

NATIONAL

Christian Coalition launches Catholic spinoff

By Charles M. Sennott
Boston Globe

BOSTON — They were waiting last night for the coming of Ralph Reed, the head of the Christian Coalition, which wants to bring Catholics into the fold of the largely Protestant, evangelical right through a new spinoff called the Catholic Alliance.

With the snow falling outside and the packed ballroom at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel growing anxious, the moderator suggested that a "moment of silent prayer" might be in order.

While the crowd of 400 bowed their heads in prayer for the safe arrival of Reed, he stood outside in the foyer, beaming like a choirboy for photographers and chatting with U.S. Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill. The Christian Coalition, founded by Pat Robertson, the evangelical broadcaster, chose predominantly Catholic Boston to kick off the first in a series of gatherings nationwide aimed at launching the coalition's "wholly owned subsidiary," as Reed refers to the Catholic Alliance.

The alliance, which has no connection to the Roman Catholic Church, was formed this fall to enlist Catholics in the religious right's opposition to abortion and gay rights.

Catholics and evangelical Protestants could find common ground, Reed said, in opposing abortion and pornography, and supporting school choice and the belief that "the family is the most important unit in society."

But it remains unclear how a conservative political lobby rooted in the South and struggling to shed an image as white zealots led by divisive televangelists will be received in a largely ethnic population in the Northeast, confirmed in its cultural identity as Catholic and historically Democratic.

Although the Catholic Church has taken no official position on the Christian Coalition's new division for Catholics, many Catholic leaders criticized the Coalition, stressing that its political stands were radically opposed to the policies of the U.S. Catholic Conference, which calls for compassion for the poor and new immigrants, and strong

opposition to the death penalty.

Reed stressed the political power that could result from a merger of conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants: "America's 58 million Roman Catholics are now the swing votes in American politics. And whoever wins that vote will be able to govern America for the rest of this century and into the next century."

Despite the sizable crowd in the chandelied ballroom, not all of those who paid \$25 to attend were Catholic. Mike Russell, national director of "media planning" for the Virginia-based Christian Coalition, said, "There's no litmus test at the door, so we don't know. But I would say certainly the majority."

Frank Flynn, a Peabody Republican ward chairman and a Catholic, disagreed. "I would say between 30 and 50 percent, at best," he said.

"These are not exactly the faces that you see at Mass on Sunday, if you know what I mean."

Sister Mary Carol Bennett, of an Interfaith Alliance chapter in Penn-

sylvania, said, "Their message is divisive and exclusive. It is solely for political purposes. That is why we, as Catholics, have to speak out against this misuse of religion."

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