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Pope, President: Human Kindness as the Change We Need

by Douglas W. Kmiec



Editor's note: President Obama nominated Douglas Kmiec July 2 to be ambassador to the Republic of Malta. Nominations for ambassador have to be confirmed by the Senate.

When one is nominated for a public post, it is customary to say very little. However, it would be ungrateful not to reflect how great an honor it is to be nominated by President Obama to the embassy in Malta on the eve of the President's visit with the Holy Father.

As mentioned in an earlier essay, it is highly anticipated that the Holy Father's encyclical letter -- due out shortly before the President's arrival -- will give emphasis to how the economic and social times in which we live are, like all things in Christ, at once extraordinary and paradoxical.

The old ways are being tested by ideas and systems seemingly traveling at mach 10; that's the extraordinary. To be regretted, but not at all surprising, is that many families at these velocities cannot keep up; we are slowed by the pain of layoff or reduced wage, or simply the emptiness of living in a society organized to shop. What is paradoxical is that these ill-side effects of technological sophistication are best answered not by like complexity, but by the simplicity of extending a helping hand to those we

know personally to be in need.

Before my colleagues in the law building took delight in calling me "Mr. Ambassador-designate" this afternoon, the day began in quiet conversation with Monsignor John Sheridan, my pastor emeritus, who at 94 tells me he's seen more than his share of the "extraordinary," though frankly, the adjective best describes the influential beauty of his priesthood. You see, Monsignor John whose erudition far outdistances most PhDs, attributes a consciously nurtured generosity, not intellectual acuity, as the Holy Spirit's secret weapon for taming even the most anxiety-producing challenges.

The proof was right before our eyes. Parishioners who have lost a life-long business or a home to foreclosure today regularly call the parish or assemble there to assist others. With very little central coordination, the parish is job bank, employment strategist, resume polisher, and all around bolsterer of morale. It is, in short, the place where those "down on their luck" and those tenaciously holding onto to some reinforce the idea of a "fresh start."

The words "fresh start" are confessionally-grace-filled, aren't they? Like the promise of the New Jerusalem, itself, they express far more optimism and power than the dour, heavily legalistic terminology of the law of "bankruptcy."

Don't misunderstand, it is important for the law to be well structured. That's frankly Obama's job, and goodness knows the mythical nature of credit default swaps and other economic inventions to hide the truth of the absence of real asset value in some modern securities, or banking practices that excuse the absence of a serious savings habit, or car companies that literally ran out of intellectual gas a generation ago, give the President plenty to work on. It is widely expected that Benedict and Obama will be on exactly the same page when it comes to the obligation to restore "through law and regulation -- fairness to the marketplace.

But Church and State are meant to complement, not be redundant. Obama's role is to put regulatory boundaries in place against economic greed; it is the task of the leaders of the Church to keep greed in check from inside-out through a transformative ethic more effective than any law -- namely, kindness.

As most know, Malta is a place that has figured prominently in Christian history and it is situated ideally for inter-faith dialogue in the 21st century. Recently, the Holy Father dispatched His Eminence Ennio Cardinal Antonelli, the special envoy of the Pauline Year, to mark the anniversary of Paul's shipwreck onto the island nation.

During his visit, the Cardinal referenced how St. Luke saw the people of Malta greeting St. Paul "with unusual kindness" -- and everything I have learned about this ancient and magnificently beautiful country affirms that this quality remains in profound abundance. Nearly two decades ago, John Paul II called upon Malta "to contribute to the spiritual unity of Europe by offering her treasures of Christian faith and values." Those treasures referenced by the Pope then, and likely reaffirmed by his successor next week, are those human values resisting the "storms of materialism."

Cardinal Antonelli found Malta to be a true "witness of faith" relying upon the constancy of the love expressed within family, and then by families, in looking after the well-being of the least advantaged, and each other. It was this human kindness that lit the fire of faith for Paul to follow.

The Papal encyclical and the upcoming presidential visit cannot help but illuminate the role of faith in public life. *NCR* editor in chief Joe Feuerherd elicited from President Obama this week how

considerations of the Catholic faith are influencing our non-Catholic President to preserve sensible conscience protection; structure G8 assistance for the global poor and work toward health care and immigration reforms at home. In each case, law or international agreement is put to positive use ? illustrating how Catholic social thought premised upon just law is far more than the admonition ?Don?t.?

Yet, how greatly would our own faith be strengthened simply by knocking on a neighbor?s door once a week with the inquiry: ?can I help you in any way?? Or even better, ?what three things do you need my help with?? An idea for Obama?s faith-based initiative? Perhaps. This much for certain, the applicable admonition when it comes to helping (even knowing) our neighbor is: ?Do!?

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