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JFK and the cafeteria bishops

by Patrick T. Reardon



Sen. John F. Kennedy partakes in a question-and-answer session with the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on Sept. 12, 1960, in Houston. It was on this occasion that Kennedy addressed concerns about his Catholicism and his run for the presidency. (AP photo/Houston Chronicle)

Analysis

A half century ago, John F. Kennedy was elected the first Catholic president of the United States because he convinced American voters that he wouldn't take orders from the pope.

Now, however, Catholic politicians across the United States, particularly those running for national office, are increasingly facing criticism from some members of the hierarchy -- because they won't take orders from the church.

Consider:

- In 1984, Geraldine Ferraro, a Catholic, was the Democratic nominee for vice president and the first woman on a major party's national ticket. But Bishop James Timlin of Scranton, Pa., and Archbishop John O'Connor of New York publicly rebuked her for advocating legalized abortion. When she gave a speech in Scranton, one sign in the crowd read: "FERRARO -- A CATHOLIC JUDAS."
- In 1990, O'Connor, now a cardinal, warned Catholic politicians that they were "at risk of excommunication" if they didn't oppose abortion.
- In 2003, Archbishop Sean O'Malley of Boston told Catholic lawmakers that they should stop receiving Communion if they voted to approve abortion legislation.
- In 2004, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry was named to head the Democratic ticket, becoming the first Catholic since Kennedy to be nominated for president. But, earlier in the year, less than a week before the Missouri primary, Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis told reporters that he would refuse Communion to Kerry because of the politician's support of abortion rights.

But it's not just today's Catholic politicians who are being targeted by this small corps of activist bishops. Even Kennedy, dead now for almost 47 years, is being attacked.

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Indeed, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver has been taking the late president to task in print and in public for at least six years, most recently in an address at Houston Baptist University on March 1.

He even injected himself into Kerry's 2004 presidential run with a column in the diocesan newspaper, with little more than a month to go before the election, blasting retrospectively Kennedy and former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, a Catholic who sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984, for "making a deal with the devil."

Chaput summarized the Kennedy-Cuomo approach to politics as "it's OK to be Catholic in public service as long as you're willing to jettison what's inconveniently 'Catholic.'" He slammed Cuomo for his support of abortion funding for poor women, and said Kennedy set a template for his coreligionist politicians: "Be American first, be Catholic second."

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Then, with a pointed jab, the archbishop wrote, "This was an easy calculus for Kennedy, who wore his faith loosely anyway."

That certainly seems true. Kennedy was a womanizer who never gave the impression of devoutness, although he liked to be seen in the company of Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston.

Other presidents of that era didn't trumpet their faith either. Richard Nixon was raised a Quaker, but Norman Vincent Peale, a Protestant preacher and motivational writer, said, "I don't know that he ever let it bother him."

Still, no one knows what's in a person's heart. Were Kennedy's efforts on behalf of civil rights the result of his Catholic upbringing and affiliation? What about his work to limit nuclear weapons testing?

During the 1960 campaign, Kennedy made it clear, in a speech to a group of Protestant ministers in Houston, that, in running the nation, he would be his own man:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute -- where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote. 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.

The idea of a Catholic as the nation's chief executive had long been a scary threat to many Americans. Indeed, during the campaign of Democrat Al Smith, the first Catholic nominee for the presidency in 1924, a Methodist bishop declared: "No governor can kiss the papal ring and get within a gunshot of the White House."

Kennedy calmed those fears by his refusal to proselytize -- or lead -- on behalf of his faith.

As he said in the Houston speech, "I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president, who happens also to be a Catholic."

Kennedy's election was the result of -- and helped accelerate -- great changes that had been taking place within the United States. No longer were Catholics an immigrant bloc, poorly educated and fit for little more than hard labor. By 1960, they were well on their way to assimilating fully into the national fabric, solidly middle-class and increasingly suburban.

True, in that year, they gave 83 percent of their votes to their fellow Catholic. But ever since, they have tended to split their ballots, reflecting the liberal-conservative divide in the country.

For instance, Catholics gave majorities to Democrats Jimmy Carter (57 percent) in 1976 and Bill Clinton (53 percent) in 1990, but, in other years, Republicans came out on top, such as Ronald Reagan (51 percent in 1980 and 55 percent in 1984).

One measure of the assimilation of American Catholics is Joe Biden.

In taking the oath as vice president in January 2009, Biden became the first Catholic to serve in that office. Hardly anyone considered it a watershed of any sort (especially given the true national significance of the election of his running mate, Barack Obama, as the first African-American president). Certainly no one paid much attention.

Initially, after Kennedy's victory, it was the fashion for the national parties to nominate Catholics for the vice presidency -- Republican William Miller in 1964 and Democrats Edmund Muskie in 1968 and Sargent Shriver in 1972. But after that, until Biden, the only other Catholic VP nominee was Ferraro.

That's because Catholics weren't voting for Catholics anymore simply on the basis of religion. In fact, when the only other Catholic, Kerry, ran for the presidency in 2004, his opponent, incumbent George W. Bush, won the Catholic vote with 52 percent.

Another measure of Catholic assimilation over the past half century is the U.S. Supreme Court.

Six of the nine members of the court are Catholic. Two of the other members are Jewish, soon to be joined by a third, Elena Kagan, nominated by Obama to replace the retiring John Paul Stevens, a Protestant.

The thought of a Supreme Court without a Protestant would have been anathema to many Americans, even half a century ago. In its entire 221-year history, only six other Catholics have served on the court.

Yet, in some real way today, Catholics are the new Protestants in the United States, solidly mainstream but not tied to a group philosophy.

Four of the Catholic justices are conservative, while Anthony Kennedy has been a swing vote at times. Sonia Sotomayor, appointed last year by Obama, is expected to be more liberal. The Congressional confirmation hearings on each of these focused on political philosophy, not on religion.

Religious labels

Since John F. Kennedy's election, the label "Catholic" hasn't scared away voters. In most races, it's been a non-issue, hardly mentioned amid discussions of the candidate's programs and policies.

That's a trend, however, that Chaput finds ominous -- and for which he blames Kennedy.

Kennedy's speech in Houston "left a lasting mark on American politics," said Chaput in his March 1 address, also in that Texas city. "It was sincere, compelling, articulate -- and wrong? wrong about American history and very wrong about the role of religious faith in our nation's life."

Chaput argued that Kennedy wrongly stood for a strict separation of church and state, and he said Kennedy's "remarks profoundly undermined the place not just of Catholics, but of all religious believers, in America's public life and political conversation." The speech "began the project of walling religion away from the process of governance in a new and aggressive way."

Yet, religion has hardly been "walled away" from American discourse over the past half century.

In fact, the major story of U.S. politics since Kennedy's time has been the rise of faith-based activism. Consider how many "born-again" politicians have won office, and the role of "moral values" in campaign debates.

The roots of this go back to the 1970s. In the wake of the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation as president, the United States underwent a profound loss of innocence. The nation's leadership was found to be corrupt and venal. The sense of American goodness -- a moral superiority to other nations -- was shaken to the core.

Meanwhile, in 1973, the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that abortion was a constitutional right, energizing conservative Christians and Orthodox Jews to enter the political arena in opposition.

Savvy politicians on the right saw in these developments a chance to gain and keep political power.

Faith, as a cure for secular corruption, was the selling point, but not a religious belief system. Instead, strategists realized that, by exploiting a handful of hot-button issues -- abortion and same-sex marriage, in particular -- they could marshal entire armies of single-issue voters and sway elections.

And they did.

Not that winning elections resulted in drastic changes in the national landscape.

“And what does the religious right have to show for its identification of faith with the political process?” asks Randall Balmer, a religious history professor at Columbia University in New York and an Episcopal priest, in *God in the White House: A History*, published in 2008.

“Precious little. The leaders of the religious right have failed to outlaw abortion, their signature issue since 1980, and this despite the fact that the Republicans have controlled both the White House and Congress for most of those years.”

From a practical political point of view, outlawing abortion would eliminate this powerful electoral tool. As long as abortion remains in the law books, conservative strategists have a potent issue to throw at more moderate opponents.

Entering the political fray

This is the context in which some Catholic prelates have entered the political fray.

And, like the religious right, the bishops have tended to use their threats of excommunication for only a handful of issues, mainly abortion, but not for others.

For instance, few if any bishops who publicly castigated Catholic politicians for funding abortion services made any threats against politicians who backed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 -- even though Pope John Paul II spoke out against it: “No to war! War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity.”

Similarly, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement in 1980 that “the legitimate purposes of punishment do not justify the imposition of the death penalty.” Yet, few members of the hierarchy who rail against same-sex marriages and abortion have had much to say about politicians who promote execution in the name of society.

In fact, back in 2004, when Chaput in Denver blasted Kennedy and Cuomo for failing to be Catholic enough in their governmental decisions, he took a particular swipe at the former New York governor. Although Cuomo did nothing to restrict abortion, the archbishop wrote with apparent sarcasm, "his Catholic conscience apparently did kick in [on the death penalty]."

Cuomo, Chaput wrote, "vetoed legislative efforts to reinstate the death penalty -- *12 times*."

Except for slamming Cuomo, Chaput's point was a little unclear. One reading of it is that, according to the archbishop, Cuomo should have done something to protect fetuses and also done something to get his state back into the business of putting prisoners to death.

Or maybe, to give the statement a more positive reading, Chaput was just saying that, if Cuomo followed the church's death penalty teachings, he should also follow its stand against abortion. In other words, a Catholic politician shouldn't pick and choose.

That's not a new complaint. In fact, the hierarchy has railed against the vast majority of American laypeople since the late 1960s when they rebelled en masse against the Vatican's anti-birth control fiat.

Catholics who pick and choose are, critics assert, "cafeteria Catholics."

Yet, by entering the political debates with selective threats of excommunication and refusal of Communion, the prelates have been picking and choosing what parts of the church's moral teaching they'll stress -- and which parts they'll ignore.

In other words, they've been cafeteria bishops.

It's important to remember that moral teaching doesn't only come from church officials. Think of the former Italian soldier Francis of Assisi or the U.S. social activist Dorothy Day or the former herdsman Patrick who became a missionary to Ireland.

Or think of all the many people whose example or words or insights feed the faith of those around them.

Or think of an American politician of five decades ago.

In September 1960, in his Houston speech, John F. Kennedy -- flawed sinner that he was -- made a simple but profound statement: "I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me."

There is still much moral wisdom in what he said.

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