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How Sen. Kennedy made me a better Catholic

Suzanne Morse | Aug. 28, 2009 NCR Today

In my front foyer hangs a signed, framed copy of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's 1994 campaign poster. The headline of the piece reads "His Voice is Always Heard."

I was a college intern in the senator's Boston office the summer of 1994, the last time we debated access to healthcare as a nation, and the last time that we needed to be reminded of Sen. Kennedy's importance. A year later, I was hired to be a staffer in the district office, where I worked for three years. Just out of college and embarking on a career, my experience as an aide to Sen. Kennedy also helped me to understand my Catholic faith better. It shaped my values and made me who I am today.

What you quickly learn in working in the office of Sen. Kennedy is that he took the business of helping the least among us -- those without a voice, the poor, the disabled, the disadvantaged -- very seriously. And so we all took it seriously. It was our job to listen, to help to the best of our ability, and to make sure that the people of Massachusetts understood that they had an ally in the Senate if they needed help with their Social Security check, their Medicare coverage, or bringing a family member into this country.

The example was set by the senator himself. If a tragedy happened, like the massive fire that destroyed Malden Mills in Methuen, the senator was on hand as quickly as possible, making sure he offered whatever assistance was available to workers. At events, he would always stop to listen to the many men and women who would approach him to ask for his help on an issue. And those requests would be quickly assigned to a staff member to ensure that they didn't slip through the cracks.

In the next several days and weeks, we will be hearing a lot about the senator's legislative accomplishments, so many of which reflect Catholic social teaching. More children have health insurance and to early education because of Ted Kennedy. The minimum wage is higher because of Ted Kennedy. Families can take care of ill loved ones without fear of losing their jobs because of Ted Kennedy.

But where Sen. Kennedy helped me to understand my Catholic faith, to help my brothers and sisters when they needed it, to see wrong and try to right it, was not in the large-scale legislative efforts but in the individual actions. It was in assisting the person who picked up the phone or wrote the letter to say, "I don't know where else to turn, and I need help" and the expectations that we could use what power we had to help them. That, to me, is the essence of Catholic social teaching. And that's how I hope to continue to use my voice and live out my faith.

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