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The Venom Against Sen. Kennedy

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 28, 2009 NCR Today

You knew it was coming. The venom that has been spewed at Senator Ted Kennedy by certain rightwing Catholics is starting to be spewed at Boston?s Cardinal-Archbishop. In a letter to Cardinal O?Malley posted on the website of the American Life League, Judie Brown writes: ?We are aware of the impending disaster that is about to take place at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Basilica in your Archdiocese?We are therefore astounded that you are permitting a funeral Mass for this man at the Basilica, and that you have obviously approved the appearance of President Barack Obama, the United States president who has done more to facilitate the direct killing of innocent children before birth than any president in the history of this nation.?

Impending disaster? What is disastrous about the Church burying one of its own? Sen. Kennedy, like us all, was a sinner. And, yes, he was wrong about abortion rights. But, I never sensed that his position on abortion was rooted in malice. I think like many politicians of his day his position grew out of a misplaced sense of the role of Church teaching in shaping public policy. He had watched anti-Catholic bigots say his brother, Jack Kennedy, was unfit for the presidency because he would be taking orders from the Church and embraced his brother?s position, articulated in his famous speech to the Houston Ministerial Association that he considered his religion ?private.? I think Jack Kennedy got that wrong ? indeed, it is one of the central arguments of my book Left at the Altar.

It would be a disaster for the Church if we were to refuse to bury Sen. Kennedy from a Catholic Church. That would be a scandal. The Good Shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep. The Lord was crucified not because of his ethical teachings but because he said God?s mercy was greater than any ethical teachings, and proceeded to dine with sinners.

I predict that once the television pictures of the funeral Mass make their way through the airwaves, the venom directed against the Senator will begin to be directed at the priests who are present and at the Cardinal for permitting the funeral Mass. I wish they did not have to go through what may prove a painful ordeal but I am not entirely upset that they will have to face this viciousness personally. I hope they will realize how damaged the pro-life movement is for being led by people so filled with hate. I hope they will realize that the Pharisees today, like the Pharisees of two centuries ago, are those who are truly lost ? and, like the Good Shepherd, seek them out as well. Even those who write and say hateful things about Sen. Kennedy are not removed from God?s mercy. No one is.

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