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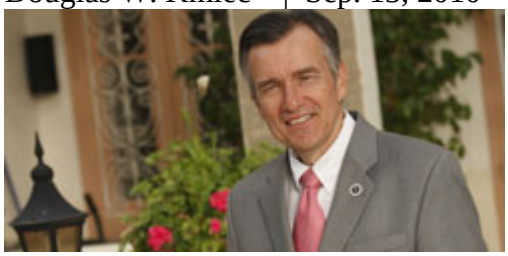
Faith's survivor on the walk of atonement

Douglas W. Kmiec | Sep. 13, 2010



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[**Editor's Note:** On Aug. 24, Sister of St. Louis Mary Campbell, Douglas Kmiec, U.S. ambassador to Malta, and Msgr. John Sheridan, the retired pastor of a Malibu parish, were involved in a one-car accident. Campbell was killed instantly. Kmiec and Sheridan were injured, Sheridan critically.]

Thank you to so many who regularly read these thoughtful pages for your prayers after my recent tragic car accident.

I owe my physical survival to the responsive firefighters and trauma surgeons and nurses. The pain of the injuries is great, but far more manageable than the spiritual and psychological wounds. From this day forward, I am on the long road of atonement for a tragedy that in an instant deprived me of the sweet companionship of a truly pious woman and still challenges the survival of the churchman in my life whose every action embodies faith expressed through kindness.

Three weeks ago now on the Mulholland Highway that winds its way through the canyons of southern California, the treasured sweetness and kindness of these friends would be stolen in a single car crash that remains as inexplicable as it is haunting. Returning from Mass and a very happy luncheon with the Sisters of Saint Louis, Msgr. John Sheridan, 95, Sr. Mary Campbell, 74, and myself were in pleasant and casual conversation about everything from the morning's festivity to the discomfort over the mid-day heat and the seemingly un-working side air-vents. This conversation would come to an abrupt stop. For reasons that I suspect will always lurk in the gauzy mists of shock, our front tire left the paved road surface as the road ahead made an abrupt turn just a handful of miles from our safe journey home. In the following micro-second eternity of time -- now repeatedly replayed in my mind -- our unpretentious rental sub-compact -- at least with three adults aboard -- lacked all capacity to resist the loose stone and gravitational pull of the adjacent drainage ditch.

Before taking up foreign service work in the faith-filled and religiously significant Republic of Malta a year ago, it was my special blessing to worship almost daily at our parish, with Mass frequently said by the saintly and extraordinarily-gifted monsignor. Regularly thereafter we would head off to a simple breakfast of toast and tea to discuss -- well, everything -- but mostly how best to give life to Catholic teaching in a modern, and challenging, world.

Sister Mary would often join us.

On that horrible day in late August, it was no different, except that we had the special joy of being back together for the first time in many months. In addition, the Mass of the day would be said by the local bishop celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Sisters of Saint Louis in the United States. and Sister Mary was a true exemplar of this splendid order of intelligent and discerning women. With missions throughout the world, the Sisters of Saint Louis, "commit to living God's love for the whole of creation and especially to stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalized." During the school year at morning Mass, Sister Mary wore her plain button down blue sweater and kept an eye out from a near rear pew for any misbehaving child whose misdemeanor transgressions in church were easily reformed by the discomfort of bringing a frown to Sister Mary's countenance which God had constructed to naturally smile.

For a half-century, families in southern California were raise up by the instruction of Sister Mary, who as born in County Mayo, Ireland. For a number of years, until 2003 or so, Mary was the principal of the well-regarded school associated with my home parish of Our Lady of Malibu. Nominally in semi-retirement in recent years, Sister Mary helped direct pastoral ministry which meant that if you looked quickly enough you might see her ever happy self dashing from grade to grade teaching catechism or coordinating the visits of academic folks like me who delighted in introducing her classes to Thomas More or C.S. Lewis or Dorothy Day. Nothing gave Sister Mary greater joy than cheerfully preparing the monsignor's calendar, and then cheerfully rearranging it, when the beloved man couldn't resist the entreaties of one or another parishioner to just look in on Jack or Ann or Bernadette who was desperately sad or whose faith was challenged by age or illness . . . or even the horror of accident.

There is an awful silence immediately after a fatal accident. After calling 911 and reciting the rosary with the half-conscious monsignor, the silence of Sister Mary behind me pierced my heart more than the bent metal and seatbelt buckle piercing my side. My dear, sweet friend whose passage to eternity had long ago been secured by the grace of Christ's own death and resurrection was more than fully affirmed by her life time of good works, and at that moment, had already been claimed by the angels.

Sister Mary Campbell, Sister of Saint Louis, *requiescat in pace*.

It remains to be seen if God is presently calling monsignor. A priest for over 65 years, pastor emeritus of Our Lady of Malibu, his influence is global in every universal aspect of the church.

C.S. Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* as a way of explaining his conversion to Catholicism; likewise, for many years it was John Sheridan who helped Catholics everywhere understand the fullness of their faith in his direction of the Catholic Information Center. As we have just navigated a week-end which has included troubling uses of faith to rekindle unwarranted and undifferentiated hatreds associated with 9/11, monsignor's life of welcoming all and pursuing peace among men and women of all faith traditions has special poignancy.

Please keep Msgr. Sheridan and me in your prayers. At moments like this, we sometimes think these prayers akin to an appellate brief persuading God to change his mind. There are, of course, some occasions in the Bible where God seemingly changes course as a result of man's pleading. The crash denies me the comfort of this notion of Divine appellate proceeding. I am now reconciled that it is God's will that has the final say on the exact length of the lives of all who walk the earth. Many of us presume to say "let God's will be done," even as our crossed fingers say something different in our hearts. Msgr. Sheridan never short-changed God in this way, and while I am praying constantly for the monsignor's recovery, I now know how foolish it is to challenge the Lord on terms I don't understand.

In our walk with God in this life, we are asked to love each other as He has loved us. The longstanding conflicts of the day remind us that the Creator's request that we love our neighbor as ourselves is too often neglected or obscured, but let me assure you on the walk of atonement, the way is clear.

[Douglas W. Kmiec is U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Malta.He is on leave from Pepperdine University, where he was ; he is on leave from Pepperdine University,]

The views of this reflection are mine. They do not purport to represent the views of the Department of State or those of the Pepperdine University from which I am on leave. It is not that either the Department or the University dispute or affirm what I have written here; it is that, for the State Department, it is constitutionally inappropriate for the government of all to speak in the faith-based vernacular of one, and for the university, especially a Christian university like Pepperdine that regularly invites Msgr. Sheridan and representatives of many faiths to bless or contribute to its academic work, far more particular faith reflection is invited and welcome. I am grateful to both institutions for permitting me to speak individually on this singular occasion in order that I might at least discharge the burden of my conscience with my fellow brothers and sisters at this most difficult time. An abbreviated version of this personal reflection appeared in The Sunday Times of Malta.
--*Doug Kmiec*

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