

For God and Mr. Nixon

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By WILLIAM V. SHANNON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 16—The Nixon Administration's lengthy and assiduous courtship of Catholic voters is one of the remarkable features of the political scene. The latest gesture was its endorsement of a Democratic-sponsored bill to give a \$200 tax credit to parents of children in parochial and private schools.

A year ago this month, President Nixon told the Knights of Columbus in New York: "In your fight to save your schools, you can count on my support."

On April 10, he went to Philadelphia to repeat that pledge to the National Catholic Educational Association's annual convention.

Financial help for parents of children in church-related schools—83 per cent of such children are in Catholic schools—is only one of the Administration's many pro-Catholic moves. Consider these other items:

Two weeks ago, the Administration announced that 41 private schools and colleges damaged by Tropical Storm Agnes would receive money from the President's disaster relief fund to pay for their reconstruction. Twenty-seven of them are Catholic primary and secondary schools.

Two years ago, the President appointed John D. Rockefeller 3d and 23 other distinguished citizens to serve on a Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. When the commission finished its work on May 5, the President issued a statement rejecting much of its report. "I consider abortion an unacceptable form of population control. . . . I do not support the unrestricted distribution of family planning services and devices to minors," he declared.

When repeal of New York's permissive abortion statute was pending before the State Legislature, the President intervened on the anti-abortion side with a letter to Cardinal Cooke.

President Nixon has Henry Cabot Lodge, his 1960 running mate, in Rome as his personal envoy to the Vatican.

He has retained a Jesuit priest on the White House staff.

Viewing these actions, Democratic politicians shake their heads in envy. As one of them remarked the other day, "Nixon is doing things Jack Kennedy could never dream of trying. Can you imagine the uproar if Kennedy had come out for parochial school aid or put a Jesuit on his staff or sent that abortion letter to the Cardinal?"

Matthew Troy, the Queens County Democratic chairman, wisecracked recently, "Nixon's done everything except say mass."

The Catholic community is not a political monolith. A substantial majority of Catholics, however, used to vote Democratic. Beginning in the late nineteen-thirties during the controversy over the Spanish Civil War, the minority of Catholics voting Republican grew appreciably. General Eisenhower made further inroads.

In 1960, however, the Democratic vote among Catholics rose sharply when John F. Kennedy was the candidate. It stayed high in 1964, perhaps because President Johnson was seen as carrying on the Kennedy policies, and again in 1968, partly because Senator Edmund S. Muskie, a Catholic, was the Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee. In choosing first Senator Eagleton and then Sargent Shriver for Vice President, Senator McGovern also picked a Catholic running mate.

President Nixon, like a fair number of other non-Catholics, undoubtedly opposes abortion and favors aid to church-related schools on philosophical grounds. There is nothing unusual in the hope of G.O.P. political strategists to translate these positions into additional Catholic votes.

When the President's gestures are closely examined, however, they are all curiously insubstantial. Although he retains Ambassador Lodge in Vatican City, for example, the President completely disregards Pope Paul's urgent pleas to end the Vietnam war and to stop the killing and the creation of new refugees.

Mr. Nixon's opposition to abortion is symbolic and has little practical effect. Abortion is an issue decided not by the Federal Government but by the states, as Governor Rockefeller demonstrated when he vetoed abortion repeal despite Mr. Nixon's letter.

Although a strong argument can be made for Federal aid to church schools, a \$200 tax credit is not going to save foundering parochial schools. Since the average cost of educating a child is \$930 a year, a credit would have to be three to four times larger than what the President has endorsed to be of decisive help to hard-pressed Catholic parents.

Will any of this money actually be forthcoming? Caspar Weinberger, the Budget Director, warned the Ways and Means Committee that since the Administration wants no tax increase and a rigid budget ceiling, any help for parochial school parents should be financed by cutting existing Federal aid to public schools. Put in those terms, the bill could set off the kind of parochial vs. public school Donnybrook which killed Federal aid to education bills for twenty years.