



JFK, Catholicism, and Politics

Everyone knew the Democrats were running not only against the Republicans, but against history when they nominated Kennedy to be the party's candidate for President in 1960. The last time the party had dared to nominate a Catholic, Gov. Al Smith of New York lost in a landslide to Herbert Hoover in 1928. Although many Catholics at the time attributed the outcome to anti-Catholic bigotry, the religious issue probably had much less impact on the voting than the prosperity that was being enjoyed under Republican administrations during the 1920s and was still rolling along rather handsomely on Election Day, 1928. Catholics might have been relieved that there was no Catholic chief executive in the White House when the stock market crashed less than a year later. For surely the soothsayers in the press and among the general public would have discerned the crash was an act of God to punish the rebellious nation for voting for a Catholic who favored the repeal of Prohibition. Once again, it was said, the people had voted against the three "R's" — "Rum, Rome and Rebellion."

Only the solid South went solidly Democratic, their natural fear of things Catholic being overcome by dread of things Republican, of which the Southerners had suffered more direct experience. The rest of the "Bible belt" went solidly for Herbert Hoover.

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In 1956, Kennedy tried to win the vice presidential nomination at the Democratic National Convention after Adlai Stevenson, running for the second time at the top of the ticket, decided to leave the choice of running mate up to the delegates. It was a risky decision for the former Illinois Governor, since he was already plagued by an image of indecisiveness, a point Sen. Richard Nixon made in his famous "Checkers speech" in 1952, even as the Republican standard-bearer, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was conspicuously not deciding whether he would keep Nixon as his running mate after allegations were aired that Nixon had established a slush fund of corporate contributions designed to ensure that he would live comfortably on the campaign trail.

The Kennedy family battled fiercely to win the nomination for Jack, but the delegates opted for Sen. Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, who had campaigned for the presidential nomination and lost to Stevenson. Again, God was smiling on his Irish Catholic sons. Eisenhower was going to win a second term, most likely by a landslide, no matter who ran with Stevenson. But if a Catholic had been on the ticket, undoubtedly Catholicism would have been blamed for the magnitude of the Stevenson defeat and the number of House, Senate, and gubernatorial candidates it dragged down with the national ticket. John F. Kennedy gave a gracious concession speech and began laying plans for 1960.

If God was not on Kennedy's side, the demographics were. Catholic ethnics were becoming increasingly numerous in the large industrial states that were rich in electoral votes. In some states they were a majority. In others they were a large enough bloc to swing any election. And though many Catholics outside the South, and even in a few Southern states, had voted for Eisenhower, they could be counted on to vote as a bloc for Kennedy, once his religion became an issue. And while a few Southern and border states might break in the Republicans' direction, most of the South would remain solidly Democratic.

So while the Northeast, with its heavy Catholic population, would likely go for Kennedy, a Massachusetts liberal, and the South would continue to be loyally Democratic, the West and Midwest were up for grabs. But even in the heartland of liberalism, in the city of New York, there was an anticipated backlash to the presidential candidacy of a Roman Catholic. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale,



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best-selling author, media star, and pastor of a large and influential Manhattan congregation, led a large number of Protestant ministers throughout the country in issuing a statement questioning the wisdom of putting a Catholic in the White House. The statement raised the issue of a de facto religious establishment, with the President taking directions from the pope on issues ranging from contraception to federal aid to parochial schools. For neither the first nor last time the issue of "divided loyalty" was raised, with the suggestion that a Catholic chief executive would be torn between his loyalty to his faith and the Catholic hierarchy and his oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States.

The statement did not dredge up any of the wild-eyed claims that no doubt circulated in and emanated from the fever swamps of American life. It did not attack the morality of priests or nuns, did not accuse parochial schools of being un-American or repeat the claim made during Al Smith's campaign that if the Democrat were victorious the pope would move into the White House. Indeed, the popular saying in 1928 was that the pontiff already had his bags packed and travel plans made. In his concession speech, the always-witty Smith announced he had sent a telegram to the pope. "Unpack!" it read.

There were a few crackpot claims in 1960 about what a Kennedy victory might mean, some of them serious, some obviously not. One that was said to have provoked no small amount of laughter from the Senator himself was the charge that the Kennedys were already stringing together bowling balls for a rosary for the Statue of Liberty. But the statement by the Protestant clergy was serious and respectful and made no claims, whatever the ministers might have thought about it, concerning the truth or falsehood of the Catholic faith. Stevenson, who was neither Catholic nor a candidate, nonetheless dismissed the concerns of Dr. Peale and company with characteristic humor. "I find Paul appealing and Peale appalling," the erudite Stevenson quipped.

Kennedy could not afford to be so cavalier about the issues raised in the ministers' public statement. It was bound to raise concerns among other serious-minded Protestants and would give cover to out-and-out bigots for a religious campaign against the Senator. But while the statement posed dangers, it also offered the candidate a golden opportunity to present himself again to the nation as someone who was not the Roman Catholic nominee for President, but the Democratic candidate, who was also a Roman Catholic.

In a sense, Kennedy could have it both ways. He could benefit by enjoying the nearly unanimous support of Catholics caught up in a wave of ethnic and religious pride, while at the same time appealing to Protestants and others to be fair-minded. That, essentially, is what he did in his speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. Kennedy noted that "contrary to common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President, who happens also to be a Catholic."

Who "happens" also to be a Catholic? Though little was said about it at the time, that rhetorical flourish contained the seeds of discontent among serious-minded members of Kennedy's own faith. Was his Catholicism purely a matter of happenstance? Or was he also a Catholic by conviction? Surely, John Fitzgerald Kennedy could not help the fact that in his infancy he was baptized into the Catholic Church. But he was an intelligent and well read man and there was reason to wonder if there were any room in his roving, curious, often skeptical mind for the teachings of the Catholic faith. Or were they merely things he inherited and grew up with, like his wavy hair, blue eyes, and Boston accent? Catholics who wondered about such things at the time were probably few in number and they may well have concluded that Kennedy phrased things the way he did simply because he was saying what he had to say to get elected. One might put in the same category what we might assume were Kennedy's carefully



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calculated stands against appointing an ambassador to the Vatican and against federal aid to parochial schools.

But years later people would revisit that speech and find it overly deferential, as if Kennedy were pleading that, after all, he could not help it that he had been born into a Catholic family and baptized and raised in the Catholic faith. Within a decade of that speech and a scant half dozen years after Kennedy's death, William F. Buckley Jr., a fellow Catholic, would write that Kennedy seemed to be presenting his Catholicism as an "accident of birth." That may be unduly harsh. Kennedy obviously wanted to make the issue one of fairness, so he tried to make it appear that an individual American was no more personally responsible for his religious faith than for the color of his skin.

"But if this election," he said, "is decided on the basis that 40 million Americans lost their chance of being President on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole nation that will be the loser in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history and in the eyes of our own people." But Kennedy also went further than he needed to in assuring both to the ministers gathered before him and to his fellow Americans everywhere that he was not looking to establish a Catholic America.

"I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute," he said, going farther than even the American Civil Liberties Union has ever gone in the direction of militant secularism. But Kennedy did well to remind the reverend clergy and others of the provision in the original Constitution, preceding even the Bill of Rights, that forbids a religious test for holding religious office. He did well also to remind them that when he and his brothers served in World War II, no one suggested that a possible "divided loyalty" prevented them and other American Catholics from putting their lives on the line for their country. And he made a telling point when he spoke of having visited the Alamo in San Antonio earlier that day and noticed that the roster of those who died with Bowie and Crockett included names of men like Fuentes and McCafferty and Bailey and Bedillo and Carey. But no one knows if they were Catholics, he said. "For there was no religious test there."

Kennedy said he believed in an America "where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners how to vote." He also made the following promise:

Whatever issue may come before me as President, if I should be elected — on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject — I will make my decisions in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictate. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.

It is on this point, and on that rhetoric in particular, that Catholics and others have since expressed concern about Kennedy's statement on the role of religion in public life. As Catholic columnist Russell Shaw noted in the August/September 2010 issue of *The Catholic World Report*, Kennedy's statement "reduces the criterion of right and wrong to national interest — a proposition that would have delighted Machiavelli. Still more, the appropriate instrument for determining where national interest lies is said to be the private judgment of a president, unhampered by objective moral principle, moral doctrine or anything else."

That may, however, be reading either more or less into the candidate's statement than what he actually said. For Kennedy also said he would, in formulating his view of the national interest on any difficult



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issue, act "in accordance with what my conscience tells me." One would assume that the conscience of a Catholic in 1960, though perhaps less so today, would be informed by "objective moral principle" and "moral doctrine." Still, Shaw makes a valid and interesting point.

Suppose Kennedy were President today and was, as a great many people say they are, "personally opposed to abortion." But suppose his political judgment informed him that overturning *Roe v. Wade* would cause more civil turmoil, leading perhaps even to riots, than it would resolve. Would his conscience and his sense of the national interest permit him to go against that "objective moral law" and defend the legalized killing one million or two million unborn babies a year?

Suppose as President, he had determined that the national interest would be served by invading Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis, even at the risk of igniting World War III and even if he did not have sufficient reason to launch such an invasion under any reasonable interpretation of the Christian "just war" doctrine. Would he have forsaken moral principle and moral doctrine and ordered the invasion? Suppose the Soviet Union invaded West Berlin. Would he have given the order to drop nuclear bombs on Moscow, incinerating perhaps hundreds of thousands, based on the national interest as determined by his own private conscience?

According to Catholic teaching, each person's conscience is not strictly a private matter. A Catholic has an obligation to inform his conscience in accordance with church teachings. Those are readily available at minimum effort to any conscientious Catholic, much less one as learned and powerful as John F. Kennedy was. That fewer Catholics bother to follow or even learn what the Catholic Church says about the critical moral issues of our time reflects, in part, the legacy of JFK's stand before the ministers in Houston.

Thus, many Catholics in the years and decades since the *Roe v. Wade* decision have decided it is perfectly acceptable for them to support maintaining the legal status of abortion while remaining Catholics, supposedly in good standing with the Catholic Church. That was the position taken by, among others, the late President's younger brother, Senator Edward Moore Kennedy. It is the position still taken by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Sen. Christopher Dodd, and so many other Catholics in private as well as public life.

It is the attitude expressed by General Wesley Clark when he ran for the Democratic nomination for President in 2004. Defending his "pro-choice" position during a nationally televised forum at Saint Anselm College (a Catholic institution), he said: "I know what the party line is, but I have freedom of conscience." It is the attitude of countless Catholics who have signs on their lawns proclaiming their support for candidates pledged to defend a "woman's right to choose."

John F. Kennedy was very much a child of post-Enlightenment 20th-century America in an age where progress was often marked by extensions of the presumed right of the individual to be free in his or her private life from institutional coercion or control. But Clark had become a convert to Catholicism long after the Catholic Church had concluded the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which had produced, among other things, a Declaration on Religious Liberty. Father John Courtney Murray, a Jesuit priest who led the way in the adoption of that document, would later say the idea that "I have a right to do what my conscience tells me to do, simply because my conscience tells me to do it" is a "perilous theory" leading to subjectivism, and is not at all what the Council taught.

We need not go back very far in history to see where the Kennedy-Clark doctrine on a ruler and his conscience might very well take us. A baptized Catholic who abandoned his faith became ruler of a



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great nation not quite 80 years ago and pursued what he perceived as the national interest, according to his own conscience, a conscience that did not acknowledge or accept the restraints of any external authority. He started World War II and the world is still recovering from that devastation.

Speaking last March at Houston Baptist University, Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver said Kennedy was not wrong in 1960 to speak up for the patriotism of American Catholics. But, he was, the archbishop said, "very wrong about the role of religious faith in our nation's life.... His Houston remarks profoundly undermined the place not just of Catholics, but of all religious believers, in America's public and political conversation. Today, half a century later, we're paying for the damage."

Some day perhaps, we may recognize the cost of that damage in the lives of the aborted babies, the systematic effort to destroy marriage as a sacred institution, and the assault on common sense and decency in the name of "sex education" for six-year-olds in our public schools. God grant that cost will soon become clear and move men and women of good will and of all religious faiths and political persuasions to stand up and resist the imposition of moral decadence as well as other forms of tyranny. It is time to take seriously the call of the Apostle: "Stand fast in the liberty wherein God has made you free."



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