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In thanksgiving for Ted Kennedy's legacy of faith-filled service

Douglas W. Kmiec | Nov. 26, 2008

The great presidential contest is concluded. The words and expectations of promise and hope sit well upon a Republic troubled by war and financial ruin. Much ink has already run explaining the outcome, but oddly, most if not all have overlooked a game-changing endorsement ? that of Ted Kennedy in January 2008. Just a short time later, Kennedy would be diagnosed with brain cancer, which today he is fighting in the usual stoic way the Kennedys handle adversity.

In politics, no one is free of controversy and Ted Kennedy has had his share. Yet, it cannot be gainsaid that he has lived JFK's inaugural observation that "here on earth, God's work must truly be our own." Kennedy's faith is that of Francis calling us to look first to the needs of the poor. It is the faith of Benedict and Thomas Aquinas calling us to discipline our minds and to understand the importance of seeking good and avoiding evil. It is the faith of Thomas More reminding us that on this earth it is up to us to establish legal and political systems of justice. It is the faith of John Paul II who invited us to cross the threshold, not in fear, but with hope.

Ted Kennedy's faith also calls 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. It has served the narrow, partisan political interests of some to keep us divided, and those who profit politically by such division were -- regretfully -- present again in 2008.

Often our most profound disagreements have been over the most innocent -- the unborn. We grasp the necessary primacy of the right to life, but then seemingly cannot comprehend that there may be more than a single way to build a "culture of life." The church has always meant this phraseology to be far broader than the reversal of one, aberrant Supreme Court opinion.

Ted Kennedy has built up that culture by: 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 in 1996 that allows employees to

keep health insurance after leaving a job; sponsoring needed increases in the minimum wage; requiring more rigorous testing of public school students in 2001; and even in the last few months in the midst of his own illness, securing Senate passage of a measure requiring doctors to provide parents with the latest information about caring for children with disabilities as well as available support services and networks that can help parents unfamiliar with Down syndrome choose life. The bill also calls for creation of a national registry of families willing to adopt the disabled child. Today, 80 to 90 percent of women who learn they are carrying an unborn child with Down syndrome opt for abortion. Kennedy and co-sponsor Senator Sam Brownback, R-Kansas, believe accurate information about services available will bring that tragically obscene rate down.

The legislative accomplishments of Ted Kennedy remind us how our faith is less categorical demand than the extension of empathy, compassion and assistance to those who stand in need among us now, whether that is a mother facing an unwanted or complicated pregnancy or a worker who was been left behind in the race for corporate greed that now gives rise to the financial bail-out.

With his early endorsement of the new president-elect, Ted Kennedy was one of the first to invite us to contemplate replacing "the politics of fear with the politics of hope." Thank you, Senator, in this case, as in so many you have done your nation a great service.

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