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Ted Kennedy died with faith ñ in us

Douglas W. Kmiec | Aug. 27, 2009

(CNS photo)

Ted Kennedy is dead. Called ?the Lion of the Senate? for his extraordinary legislative accomplishments, his own words in eulogy for his brother Robert aptly summarize Ted Kennedy?s own legacy as ?a good and decent man who need not be idealized or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life. . . .?

And what was he in life? A man of privilege whose Catholic faith prompted him to pursue the calling of Francis to look first to the needs of the poor. A man of faith, whose last courageous days of suffering exemplified Pope John Paul II?s invitation to cross the threshold, not in fear, but with hope.

Ted Kennedy?s faith also called upon the Nicene Creed to remember that despite our political differences, we remain "one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

For too long in America, people of good will sharing the Catholic faith have been divided. We have been told, or we have convinced ourselves, that unless there is perfect agreement on every issue, there can be no friendship. This is mistaken.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote recently in *Caritas in Veritate*:

> ?Clarity is not served by certain abstract subdivisions of the Church's social doctrine, which apply categories to papal social teaching that are extraneous to it. It is not a case of two typologies of social doctrine, one pre-conciliar and one post-conciliar, differing from one another: on the contrary, there is a single teaching, consistent and at the same time ever new.?

The pope was not saying the reform of the tax system or the economy was of the same order of importance as honoring the gift of life, but he was reminding us to be honest with ourselves and not overlook the consistency of church teaching calling us to love our neighbor in the most tangible and obvious way -- by meeting the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves.

Of course, one must never meet the needs of the infirm, the aged, or the poor by sacrificing the unborn. But when President Obama has committed, as he has, to maintaining the Hyde Amendment prohibition of the use of taxpayer funds for abortion, is it really the spirit of Vatican II to insist that the law also prohibit private individuals from opting to pay an extra premium for reproductive services?

No Catholic in good conscience could support our neighbor?s personal choice to purchase such reproductive coverage, and we offer the fullness of our faith to form individual conscience in order that this basic precept is

understood.

But is it proper to insist that the law simply coerce the hearts and minds of others? Was it not once the calling of the church to convert, not coerce? Do we not commit injustice by continuing to place the health of millions of uninsured in jeopardy when we ask the law not just to protect the conscience of Catholic health care practitioners, but to impose by law our view of conscience on non-Catholic health care workers as well? Yes, ?here on earth, God?s work is our own,? as Ted Kennedy?s older brother JFK told us, but our Lord Jesus did his own preaching and healing, he did not expect Caesar to do it for him.

While Ted Kennedy understood the law could not impose faith, he knew it was instrumental to building a just society: reforming immigration in 1965 (abolishing irrational quotas); creating a federal cancer research program in 1971 that quadrupled the amount spent on the number one disease affecting millions of Americans each year; promoting women?s equality in college sports with the passage of Title IX in 1972; curbing the corrupting influence of money in politics with the public financing system for presidential candidates in 1974; securing the creation of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday in 1983; bringing racial justice to South Africa by spearheading the 1986 anti-apartheid efforts; co-authoring in the 1990s, the Family and Medical Leave Act helping business to begin to understand the Catholic insight that ?work is for man; man is not for work; allowing for student loans at subsidized rates; passing the law that allows employees to keep health insurance after leaving a job; sponsoring needed increases in the minimum wage; and on and on. The work of social justice is never finished, he observed. How correct he was.

Ted Kennedy?s life expired before his dream of health care as human right was realized. Whether that dream will, as the senatorial lion roared in inspirational voice, ?live on? is left to us.

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