

Chicago priest, hired Barack Obama as organizer, dies at 70

Patrick Whelan Fr. William Stenzel | Feb. 28, 2011



Fr. Thomas Kaminski

Amidst all the controversy that has swirled around the church over the past decade, it is easy to forget the legions of men and women who have dedicated their lives to the simple idea that they had a duty to magnify the love of God by working selflessly for the wellbeing of others.

Fr. Thomas Kaminski, who died Feb. 12 at age 70, was such a man -- and one who found himself fatefully in a position to animate and applaud the efforts of a young Barack Obama as he was beginning to discover his own calling to a public life.

Kaminski entered Catholic seminary in a time of great excitement in the church. Pope John XXIII had called a global convocation of bishops as countries across the developing world were throwing off the yoke of colonialism, and new technologies were bringing people everywhere into closer contact with one another.

At the time of his ordination to the priesthood in 1966, Kaminski found himself confronted with the fallout of the new globalization. Over the next 20 years, he witnessed the economic dislocation of closing steel mills through the Calumet River Valley south of Chicago, ethnic Catholics moving to the South in search of new opportunities, and African Americans faced with both the promise of the civil rights revolution and the hostility of a city grappling with an unprecedented intermingling of previously isolated communities.

In 1984, a pair of community organizers, Jerry Kellman and Michael Kruglik, joined with a group of eight Catholic parishes to form the Developing Communities Project. With funding from the new Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), an anti-poverty agency funded by the U.S. Catholic bishops, the Developing Communities Project set out to address the Vatican II call to reach out in a special way to the needs of the poor.

Kellman traveled to New York and interviewed a 24-year-old recent graduate of Columbia University, and saw a special promise in this young man's abilities.

Kellman, a recent Catholic convert, brought Barack Obama to Chicago and introduced him one-by-one to these eight Catholic pastors. Kaminski was a sturdy leader of St Helena of the Cross parish in the Washington Heights community on the south side of Chicago. He had been selected as "president" of the Developing Communities Project "because no one else wanted the job."

Kellman saw an opportunity to begin addressing the material needs of his parishioners in a way that would

complement the work his church was doing on the spiritual front.

Providing windowless office space at the nearby Holy Rosary Parish's rectory, Kaminski and his then-assistant Fr. Stenzel, welcomed Kellman, Kruglik and Obama to a new mission addressing the economic needs that escalated during the explosive recession in the early years of the Reagan administration.

With no previous formal exposure to religious practice, Obama might be said to have gotten his political start collaborating with the church and the bishops through the Developing Communities Project and the CCHD.

In an interview following the 2008 presidential election, Kaminski recalled those days, saying:

When Keith Olbermann announced at 10 p.m. that [Obama] was going to be the next president, that absolutely blew me out of the water -- I was SO proud of the guy! Of course I had a horse in the race, and it was something very, very special. I remember saying to a number of people, 'this effectively takes the wind out of the sails of Al Qaeda.' You look around the world, nobody else has a person of African descent as their president.

Then he recalled the scene that unfolded in the time leading up to Barack's arrival in Chicago two decades earlier:

Stenzel ? was here [at St Helena] only eight months as my assistant. It was a middle class African-American parish, with a lot of bus drivers and police. Mike Kruglik -- now working in south suburbs -- was a short round guy who used to run a restaurant in Houston. Jerry Kellman used to remind me of Columbo. He had been through the whole Saul Alinsky thing. He had the street smarts. They could both be cast in Damon Runyon shows.

Then comes along Barack. Nice smile, calm personality. We thought we'd have to break him in. Certainly he was learning.

The thing that impressed me the most was his ability to listen, and in doing so he shows respect for the person he's listening to. He doesn't come back with the quick answer, the flip answer.

I think he's going to be able to draw the best out of all the people around him. ... He's 45-46 years old now, but I still see the kid in him -- there's a genuine quality. I look at the man today that I saw back in 1985-86, and still see those genuine qualities. They haven't been chipped away.

President Obama reflected warmly last month on the time he spent in those parishes and on his visits with Kaminski.

During his seminary days, a junior classmate had nicknamed Kaminski "The Rock." Kaminski was one of those people who spent his life dedicated to helping others, and perhaps more importantly cultivating that enthusiasm in his parishioners.

He did it out of a sense of conviction that love is at the heart of our existence. And one never knows when that kind of witness, genuinely rendered, might not touch someone who goes on to change the world.

[Dr. Patrick Whelan is on the board of the *National Catholic Reporter*, and is the president of Catholic Democrats. Fr. William Stenzel is pastor of St Bede the Venerable Catholic Church in Chicago.]

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