one issue but on the broad range that we deal with as legislators. In an effort called *Public Voices*, I convened a series of panels and meetings on faith, values, and politics featuring columnist Ron Brownstein, journalist Joe Klein, political theorist Alan Wolfe, Rev. Jim Wallis, Michael Novak of AEI, and Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute. I hosted dinners in my home for my colleagues—all with the hope that some would recognize that, as Democrats, we had to communicate the values and faith that informed our work: we had to make the connection explicit; if not, others would do it for us. Unfortunately many of those meetings saw scant attendance.

Then one day in December 2003, shortly before Christmas, Rep. Nick Lampson of Texas and I discussed our common backgrounds growing up in Italian Catholic households, and before long we were talking about the current state of politics in our religion. We shared a similar frustration, and that spontaneous conversation led to us to bring our colleagues together in the hope of starting a dialogue about the role of our faith in our public lives. That is how we began our unofficial Catholic working group, inviting many guests from the faith and political worlds to speak to us and help us not only to tackle key and controversial issues but also to begin a discussion within our own Caucus.

Uniting us at these meetings as Catholics and Democrats was an understanding of the vital connection between faith and public service—the Catholic tradition we all had grown up with had given each of us a commitment to make a difference engaging in the social and political realm.

These conversations helped me to crystallize my own thoughts. I realized that I had never felt the need to “resolve” my religious faith with my career as a public servant. My church is part of who I am and what I value. Until the presidential election of 2004, it did not occur to me that my church would not be joyful about what I was trying to achieve for people from my role as a legislator.

Yet, for all our advancement and work guided by Catholic social teaching, we increasingly came to find ourselves, especially during the 2004 election, subject to scrutiny from some in the Church hierarchy and the media on but a single issue—abortion. That scrutiny took the form of a handful of bishops threatening to withhold the sacrament of communion based on one's support for a woman's right to choose. For many of us, first inspired by John F. Kennedy—a president who insisted that his religion would not dictate his politics—this threat served as a wake-up call.

Even if this line in the sand were the work of a few bishops, we understood it was time to take a stand. Their decision to single out some of us for our pro-choice position on abortion while failing to show significant interest in all we were doing to advance life and the Church's rich tradition of social justice felt out of balance. We worried it would

be ultimately damaging to the Church we loved. In a letter to Cardinal McCarrick in May 2004, forty-eight House Democrats wrote,

As Catholics, we do not believe it is our role to legislate the teachings of the Catholic Church. For any of us to be singled out by any bishop by the refusal of communion or other public criticism because we vote in what we believe are the requirements of the United States Constitution and laws of our country, which we are sworn to uphold, is deeply hurtful. We would remind those who would deny us participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist that we are sworn to represent all Americans, not just Catholics.

We felt a need to make clear that although some of us differ on the issue of abortion, each and every one of us was committed to the basic principles that are at the heart of Catholic doctrine. As such, when we met with Cardinal McCarrick after sending the letter, our message was simple, frank, and respectful: Democrats had no intention of ceding our faith to those who would use it as a political weapon or to exclude us from our own Catholic tradition. We expressed our belief that religion was being used as a divisive tactic and that the Church's leadership should not embrace that kind of strategy.

We found Cardinal McCarrick to be a caring and spiritual pastor—someone who represented the Church's teaching but at the same time understood the hurt and confusion we were experiencing. Later, we were encouraged when Cardinal McCarrick, speaking at a meeting among Bishops at a Denver conference, expressed concern that if withholding Holy Communion from politicians became a practice, "the sacred nature of the Eucharist might be turned into a partisan political background. Our task force does not advocate the denial of Communion for Catholic politicians or Catholic voters in these circumstances . . . We do not want to encourage confrontations at the altar rail with the body of the Lord Jesus in our hands."

We may have been successful in preventing the church from endorsing such a radical stance as denial of communion at large. Yet the politicization of Catholicism proved effective for the Bush campaign in the 2004 election—from threatening to deny communion to pro-choice politicians like John Kerry to a concerted effort by the Republican Party to use the Church as a political organizing tool in key battleground states. And the result was a serious defection among Catholics to vote Republican. Democrats lost the Catholic vote 52 to 47 percent, with 14 percent of white Catholics who voted for Bill Clinton in 1996 choosing *not* to vote for John Kerry.

With those results and the new reality they signaled, our unofficial Catholic working group, including Members on both sides of the abortion debate, began to realize the need to engage in a more reflective

process. In the first six months of 2005, we held numerous sessions with academics, Catholic thinkers, and theologians to help us process, reflect, and decide on a path of action

That led us to loudly challenge the Administration's federal budgets that consistently proposed to cut essential programs for working families and the poor. For many of us, brought up in the tradition of Catholic social teaching, the federal budget should reflect our values and advance the moral responsibilities of government. Yet, in reality, these budgets, especially those following President Bush's reelection in 2004, *offended* the common good. Budget after budget, the Administration's proposals targeted important agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services squarely behind the bulls eye for drastic cuts.

The budget released in early 2005, for example, increased tax cuts for the wealthy by \$106 billion over five years while it dramatically cut funding for vital human needs programs. Among the most damaging were \$10 billion taken from Medicaid as well as \$212 billion in cuts to domestic discretionary spending over five years—including funding for child nutrition, student loans, pensions, vocational rehabilitation, Head Start, and child care. The Church would no doubt send letters to Congress against these cuts. It understood that the Bush budgets represented a threat to working people with the lowest incomes and sent the wrong message to the world about our nation's values.

Yet we felt the need to go beyond simply highlighting the connection between budgets and values. One morning in July 2005, we gathered to discuss what to do next and what to do about the fact that Democrats were still being portrayed as godless heathens by those who disagreed with our political views.

We Catholic Democrats had been meeting for nearly two years. We had already written Cardinal McCarrick and met with him. And we felt a strong and deep conviction that much was at stake for the country as well as for our tradition of religious pluralism. The time had come to speak up and speak clearly on this complex and highly personal matter, to make clear that ours was a vibrant moral agenda that speaks to a broad array of issues informed by our faith, and to do so with a newfound boldness and energy.

So we drafted the following statement of principles, which was signed by fifty-five Catholic Democrats:

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES  
BY FIFTY-FIVE CATHOLIC DEMOCRATS IN THE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

As Catholic Democrats in Congress, we are proud to be part of the living Catholic tradition—a tradition that promotes the common good, expresses a consistent moral framework for life and highlights



the need to provide a collective safety net to those individuals in society who are most in need. As legislators, in the U.S. House of Representatives, we work every day to advance respect for life and the dignity of every human being. We believe that government has moral purpose.

We are committed to making real the basic principles that are at the heart of Catholic social teaching: helping the poor and disadvantaged, protecting the most vulnerable among us, and ensuring that all Americans of every faith are given meaningful opportunities to share in the blessings of this great country. That commitment is fulfilled in different ways by legislators but includes: reducing the rising rates of poverty; increasing access to education for all; pressing for increased access to health care; and taking seriously the decision to go to war. Each of these issues challenges our obligations as Catholics to community and helping those in need.

We envision a world in which every child belongs to a loving family and agree with the Catholic Church about the value of human life and the undesirability of abortion—we do not celebrate its practice. Each of us is committed to reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies and creating an environment with policies that encourage pregnancies to be carried to term. We believe this includes promoting alternatives to abortion, such as adoption, and improving access to children's healthcare and child care, as well as policies that encourage paternal and maternal responsibility.

In all these issues, we seek the Church's guidance and assistance but believe also in the primacy of conscience. In recognizing the Church's role in providing moral leadership, we acknowledge and accept the tension that comes with being in disagreement with the Church in some areas. Yet we believe we can speak to the fundamental issues that unite us as Catholics and lend our voices to changing the political debate—a debate that often fails to reflect and encompass the depth and complexity of these issues.

As legislators, we are charged with preserving the Constitution, which guarantees religious freedom for all Americans. In doing so, we guarantee our right to live our own lives as Catholics, but also foster an America with a rich diversity of faiths. We believe the separation of church and state allows for our faith to inform our public duties.

As Catholic Democrats who embrace the vocation and mission of the laity as expressed by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation,

*Christifideles Laici*, we believe that the Church is the “people of God,” called to be a moral force in the broadest sense. We believe the Church as a community is called to be in the vanguard of creating a more just America and world. And as such, we have a claim on the Church’s bearing as it does on ours.

To be clear, we were aware that some would accuse us of political opportunism—of trying to broaden the Democratic Party’s appeal by reframing the abortion debate. But I believe our statement came out of a deeper reality than that. I know it came from a desire to rescue the Catholic faith as we had lived it from those who would take it from us. It came from the experiential recognition that others were defining us by seeking to dissolve the connection between our party’s public priorities and the values that have always guided them.

And so as much as the statement was an acknowledgment that faith does matter in today’s public discourse, more importantly it was a means for us to define *ourselves*—to declare that our Catholic faith has bearing on the broad range of issues that we champion here in the Congress and in our communities. It was a way to communicate to the public not only the principles that guide us but also to make explicit their policy implications on everything from increasing access to education for all and pressing for real health care reform to taking seriously the decisions to go to war and to reduce poverty.

The document was also motivated by a broad agreement that so many of the decisions being made by this Congress have clear social and moral implications that directly contradict our values as Catholics. These include decisions that have benefited the few at the expense of the larger community and have made it harder for parents to raise their children and balance the pressures of work and family. This latter issue includes everything from our lack of investment in health care to neglect of child care and education.

Our Statement of Principles offered a powerful tool to engage a potentially polarizing landscape in a constructive way. It marked the beginning of a newfound unity among Catholic Democrats in Congress and also started a long overdue conversation about how we should be communicating our faith. But the greatest challenge ahead lay in translating that unity from principles to practice, finding common ground not just in big statements but on real policy solutions.

#### TOWARD A POLITICS OF UNITY

We knew our statement would evoke a mixed response. In the National Catholic Reporter Sister Joan Chittister saw a complicated history behind

our words: “We are into theological stew like we haven’t seen for decades. Take one part ‘primacy of conscience,’ add one part ‘people of God,’ salt with ‘as much bearing on the church as the church has on ours’ and stir. Depending on how you see it, that is either a recipe for renewal or a recipe for revolution.”

For her, that struck a chord: “From where I stand, it seems to me that the laity of the church has heard the church’s recognition of the ‘lay vocation.’ And, furthermore, they are beginning to take it seriously.”

But certainly, not everyone embraced our efforts. The religious right failed to see our Statement of Principles outside of the usual black-and-white framework they had grown accustomed to and instead pushed back against the idea that anyone serious about her faith could also be a serious member of the Democratic Party. The Catholic League ridiculed our words and announced that we were “driven by fear.” Yet, that is not how we felt at all. Instead, it seemed as if there were something new and exciting on the horizon, and the politics of division were about to change.

Throughout 2006, Congressman Tim Ryan of Ohio and I worked together to introduce *The Reducing the Need for Abortion and Supporting Parents Act* in September of that year. Although one might call Congressman Ryan “pro-life” or antiabortion, and I am staunchly in favor of a woman’s right to choose, we both recognized something elemental about the abortion debate—that it was time to forge consensus and find common ground. We recognized that a majority of the American people still support *Roe v. Wade*. And despite our differences, we both want to see fewer abortions, not more—and we understood that the first step toward making that possible was helping women never to have to come to that decision in the first place.

Our bill focused on the need to reduce abortion in our country while at the same time it provided supports for new parents to strengthen their families. The bill’s language makes clear that those of us who support the right to choose do not “celebrate abortion,” as some have suggested. It simply says that absent prevention, absent contraception, and absent family planning, you simply cannot reduce the rate of abortion. In addition our bill asserts that there is much positive action we can take in this arena by improving access to safe, affordable, and effective contraceptive methods; by restoring the Medicaid entitlement to coverage of Family Planning Services; and by providing grants to states to reduce teen pregnancy.

It also creates an environment that encourages pregnancies to be carried to term, promoting alternatives to abortion, such as adoption, as well as improving access to children’s health care and child care. By providing a comprehensive approach to this issue—from increased funding for child care assistance to after-school programs to nutritional support

through food stamps—our legislation promotes real parental responsibility once the child is born. And it does so by reducing the economic pressures that can sometimes cause a woman to decide against carrying a pregnancy to term.

Of all the important goals this legislation can help us reach, perhaps the most important is simple forward progress beyond the question of legality and toward actually reducing the need for abortion. Our goal has been to break the stalemate and show that Catholics not only are ready to take action on this critical issue but are ready to lead.

The fact is that by the second half of the second Bush term, the religious right's influence had begun to wane. As the president's popularity and credibility began to unravel—which some would say started with his failed and misguided drive to privatize Social Security and the government's botched response to Hurricane Katrina—Democrats were able to regain the Congress in the midterm elections of 2006 and begin to set a new direction for the country.

Again, E. J. Dionne described it as “part of a larger decline of style of ideological conservatism that reached high points in 1980 and 1994 but suffered a series of decisive—and I believe fatal—setbacks during George W. Bush's second term.”

This decline created an opportunity and an urgency for Democrats to provide an alternative. And in a significant way, religious Democrats learning the lessons of the 2004 election were in a much better position to tell their story and share their experiences.

Indeed, with the new majority in Congress came new opportunities to push forward the common-ground agenda on abortion we Catholic Democrats and others had been working toward. We sought new ways to make our legislation a reality. And in Representative David Obey, Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, we found someone who understood what Tim Ryan and I were trying to achieve. With his support, we were able to include several new programs and increased funding in the fiscal year 2008 Health and Human Services Spending Bill—for programs such as Title X, Healthy Start, teen pregnancy prevention, adoption awareness, after-school programs, and child-care programs for new parents attending college, just to name a few. This was welcome news after more than six years of stagnant funding in these areas.

What is more, this was evidence that we were not just going to talk about common ground but that we could actually find our way there as policy makers. So by the time the Democratic Party, now led by Senator Barack Obama, approved its platform in 2008 in Denver, it included new language specifically about reducing the need for abortion:

The Democratic Party also strongly supports access to affordable family planning services and comprehensive age-appropriate sex

education which empower people to make informed choices and live healthy lives. We also recognize that such health care and education help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and thereby also reduce the need for abortions.

The Democratic Party also strongly supports a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre- and postnatal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs.

An effort that began not long ago as an informal conversation and a working group among my peers was now essentially codified by our party as integral to its core philosophy. It certainly marked new territory for our party.

But beyond the abortion issue, there was also a new understanding that attacks from the right would not go unanswered. When the Catholic League's President Bill Donohue described Barack Obama's Catholic council as a bunch of "Catholic dissidents" for diverging from the Vatican line, as Democrats, we refused to take the insult silently. We pushed back publicly. I signed a letter with more than three dozen elected officials, academics, and community leaders; in it we called out Donohue directly for his history of divisive rhetoric:

Mr. Donohue, your work to fight legitimate cases of anti-Catholic bigotry in this country should be applauded. But when you smear other Catholics with whom you disagree, you betray your own cause. Our measure of what it means to be a "good" Catholic is not defined by the narrow pronouncements of partisan operatives; but rather by the rich teachings of our Church and our informed consciences.

But playing defense was only half the battle. And if the Obama campaign was engaged in responding to the politics of division by not letting any attack go unanswered, they were also busy crafting something much bigger and lasting—a new narrative of unity. And our new conversation about faith would be a part of it.

This narrative was not entirely new—it was the culmination of a process. Of course, we know those themes had taken root during Obama's star-making 2004 Democratic Convention speech. But it was not long before they began to really take flight. In 2006 before the Call to Renewal Conference in Washington, we could see the blueprint coming to life:

When we ignore the debate about what it means to be a good Christian or Muslim or Jew; when we discuss religion only in the negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced, rather than in the positive sense of what it tells us about our obligations towards one another; when we shy away from religious venues and religious broadcasts because we assume that we will be unwelcome, others

will fill the vacuum, those with the most insular views of faith, or those who cynically use religion to justify partisan ends.

And so two years later, by the time we had reached the general election, it was the Democrat, not his Republican opponent, who was widely considered to be the so-called “faith” candidate. And he would call on that faith differently—not to divide people but to bring them together.

Obama turned away from the hot-button culture wars and instead has turned consistently to the big challenges of these historic times to apply the values and guidance of his faith. Like our Catholic Working Group, he made the point that honoring his core beliefs was less about standing in the right place on a few narrowly defined issues and more about moving forward on a broad range of issues that affect people’s families every day.

“My faith teaches me that I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won’t be fulfilling God’s will unless I go out and do the Lord’s work,” Obama said shortly after becoming the presumptive nominee in June 2008.

And he captured a growing desire in the American people to get the big things right. A Faith in Public Life poll released the week after the 2008 election showed that religious voters want a broad agenda. Only 20 percent of evangelicals and 12 percent of Catholics say an agenda focused primarily on abortion and same-sex marriage best reflects their values. All religious groups in 2008 ranked the economy as their top priority.

During the fall of 2008, I traveled to battleground states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio to campaign for Barack Obama. And everywhere I went—senior centers, community centers, and diners, with small groups of undecided voters or at big rallies of Obama supporters, with groups of Catholic voters or often Italian-American gatherings—people everywhere wanted to hear our plan to steer the economy back in the right direction: health care and education, vibrant communities, and a strong safety net. With America facing an economic crisis greater than any since the Great Depression, a middle class hit hard by job insecurity, stagnant wages, rising health care costs, and a financial market in crisis, they wanted a leader who shared their values, understood their aspirations, and honored their hard work.

In November 2008, Obama won 54 percent of Catholic votes—an increase of 7 percent over John Kerry’s showing in 2004. And even though he only won 26 percent of evangelical and born-again voters, that number was up 5 percent from 2004 as well. To me the results served as an affirmation that voters were searching not for just one or two divisive issues to dominate the public discourse but for political and policy debates to be framed in terms of values shared by all Americans. I believe this understanding represents the foundation that our nation’s new leadership has set out to build on today.

I know that as we try to restore our economy and, with it, the middle class, no investment is more critical than the one we make in our human capital—the investment we make in our *one* human family and our society's ability to give its people work and purpose and willingness to take care of its most vulnerable.

The relationship between faith and politics has changed significantly since the 1960s when I first considered its impact on my life and our democracy. But people continue to hunger for authentic leadership that promises to strengthen our communities and make opportunity real. It has always been that way—a simple yearning for leaders who share a common purpose for the common good. Growing up in Wooster Square, I saw it around our dinner table. In 1960, I saw it in John F. Kennedy inspiring a nation to dream, to sacrifice, and to serve. And I see it right now, even in these challenging days, a new hope and honest faith that hard work will mean progress once again.