NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Douglas Kmiec on the crossorads of faith and politics

Joe Ferullo | Oct. 24, 2012 NCR Today

Catholic scholar Douglas Kmiec was reviled by some in the church when he endorsed Barack Obama in the 2008 election. He said then that social justice concerns drove his decision. He was even denied Communion at a service in Los Angeles, though then-Cardinal Roger Mahony made the priest involved send Kmiec a letter of apology.

Kmiec then found himself embroiled in controversy after being named by Obama as U.S. Ambassador to Malta. There, he actively pushed a faith-based, ecumenical agenda, one that found disfavor with the State Department even though Kniec says the president fully supported his actions.

Now, as the 2012 election approaches, Kmiec tells the *Los Angeles Times* [1] he still strongly backs Obama -- and it is the overall issue of social justice that continues to be his main motivator.

Here are some excerpts from the *Times* interview by columnist Patt Morrison:

You are antiabortion; Obama is in favor of abortion rights. But you also see abortion as part of a broader policy position, including issues like the death penalty, poverty and war. You don't have a single-issue test for a candidate.

There is a tradition we trace back to Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago, of the seamless garment -- all life issues are interrelated: abortion, capital punishment, war, a family wage, the environment. You can't take these things apart. More and more Catholics understand that, but some very important Catholics are resistant.

People on all sides tend to run to get the law on their side and then to say, "See? We're right." That kind of smugness cuts off dialogue. If you have a message about the sanctity of marriage or human life, deliver it to *me*. Move *my* heart. Change *my* mind as I'm sitting in your congregation. Don't run to Sacramento or Washington and put it in some statute and then say, "I'm right because the law is on my side."

Everybody wants to solve [same-sex marriage] with law. I don't need the state to define marriage for me. I need the state to treat citizens equally, to give everyone the benefit of the rule of law and not shape it to favor one side or the other. At the same time, give individual churches the opportunity to define marriage as they read their religious practices.

The president promotes social justice as if he were a Catholic. I get in trouble when I say that. I was fooled by one of my friends in the White House. He called and said, "I want you to be the first to know Barack Obama has converted to Catholicism." He let me talk for 10 minutes about how I knew it was going to happen, and all the while, laughter is building on the other side, and he said, "Isn't it April 1 in Malta as it is in the U.S.?

What are your thoughts on the 2012 campaign?

[Mitt] Romney says 47% won't vote for him because they're dependent on government -- it's not that we're

dependent on government; we're dependent on each other, and government is one means [to] fulfill our obligation of love and service.

Ronald Reagan at the '80 convention said five words framed what [he was] going to do: family, neighborhood, work, peace, freedom. I think he would be closer to a Democrat [now] than this Ayn Rand notion: the poor are parasites, leave me alone.

We don't want to be left alone. We want to be in dialogue with those who see the world differently, and to live in peace.

Are you still a Republican?

I would view myself more as an independent now, and I suppose the Republicans would breathe a sigh of relief because they wouldn't want me anyway.

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