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A Tale of Two Presidents

by Anthony Egan SJ

Sixty years ago another Catholic, John F Kennedy, was installed as President of the United States. The first, in fact. The first Catholic to run, Democrat Al Smith, lost the 1928 election to Republican Herbert Hoover. Part of this was due to deep-seated anti-Catholic prejudice, rooted in a fear that a Catholic president would govern the country under instruction from the Vatican.

To allay such fears, Kennedy insisted that he would govern solely according to the Constitution and legislative process of the United States. Despite this, his election was welcomed by American Catholics.

How different today! Joseph Biden's Catholicism never got a look in during the election campaign, not even – so far as I could tell – from his opponents. People took Biden's religion for granted. Except, well, for some of the United States Catholic bishops, who objected to his alleged support for abortion.

On 20 January, a Jesuit priest Leo O'Donovan (a family friend of Biden) said the opening prayer at the inauguration. The following day, during the traditional prayer service for the new president at Washington National Cathedral, two sisters prayed during the virtual service, as did (among others) a Greek Orthodox Patriarch and the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. But Catholic bishops, even those sympathetic to Biden, were conspicuously absent.

This absence, which reads like (social?) distancing, no doubt due to the abortion issue, is disturbing and ironic. It is disturbing because it displays an apparent unease with how we live as believers in a modern secular democracy – and how believing politicians can, and should, behave. Quite simply, the age of the Church determining public policies in states (and I am told it did in countries like Ireland until recently) is over.

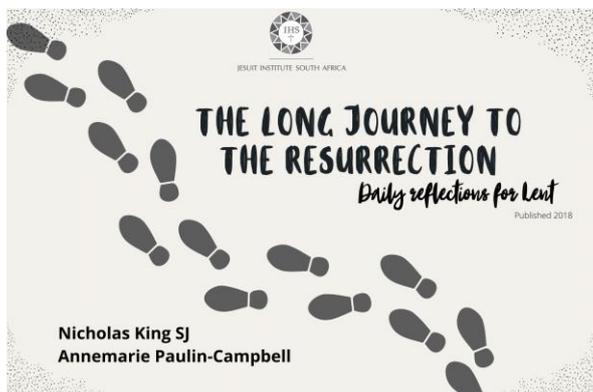
Secular democratic states determine policy according to secular reasoning; many of them open to religiously rooted insights and proposals during the process. Kennedy himself recognised this in 1960 – and followed through on it during his brief presidency. No one among the bishops then seemed to dispute this. If anything they were just delighted that 'one of ours' was president.

Granted, Kennedy never had to address the abortion issue. Abortion was only legalised in the US in 1973, ten years after his assassination.

Furthermore, when we read Catholic Social Teaching (CST) closely, we see similar principles involved. CST works on the assumption that faith in public life matters, that Christian ethics needs to feed into policy, while usually articulated in a tone that is reasonable to everyone – not just members of the Catholic Church. It also implicitly suggests that Catholic legislators need to do this themselves.

Ironically, listening to Joe Biden's speeches, I am struck by how far they reflect CST: opposition to racism, care for the poor, the environment, and at this time rolling out vaccines and rebuilding an economy damaged by Covid-19.

If the US bishops continue their indifference to Biden, will they miss out on contributing to the rebuilding of the country after Trump? That would be a missed opportunity.



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