

Mrs. Kennedy and Bishop McManus

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 2, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I always try and give a bishop the benefit of the doubt. They make mistakes. I make mistakes. But, bishops are successors of the apostles, and I am not, and that status alone makes it incumbent upon the rest of us Catholics to take their words to heart even if, in the end, we find ourselves reaching different conclusions. Always, we should respect these men and the office they hold, not from us but from Christ, and treat their words and their deeds with similar respect. But, the decision of Bishop Robert McManus to forbid Vicki Kennedy from giving the commencement address at Anna Maria College makes it really, really hard.

Mrs. Kennedy is not a public official. In fact, I do not normally think of her as a public figure. Like many spouses of politicians, she has dedicated herself to good works, many good works, often on behalf of the Church. It was clear to everyone with eyes to see that she was a rock of support to her husband, Sen. Edward Kennedy, both in his life and in his declining years. At his funeral, she was the epitome of grace, and not only in the sense of manners, but in the theological sense: She knelt, as Kennedy women had before her, at the side of her husband's coffin, leading her family so scarred by suffering in prayer.

I have never been overwhelmed by the Kennedy mystique, the whole "Camelot" business and talk of "American royalty." Growing up, we had a framed text of JFK's inaugural address on our dining room wall, but in adulthood I have developed very mixed views about his presidency: The entire human race should be grateful that President Kennedy stared down his own generals during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but his record on civil rights was anemic, and his unwillingness as a Senator to vote to censure Joe McCarthy remains a dark stain.

Sen. Ted Kennedy served in the Senate from the year of my birth until the year of his death. He cast a lot of votes, most of them for the very things that should make us all proud to be Americans. He voted for the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Kennedy voted to create Medicare and Medicaid. He led the fight to pass the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 and was critical to securing funding to fight HIV/AIDS. Kennedy helped craft the Americans with Disabilities Act. He voted against aid to the contras and against the Iraq War. He championed the rights of labor and the dignity of immigrants. Few politicians did more to alleviate the sufferings of the poor than Sen. Kennedy did in his lifetime.

I wish how I wish he had stuck to his pro-life position. He didn't. Neither did Ed Muskie, or Al Gore, or Dick Gephardt, or Dennis Kucinich, or Jimmy Carter. The length of the list does not excuse anyone on it, to be sure. People who cared about the unemployed and the undocumented should have understood that the historical vocation of the Democratic Party, as well as the dictate of Christian ethics, is to care for the "un's" without exception, those whom society has forgotten or neglects, and the unborn should have remained a concern for them. Nor can their change of heart on the issue be excused, although it is probably best explained, by a sense that women had a different perspective on this issue and that, as women began to take a more prominent place in the political life of the nation, a fact that was long overdue, these men needed to listen and probably defer. But, you don't have to be a burglar, nor to have been burgled, to oppose burglary. And Ella Grasso, the liberal Democratic Governor of Connecticut, and the first woman to be elected governor in her own right, never abandoned the pro-life cause. I wish more of the men had stood with her.

What should be clear, however, is that the Kennedys, more than any other family, paved the way for American Catholics to enter fully into the political life of the nation. In 1960, the issue was not so much how Catholics should conduct themselves in the public square but if they should be permitted into the public square. The issue JFK faced, and that his election laid to rest forever, was whether or not Catholics could be as good Americans as anyone else. Many of us now recognize that it would have been better if JFK had framed the issues differently in his 1960 Houston speech (although the purposes to which his speech were put by some is not really JFK's fault), and that we now have a different question about Catholics in political life. Today, the question is how we can be good, but different, Americans as Catholics. Had JFK addressed such nuances, he would have been accused of "jesuitical reasoning" and the stained glass ceiling for Catholics in public life would not have been broken. Had his brothers not continued in politics, that ceiling might have been put back in place. Today, our bishops, as well as the laity, enjoy their position in the public square of American life because the Kennedy family broke down the barriers of bigotry. No one has, so far as I know, accused Bishop McManus of "dual loyalty" in the kind of insinuating, bigoted way that accusation was leveled against Catholics before 1960 and still is leveled at some Jews.

But, all this is about "The Kennedys", and it is only Vicki Kennedy who was just barred from taking the stage at Anna Maria College. On what grounds? According to a spokesman for the diocese, the bishop's action was consistent with the stated policy of the USCCB "that Catholic institutions should not be honoring Catholics who take positions publicly which are contrary to the Catholic faith's most fundamental principles, particularly on the dignity of life from conception and the sanctity of marriage." I have never liked this formulation, found in the USCCB document Catholics in Public Life. The divinity of Christ is a "fundamental principle" of the Catholic faith, but we regularly and rightly invite Jews and the Dalai Lama and others who do not share our beliefs about the divinity of Christ to speak on our campuses.

Nor does the prohibition seem to be well applied in the case of Mrs. Kennedy. I have searched quite diligently for some evidence of her taking a position that is contrary to what the Church teaches on these issues, and have found nothing. I did find a [2004 op-ed in the Washington Post](#) [1] in which she argued it was wrong for bishops and priests to deny communion to pro-choice politicians, which happens to be the policy of most bishops in the U.S. as well as that of the Holy Father. In that article, Mrs. Kennedy presents some statements with which I would disagree and some with which I would agree. But, the main point is this: It is far from clear how Catholics can and should deal with the complex political issue of abortion. The issue is not complex morally. We know abortion is wrong morally. But, how to fix it? If anyone thinks overturning Roe is enough, they are foolhardy. It would take only one, maybe two, botched back alley abortions to create a counter-movement that would sweep away any restrictions on abortion. The pro-life movement has to decide when it will demand of its political allies a real strategy for addressing the issue. Right now, there is none.

No, the problem here is not really with Mrs. Kennedy. The problem is that among the many dispositions that religious experience engenders, one disposition, the urge to censor, can trump all other dispositions in the thinking of some people. And, those of us who get nervous about censorship need to recall that it is rooted in a perfectly fine sensibility, the desire to protect those we love from influences that will harm them. Parents are correct to "censor" what their children watch on television, deciding what is appropriate or not. But, a college seems a strange place to champion censorship.

The urge to censor is not always wrong-headed: There are speakers who would be totally inappropriate to honor at a Catholic college by giving them the speakers' rostrum. If Mrs. Kennedy were the President of NARAL, or a board member at Catholics for Choice, it would be wrong to invite her and any college president who did so should be fired. But, she isn't the head of NARAL and she is not a board member of any pro-abortion group. But, I do not buy the argument that by having a Catholic who has differed from this Church on this issue or that, the Church itself is somehow confusing the people of God about what the Church does and does not teach. Is

there anyone who really believes that anyone in America doesn't know where the Church stands on abortion?

For some people, censorship of books or commencement speakers does not seem like an odd stance for a university. They fear engagement with the world and lack the confidence in the Church's teachings displayed by, for example, then-Cardinal Ratzinger when he engaged Jurgen Habermas in public discussion or invited Hans Kung to Castel Gandolfo to talk things over or who convoked a meeting of various religious leaders to come to Assisi last year to pray for peace. In the two-word phrase "Catholic college" those who favor censorship forget about the college, the education, and focus exclusively on the Catholic mission, and a very narrow understanding of Catholic mission at that. They want universities and colleges to be arms of their propaganda ministry. The *raison d'être* of the Cardinal Newman Society, after all, is to police Catholic college life for any whiff of what they deem heresy. There is no evidence that they applied pressure in this instance, but the Cardinal Newman Society has been the central actor in the commencement speakers' wars over the past several years. They are to the first decades of the twenty-first century what the Sodalitium Pianum was to the first decades of the twentieth century: heresy-hunters, indiscriminate in their accusations and foul in their methods. The Sodalitium Pianum kept records of many suspected of heresy including a young priest Angelo Roncalli who would go on to become Pope John XXIII. (Mrs. Kennedy is in very fine company!)

There is an ironic story from the life of Sen. Kennedy that shows just how narrow these heresy-hunters are. In May of 1983, Kennedy received a card - #B0500878 - indicating his membership in the Moral Majority. At the time, the mere mention of Kennedy's name was a great fundraising device for the conservative, evangelical group, just as the Rev. Jerry Falwell's name was fast becoming a fundraising device for the left. When the mix-up became public, and always conscious of the value of media attention, Falwell decided to invite Kennedy to come to Falwell's Liberty University to give a talk. On October 3, 1983, Sen. Kennedy spoke to the student body. Falwell took some grief from some of his more conservative donors and he replied that if the school and the church were doing their job, then "one liberal pied piper" would not be able to shake the students from their views. It takes quite a bit of trying to be more reactionary than Jerry Falwell, but Bishop McManus and his allies at the Cardinal Newman Society appear to have succeeded.

The bishops complain that they alone should be permitted to speak on behalf of the Catholic Church in the United States and, of course, in one sense they do. There is a difference between a Catholic organization and an organization of Catholics: The former must, in some sense, be answerable to the hierarchy. But, it is hard not to see that some bishops allow themselves be led by the nose by conservative groups like the Cardinal Newman Society, which can make life hell for a bishop. But, bishops should realize that, as in this case, the worst kind of wound to the Church is the self-inflicted kind. The anti-Modernist campaign set back the intellectual life of the Church for decades. The Syllabus of Errors in the nineteenth century had a similar effect. No, the Church should not be in the business of accommodating itself to the world, but it should be in the business of engaging the world and these heresy-hunters deeply fear such engagement.

Mrs. Kennedy issued a statement about this incident that was gracious in the extreme, acknowledging that graduation day is for those graduating, and regretting that this incident might cloud their day. But, she did something else. She testified to her love for the Church. I do not know Mrs. Kennedy but I would like to thank her for that testimony. It would be all too easy, and very understandable, if she were to throw up her hands and say, "Enough!" It would have been all too easy, and very understandable, if she had used the occasion to criticize the bishop in the kind of hurtful and unhelpful tones that so often characterize public debate. Instead, she wrote that she was sad, not only for herself, but for "the Church I love."

It is my profound hope that Bishop McManus will reconsider his decision. I also hope he would have the decency to meet beforehand with those against whom he intends to make such a wounding judgment: That is mere courtesy. And it is time for the bishops to consider the activities of groups like the Cardinal Newman Society and ask whether they help or harm the mission of the Church in the twenty-first century. I am no fan of

heresy, but I am equally not a fan of the kind of heresy-hunters who seem so like the Pharisees, always ready to condemn, always one hundred percent sure that they, and they alone, understand the will of God, indeed, leaving no space for the Holy Spirit in their calculations. Let them go burn some books and feel better about themselves. But, please God, let them stop inflicting these self-inflicted wounds upon the Church.

A last thought. When Sen. Kennedy died, thousands of people lined up outside the JFK Library in Boston to pay their respects at his casket. Those people were ?our? people: the poor, immigrants, the elderly. Many were physically disabled. They stood in the rain for hours. A prelate said to me at the time: ?Do you think there would be any kind of similar outpouring of grief if any of us bishops died? I don?t think so.? There is a goal for the episcopacy. Make yourselves loved as Sen. Kennedy was loved. Find ways to defend the poor and the unemployed and the undocumented ? and, yes, the unborn ? that attest to what is beautiful and true about the Church?s teachings, and about Christ who comforts the afflicted. Talk to people before you declare them persona non grata. Follow the example of Pope Benedict XVI who said these words in his Palm Sunday sermon yesterday:

Here we find the first great message that today?s feast brings us: the invitation to adopt a proper outlook upon all humanity, on the peoples who make up the world, on its different cultures and civilizations. The look that the believer receives from Christ is a look of blessing: a wise and loving look, capable of grasping the world?s beauty and having compassion on its fragility. Shining through this look is God?s own look upon those he loves and upon Creation, the work of his hands. We read in the Book of Wisdom: "But thou art merciful to all, for thou canst do all things, and thou dost overlook men?s sins, that they may repent. For thou lovest all things that exist and hast loathing for none of the things which thou hast made ... thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord who lovest the living" (11:23-24, 26).

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