EDITORIAL

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Let clergy preach from pulpit

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The hoary issue of religion and politics has entered the political campaign in Connecticut in a new way. Witness the clergy lining up to take sides.

Hartford Archbishop John F. Whealon made a much publicized shift of his registration from one party to the other, and then embraced the Republican candidate at the chancery office in Hartford. Now, perhaps partially in reaction to Whealon's action, a group of Clergy for Dukakis has claimed some of the local political limelight, with a press conference staged by the Dukakis campaign.

That some clergy should publicly associate themselves with some candidates is not new. We all knew how a Cardinal Francis Spellman or a Rev. William Sloane Coffin would vote. Likewise, the political allegiances of Vietnam-era anti-war activists, like the Rev. Daniel Berrigan, or new rightists such as the Rev. Jerry Falwell, are a matter of common knowledge.

But endorsing specific political candidates, as the archbishop in effect did when he met with George Bush, and as the Clergy for Dukakis has done directly, is something of a departure in the public practice of mainstream Catholic and Protestant clergy in recent decades. Hitherto such clergy have usually restricted themselves to addressing issues, not endorsing candidates.

This is a matter of concern. Never mind the apparent contradictions involved: In the name of "right to life," Whealon has embraced a candidate who gleefully champions the death penalty. Members of Clergy for Dukakis, many of whom have championed the cause of the urban poor in Hartford, have now publicly embraced a campaign that seems to be selling its soul in quest of anti-urban Reagan Democrats.

The concern, rather, is how much the clergy can play the media game and come away winners, not losers. If moral issues are nothing else, they are complex. Whether such issues can be addressed with any seriousness in a 30-second TV bite is questionable. It is also doubtful that the clergy's endorsement of candidates for the sake of bites on the nightly news can highlight any moral issue. Rather, such bites will be drowned in a sea of media glitz, from the sensationalism of the latest local murder story to the sentimentalism of some saga about whales in Alaska.

Contrast the approach taken by the Catholic bishops in issuing their statement on economic justice. It was a cumbersome process. It took years of study, hearings and revisions before the statement was issued. The document is long. It takes time and effort to read and understand it. The bishops did not endorse any partisan political philosophy, much less any candidate. But their statement will surely be remembered long after the bites of the latest campaign have been forgotten. And rightly so.

I'm not saying that the clergy should stay away from politics. That is the position taken mainly by religionists who prefer the clergy to bless the cornerstones of the established order, rather than publicly address moral issues that shake its foundations. Insightful documents, such as the bishops' pastoral, place the Christian community squarely in the midst of the public policy debate on behalf of the poor.

Maybe the much-sought-after bite-parts on the nightly news will never be anything more than glitz. Maybe the clergy should stay in their pulpits, where they do have time to address complicated issues thoughtfully and with informed passion.

The question is not whether the church and its clergy should be engaged with political issues, but how.

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