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Sen. Kennedy's funeral

Richard McBrien | Sep. 28, 2009 Essays in Theology

There is a Latin phrase in the Easter Vigil liturgy, "*O felix culpa*" ("O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" -- from the Easter Proclamation, also known as the *Exultet*, from its first word, "Rejoice").

In clerical circles at least, the expression "*felix culpa*" has frequently been used to describe an unfortunate event or circumstance that has a good, though unintended or unexpected, consequence.

The venomous (and I choose that adjective deliberately) reaction to Cardinal Sean O'Malley's presence at Sen. Edward Kennedy's funeral in Boston Aug. 29 was just such a development?a "*felix culpa*," or "happy fault." I'll explain why in a moment.

There is no one in the United States hierarchy with greater impeccable anti-abortion credentials than the archbishop of Boston. It is also true of Cardinal O'Malley that he has good pastoral judgment.

Thus, during the 2004 election campaign when some American bishops were threatening to deny Holy Communion to the other senator from Massachusetts, John Kerry, who also happened to be that year's Democratic candidate for president of the United States, Sen. Kerry's own bishop, Cardinal O'Malley, did not follow suit.

If any bishop might have denied Sen. Kerry Communion because of his pro-choice (not pro-abortion) votes in the U. S. Senate, it was surely the cardinal-archbishop of Boston. But he chose not to make such a threat or hand down such an order to his priests.

In other words, Cardinal O'Malley showed then, as he did again by attending Sen. Kennedy's funeral, that it is possible to be vigorously anti-abortion while at the same time exercising pastoral prudence.

Why, then, did I describe the harsh reaction to the cardinal's presence at the Kennedy funeral last month as a "*felix culpa*," or "happy fault"?

Because it showed good, conservative bishops like Cardinal O'Malley just how extreme and even fanatical some Catholics can be, and are, in the anti-abortion cause.

We here at the University of Notre Dame saw that extremism in action in connection with our graduation ceremony in May, when the likes of Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, and Alan Keyes, Barack Obama's opponent in the 2004 Senate race in Illinois, led the on-campus protests.

The event proved to be a triumphant success and a dramatic repudiation of the 80-odd bishops (not including Cardinal O'Malley, by the way) who had publicly protested the university's selection of President Obama as its commencement speaker and recipient of an honorary doctorate.

One archbishop, Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., recently went on record in criticism of the "loud tactics" of some of his fellow bishops. (See his interview with Tom Roberts in the *National Catholic Reporter*, "Bishop decries 'combative tactics' of a minority of U. S. bishops," 8/26/09.)

There is a persistent rumor that Archbishop Pietro Sambi, papal nuncio to the United States, had also privately criticized those bishops at a recent meeting of the U.S. bishops' conference, and that he has given the green light to other bishops, like Archbishop Sheehan, to speak out on the issue.

Some of the nastiest rhetoric from the anti-abortion forces in the Catholic church has come, however, from lay people, and it was directed most recently at surely one of the least likely targets in the entire Catholic community, namely, Cardinal O'Malley.

According to *The Boston Globe*, the archdiocese received "hundreds of phone calls and e-mails," in addition to negative comments by bloggers and some anti-abortion organizations which took the Cardinal to task for participating in the Kennedy funeral. Archbishop Raymond Burke, formerly of St. Louis and now the prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, or Vatican Supreme Court, told a Washington gathering last week that "Neither Holy Communion nor funeral rites should be administered to such politicians." One of Cardinal O'Malley's sharpest critics was Raymond Arroyo, anchor and news director on Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network.

The cardinal responded to this criticism on his own blog, excerpts of which were published in the *Globe* (Michael Paulson, "O'Malley defends role at Kennedy rites," 9/3/09).

He warned against "harsh judgments" and attributing "the worst motives" to people with whom Catholics have disagreements, saying "these attitudes and practices do irreparable damage to the communion of the church."

"If any cause is motivated by judgment, anger or vindictiveness," he continued, "it will be doomed to marginalization and failure."

And to those who argued that Sen. Kennedy did not merit a Catholic funeral because of his support for abortion rights, the Cardinal wrote: "In the strongest terms I disagree with that position."

"We will not change hearts by turning away from people in their time of need and when they are experiencing grief and loss," he added. "Our proclamation of the truth is hindered when we are divided and fighting with each other."

Sound words from Cardinal O'Malley.

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