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Exploring the true meaning of anti-Catholicism

Bill Tammeus | Nov. 13, 2013 A small c catholic

I was a freshman in a physics class at the University of Missouri on Nov. 22, 1963, when, halfway through the hour, someone stuck his head into our classroom and announced that President John F. Kennedy had been shot in Dallas.

Our professor's response: "I know this news doesn't make transistors sounds very interesting, but stay seated. We're going to finish the hour." And we did.

Among my many thoughts as I sat there not thinking about transistors was the possibility that someone with virulent anti-Catholic prejudice had shot America's first Catholic president. It seemed plausible given all the anti-Catholic trash talk before Kennedy's election.

Even my own Presbyterian pastor in my Illinois hometown had warned the congregation that if Kennedy were elected, the pope would run the country. It was, of course, balderdash, and I didn't buy it even then, although coming from a pastor it had the veneer of authority on it.

Fifty years later, charges of anti-Catholicism have taken on a much different hue. Today, the "anti-Catholic" label gets applied mostly by traditionalist Catholics who tend to see enemies of the church everywhere. It's not an attractive trait.

My previous *NCR* column [1] -- an open letter to Pope Francis asking that he remove Bishop Robert W. Finn of Kansas City, Mo., from office -- produced exactly such defensive and angry responses, especially from people who parroted this misguided post from Bill Donohue [2] of the Catholic League, a post to which I responded on my daily "Faith Matters" blog [3]. But by the time I responded, my email had filled up with hate mail denouncing me as someone who has long hated the Catholic church and calling me many vile names.

By my critics' faulty, category-error reasoning, I'm judged to be anti-Catholic because I support the ordination of Protestant women as clergy; I believe abortion should remain legal (and quite rare) because in a few cases it's the least evil of a series of evil choices; and I once suggested that then-Pope Benedict XVI seemed a little tone-deaf in some of his speeches, especially the 2006 speech in Regensburg, Germany [4], and could use some help with that so he wouldn't stir up anger against him and the church unnecessarily.

These positions do not constitute anti-Catholicism. Rather, they constitute my best judgment as a Protestant who loves the Catholic church.

If you want to see real anti-Catholic vitriol, check the theological father of Presbyterians, John Calvin, who thought -- and wrote -- that the pope was the anti-Christ. Or, in more modern times, you can find true anti-Catholic sludge coming from the Ku Klux Klan and other radical groups.

To confuse that kind of vicious nonsense with critiques of certain social or political policies on which the church may have taken an official stance is to engage in the same silliness that happens when any criticism of

the state of Israel is declared to be anti-Semitic.

It turned out that my initial question 50 years ago about whether JFK's attacker was anti-Catholic was off base.

Indeed, in the (botched) Warren Commission Report [5] on the assassination, the term Catholic is barely mentioned. And the one reference to anti-Catholicism concerns a note about accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald attending what he described as a right-wing political meeting a few weeks before Kennedy was killed, a gathering at which he heard rhetoric that he himself described as anti-Catholic.

The anti-Catholic attitudes we saw before JFK's election are largely gone in an era in which a majority of the justices on the U.S. Supreme Court are Catholic. And yet charges of anti-Catholicism continue, many of them nearly as misguided as the true anti-Catholics were in the past.

Fifty years after JFK's death, it's not anti-Catholic to describe and critique Catholic history, including the Crusades. It is, however, anti-Catholic to suggest that this history is nothing but darkness. Catholics should appreciate the former and denounce the latter.

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