

John F. Kennedy: Catholic Manhood, Fraternal Sacrifice and the Christian Nation

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Generation X takes a shot at Grandpa

She was in her young thirties, friendly, articulate, working at a neoconservative think tank, easy to look at but increasingly difficult to listen to. She was explaining the “Kennedy Compromise”—how JFK’s speech to the Houston Ministerial Association (1960) on the separation of Church and State had introduced a fatal flaw into Catholic thinking about the relationship of Church teaching and the public life of Catholic officials. She linked President Kennedy to Governor Mario Cuomo and Senator John Kerry as the rightful heirs of his wrongful error. Both would be proud to acknowledge such a father. But they represent his legacy no more than the surviving brother who bears his name. And the young lady’s ingratitude betrayed an impiety as well as an ahistorical propositionalism currently infecting certain young Catholic thinkers. Charles Peguy, the French Catholic patriot who took a bullet to the forehead in WWI, could explain if he had not died at the front. Peguy was “horrified,” he wrote, to discover that what was “to us an instinct has for the young become a matter of *propositions*... a matter of logic.” Péguy hoped to show “what culture is, and how utterly different from (infinitely more precious than) science, archaeology, a doctrine, erudition, and, of course, a system. You will see

what culture was like before the professors crushed it. The modern world tries to be clever. The world of the intelligent, of the advanced, of those who know... who have nothing more to learn. That is to say more precisely the world of those without a *mystique*. And they boast of it.”

Peguy had died in a war that a later generation would call meaningless. It was the war where the French stopped the German invasion with the blood of men like Peguy who saw political and religious loyalty as more than principles applied to issues. The generation which denigrated his sacrifice debated about such ideas while trusting the technology of the Maginot Line for national defense. The forgetful French were steamrolled in less than a fortnight by a German nation of military warriors. They were liberated four years later by an American brotherhood in arms. This brings us back to the Catholic life and death of John Kennedy.

The Culture that Makes us Catholic

John Kennedy was a cultural Catholic. That’s a high compliment. He was raised in a Church built on a liturgy centered on a sacrifice. The Church was a carrier of commands that preceded and defined the churchmen of the day. They transmitted what had been given them in a language they learned especially for their timeless truths. The Church defined clear roles of social obligation for males and females. When the Church Kennedy knew gathered socially there was a clear and comforting communal sensibility of the priests, the men, the women and the children. The community was ordered by clear roles and expected sacrifices from both layman and cleric. A

vocation was a call one answered, not a career one chose. Every gift bespoke an obligation, starting with the gift of life, which fostered an attitude of thanks and a duty to worship. The nation too was a gift and an obligation.

“ We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.”(11)

The Church as a body was held together by a rule of faith and male authority. God the Father had sent his Son. After that there was an election for the head man and everyone else was appointed. No one, not even the Son, escaped the obligations of obedience. Schools and hospitals were run by women who wore full body and head coverings whenever in public. The Church was as local and territorial as an urban ward heeler. And yet it spanned the globe and had a history ten times as old as his Protestant country. In some nations, the Catholic Church was a dominant matriarch and in others, an Ark that had been captured. Her central narrative and sacramental celebrations linked cosmic purpose, human history, and personal responsibility. President Kennedy had confessed to and received communion from hometown priests in Boston and battlefield priests in the Pacific. As a president he obeyed the Church’s commandments demanding

Mass attendance on Sunday and “Holy Days.” This was no publicity stunt, for it would win him no votes if publicized-- especially the holy days. A president, like his nation, responded to a world not of his own making. The Will of God and the commands of the Church were to be learned and obeyed. “Knowing what is right, I do what is wrong.” St Paul said. Men sin and Kennedy sinned but Kennedy was not a modern man in abolishing the language of sin or treating the rules of the world as man-made. For Kennedy there was a clear transcendent order which ruled even if man did not always obey.

One might enjoy a poem like *Invictus* but no man who had really been to war and sea like Kennedy thought himself the master of his fate. The God that Kennedy spoke of was not the Deist watchmaker but Franklin’s much more personal Deity to whom one prayed in times of national crisis. He was the Providential God of Lincoln and Washington who ruled the affairs of nations. But unlike Lincoln and Franklin and Washington, John Kennedy was a practicing Catholic. And while thirty something neo orthodox converts are quite impressed with the articulated fervency of their own beliefs, the Catholic Church is also defined by a set of public actions and it is not a little thing that for the first time in American history a president attended Sunday Mass in communion with his fellow churchmen in Asia and Africa and South America. The God who Kennedy worshipped abided with man in the mysterious and sacred rites of Catholic communion. He was a God whose Son had become man. His birth had unleashed the furious bloodletting of a tyrant against the males of His generation. His Father ordered Him to the

Cross and he willingly gave His life in his thirties for the good of His people. Kennedy understood God's work in the unfolding events of history. God was not private and He did not allow Himself to be kept out of politics. Quite the opposite! God is the public master in a world of warring nations with a nuclear cloud on the horizon. If God had only a little time for peering through hotel windows to spy on a night's tryst, it was precisely because He was taken with bigger affairs. Tomorrow, nations would be praying for God's help as war, famine, plague, and death remounted on their relentless ride. Accuse Kennedy of many a sin but do not say his God was private. If anything, accuse him of setting off spaces and places in his private life when he acted as if there was no God.

The Church in Public-Not Always the Bride of Christ

In Houston Kennedy said "I do not speak for my church on public matters –and the church does not speak for me."(1&7) At the time the Church's two institutional positions in America were a) need for an ambassador to the Vatican and b) *federal* aid to parochial schools. Did Kennedy's rejection of these positions really mean the Irish chieftain had become a Brahmin Deist? Had he forgotten the advice of Robert Frost at his inaugural to "Be more Irish than Harvard?" Apparently there is little need for the young Catholic orthodox to learn history or biography—they have their principles to apply. Let's allow a little history to intrude anyway. There had been a memorable very clear intrusion by the Vatican regarding

American politics, and Joseph Kennedy (JFK's father) knew the incident well. When Joseph Kennedy was in the Roosevelt cabinet, Roosevelt was challenged from the left by Huey Long, the populist governor of Louisiana, and from the populist right by Fr Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest" from Michigan. If Fr Coughlin used his tremendous influence with Catholic workingmen and teamed with the mostly Protestant supporters of Long in the South, a good deal of the Roosevelt coalition would be siphoned by the third party effort.

That was the only scenario which could lose the White House to the Republicans. The senior Kennedy helped arrange a meeting between Eugenio Pacelli, then the Vatican secretary of state and soon to be Pope Pius XII with President Roosevelt. Fr. Coughlin was silenced. Huey Long was assassinated (that is a chronological fact not a conspiratorial one.) Could a Catholic office holder be similarly silenced by a Vatican visit? If he could, would any American in his right mind allow such a compromise of the office of the Presidency? Kennedy had to clarify this for Protestants who legitimately wondered if Vatican authority could apply to policy matters of the State if a Catholic were president. The Vatican acts as a State as well as a Church. This may escape some young Catholics who spend a good deal of time contemplating the "theology of the body" while virtually never seriously reflecting on the anthropology of the "body politic." Could the Vatican's State interests ever be different than the United States? Does an American citizen have any duty to the foreign policy of the Vatican as a

State? Could the effete intrigue of the mostly European church diplomats ever produce a situation where the “Vatican position” would differ from the US position? Since Catholics call the Pope “Holy Father,” would a Catholic have to yield to the Vatican position? Fr Coughlin was one of the most powerful men in America. The Vatican spoke, and he spoke no more. Maybe this whole issue about following “church policy” is more complicated than “respect human dignity and seek the common good.” Watch out Generation X -this is called history.

King David and the wages of family sin

Like King David before him, John Kennedy sinned in the flesh and like David before him, he lost his son in infancy. He was a man with deep flaws and a great gift. His blood relatives and hometown successors copied his flaws and, like David’s grandsons, spawned in the next generation a grotesque perversion of law and nature. Both Kennedy’s local church and home state have suffered this inheritance, and the saga of their mutual degradation would make even the corrupted Northern Kingdom of Israel blush for shame. The morphing of sexual license into sexual perversion, and the slide from bending the rules into defying the Law is part of the Kennedy legacy in Catholic Boston. Still King David with all his sins was a different man than his disastrous grandson Rebekah. They were as different as the man who pulled endangered men free from the Pacific Ocean and the one who left a frightened girl trapped in a Massachusetts river bottom. The legacy of John Kennedy’s sins - private and public - is more

tragic and grievous than his nonexistent “Compromise.” He and his family and his nation have paid for his sins. But what of his virtues?

“Because she has loved much” –and “David was a man after God’s heart”

How could the men of Israel still sing of David –the adulterer and murderer? This is just the lesson needed for the “new faithful” youth in their twenties and thirties with their “Catholic issues” who have moved beyond the babyboomers and our tired quarrels about ancient wars like Vietnam and obsolete heroes—like John Kennedy. Every generation needs to hear of a saint most unlike them and thus most necessary for their own conversion from self satisfaction to Christian heroism. You don’t like babyboomers who think Kennedy a hero? Then let a babyboomer argue that he is a saint and remind you of the “holiness of the warrior.” Begin by assuming with me that you can neither understand his holiness nor can imagine his worst sins. Because his worst sins had nothing to do with People magazine or Marilyn Monroe. He sinned against Uriah –a military and political betrayal of a Catholic Asian you barely know. And sins against nations don’t usually enter the lexicon of the crunchy con sipping organic coffee or the casual gender mixers at theology on tap. You would have to think in a different dimension to understand the holiness of a man like John Kennedy. You would have to remember Joshua meeting the angel of the Lord’s armies at a place declared *holy* just before they took Jericho. You would have to be

introduced to a dimension of masculine courage and fraternity that you don't know because you only know the college boys of your own generation. (By the way, I have great faith that eventually your generation will both heroically restore our nation and protect the Christians of Asia and Africa in their struggle against tyranny, famine, and plague. This is meant as fatherly chastisement.) There is a place where God dwells, and men who walk there are holy, and the place is a battlefield. It is not just found in Tolkien novels. John Kennedy was a saint like Mary Magdalen was a saint. Scrutinizing the details of their lives might be an occasion of sin for the Devil's Advocate but like the Magdalen, he had loved much. He was a martyr, if not for Christ's church, then certainly for a nation which protected that Church. He loved in a way quite foreign to today's young careful principled orthodox. Will you smirk? Who did Kennedy love anyway—a lady of the night?

Love God and Love your neighbor

Actually he loved God—a big terrible God he loved. He loved Him with the ethnic piety of an Irishman and the reflective stoicism of a Roman. He was a Roman not a Greek. He often said his night prayers on his knees. He was a warrior-orator not a philosopher-poet. We have all heard it is not those who cry “Lord, Lord” who are saved but all who do the Will of God. What if the Will of God is that the Japanese be stopped so the Philippines can be Catholic and that the North Korean communists be fought so the South Koreans can send missionaries around the world? What if the acts of

nations—the warlike acts of nations - are in keeping with the Will of God and you are home blogging on a safe orthodox site crying “Lord, Lord” against all those terrible violent men who dare stop those other violent men who aren’t reading your clever articles. What if the Will of God is that the tyrant fall? What if God is unconvinced why “orthodox” Catholic college grads are at think tanks and not in the military? What if God’s Will scoffs at Just War Principle IIIBii that keeps a young American Catholic male from standing between an African woman and the Muslim sword? What if God is the God of the outdoors and not a set of propositions?

John Kennedy loved someone you might not know the way he knew her. He loved his country and he loved her in a way you’ve never thought of. You may have heard of this but you have never really felt it. Like Moses and Jesus and every American man of Kennedy’s generation, he had seen many males of his birth cohort fall to a tyrant’s sword. For Kennedy that included his older brother who died in a bombing mission in August 1944. A persistent resonating theme throughout Kennedy’s life was the duty to carry forth a tradition of sacrificial brothers in arms. This was not a really neat movie to him—it shaped his manhood which was part of a corporate identity he shared with the living and the dead. His link to the dead allowed him to challenge the living to carry on the work for which others had given their last full measure of devotion. So when he was in Houston, he answered the ministers’ objections by reminding them of the way he loved the country and appealed to them not as Protestant clergy but as fellow American protectors. He did this by remembering the Alamo—an historical sacrifice which shapes

the imagination of every Texan patriot. He had asked his researchers if there were Catholics who died at the Alamo but couldn't find out. He did find a few Irish names though and figured out a way to make his point. "For side by side with Bowie and Crockett died McCafferty and Bailey and Carey—but no one knew if they were Catholic or not—for there was no religious test at the Alamo." Kennedy had a Spartan conception of citizenship. It was an earlier tradition in New England and a still honored tradition in the American South—that the structural lattice of citizenship was defined by the military obligation of adult males. He reminded Protestants that Catholics had won their place in the contest for political leadership the old fashioned way—they died for it. The blood of the martyrs and the communion of saints—Kennedy knew these realities deep in his marrow and he shared them in a language that left Protestant ministers proud that they were his fellow Americans. Kennedy defined manhood as taking up a civic duty to fight for freedom under God. He saw his neighbor first as the inner bond of fellow citizens, then allies of other countries, then adversaries to be talked to or fought. Even though men were bound by duty to these concentric circles of military fellowship he could also see all men as neighbors on mankind's planet threatened by nuclear bombs and beckoned by the stars.

Words that made men

He turned the sexless civics class about propositions and levels of

government into an outdoor call to arms. He was a master of the word because he spoke in a voice taught by hearing the sounds of men fighting and dying on a battlefield. His patriotism secured strong walls to enable daring missions outside those walls. Kennedy could elicit from men the common love of country that called forth sacrifice –his oratory was much more than the eloquent evocation of memory which was Ronald Reagan’s strength. He did not simply remind us of a glorious past—he challenged men in speech to join the communion of warriors who had preceded them. He employed speech as “agon”—a contest between the speaker and the group whom the speaker attempts to move. Protestants black and white knew this tradition well from their churches. For them it resonated with the earliest Christian rabbi who shaped men with the Word and was devastatingly effective in the “agon” with his threatened detractors and trick questioners. Both democracy and religion depend on leaders able to persuade men in groups. Kennedy once said that Winston Churchill mobilized the English language to defend Western civilization. The mobilization of the American tongue to define a national memory which now permanently included Catholics in the American covenant was a monumental achievement of character, courage, and a voice instructed by a great and loving heart. After Kennedy opened the covenant for Catholics he would try to bring black men and immigrants in with him. He had fought an old American prejudice and he had done it by evoking a sacrificial brotherhood of blood.

“In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.”(11)

For the analogical Catholic mind this was a spectacular achievement. For the propositional Protestant reckoning –this is the great compromise. He had opened his Houston speech by reminding the ministers that while he was there to address the so called religious issue, the most critical issue before us was “the spread of communist influence until it now festers 90 miles off the coast of Florida.” Three years later a man who had lived in Russia and demonstrated for Cuba agreed with that listing of priorities and would assassinate the brave warrior who had mobilized the English language in the great fight of his day against that godless armed idea. Maybe “compromise” is the wrong word.

John Kennedy loved the men who loved their country and in his oratory he always invited men to the band of brothers to strengthen the community of patriots. At West Point in 1962 he told the graduates:

“But you have one satisfaction, however difficult those days may be: when you are asked by a President of the United States or by any other American what you are doing for your country, no man's answer will be clearer than your own. And that moral motivation which brought you here in the first place is part of your training here as well. West Point was not built to produce technical experts alone. It was built to produce men committed to the defense of their country, leaders of men who understand the great stakes which are involved, leaders who can be entrusted”

The classical teaching of man's social nature by Aristotle and Aquinas is that man is perfected in community by loving a "common good." And for Kennedy the completion of man in political community with other men was as natural as the completion of man and woman in marriage. For Kennedy politics always had something to do with masculinity. Unlike Reagan, Carter, Clinton, and Bush, Kennedy never sought his wife's advice about political life. Politics was for him a way of living fully by loving fully and calling men to share that love. He had what Thomas Carlyle said was the mark of the great man. "The fact of existence is great to him. Fly as he will, he cannot get out of the awful presence of this reality. Fearful and wonderful, real as life real as death is this universe to him." He saw the warring nations and the waiting moon. He internalized the challenge of these realities in the definition of his own manhood. He called other men to share the same integrated identity of national adventure. For Kennedy political identity and masculine identity were tied together by a cord that could no more be severed than one could imagine a girl as an altar boy or a woman as a priest. His love was big hearted and demanding—it could inspire a family and yet it was quite beyond family. His family was big but his country was bigger and all of those loyalties were bound by the oath he finished his Houston speech with—"so help me God."

Liturgical Man

In many ways John Kennedy was the new associational man that Virgil Michel, the Benedictine pioneer of liturgical reform, had envisioned.(2) Kennedy probably knew nothing of this “Germanic movement” tying liturgical reform to a third way for communal social justice. Kennedy’s conception of leadership, sacrifice, and communal duty defining national identity was shaped by the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. The purpose of liturgy, the anthropologists say, is to establish proper relations between the human and divine by presenting throughout the group’s shared life a repetitive, invariant “performative statement of status.” It is essential that this enactment be encoded by others rather than the performers. Experiencing this event establishes a shared sense of time, a sacred sense of space and person, and integrates personal identity with historical and cosmic reality (The same deep liturgical identity is true of two Kennedy contemporaries- Mayor Richard Daley and Coach Vince Lombardi. Both men were daily communicants and in the rough worlds of urban politics and professional football they were legends in the integration of individual duty and communal identity(3)).

Kennedy was much more of Rome than Athens.. He understood military obligation as the defining act of citizenship and always led with this argument in dealing with the “Catholic question.” With a sure sense of “liturgical space” he stood in Berlin and reminded the citizens of that besieged city that “a thousand years ago the proudest boast of a free man

was *'Ego sum civus Romanus'* I am a citizen of Rome. Today the proudest boast of a free man is that he is a citizen of Berlin and so as a free man I say *'Ich bin Berliner'.*"

When Kennedy spoke as a free man he meant "man" - "*vir.*" He knew in Berlin and at the Alamo the gift of liberty was won by martial valor which was the mark of manhood and the guarantor of rights. Citizenship in a specific nation is the political act which incarnates the universal rights which inhere in us as creatures of God. Rights are only secure where authority is asserted. The warrior Kennedy knew as his Church had taught him that we live in a fallen world beset by evil. There were no rights of men if men did not protect those rights. There was no protection without authoritative political association. He thought the most important political virtue was courage, and he associated that with the classical understanding of manhood. In the Catholic liturgy of Sunday's Mass he attended weekly the supreme act of sacrificial manhood which ensured communion with God—the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. As a Catholic, Kennedy lived in sacred time—the yearly Church calendar and her seasons were employed to tell the narrative of salvation history. He knew the rhythms of time and place which turned masses and crowds into a reflective people with a shared memory and mission. As a Catholic he knew that before there was a written Bible there were the physical events of Christ's life and the oral word which the teacher spoke to his band of men. There is the Logos expressed in a life of action and then a writing about it. As a son of Massachusetts he knew that the armed men of Lexington and Concord were commemorated in "April of 75"

and that without their courage and military action the words on “July of 76” could not have been written. Kennedy was a man of words who thought like a man of arms ---he came from Harvard where now men of words ban the men of arms from their company. It tells in the softness and confusion of their words. As Peguy said, “A word is not the same with one man as with another. One tears it from his guts. The other pulls it out of his overcoat pocket.”

Kennedy’s charism was his ability to forge a body of men by drawing them together with an oratory of challenge and vision. The Catholic priesthood, the fraternal orders of the Holy Name Society associated with urban fire departments and police departments were comfortable places for the so called Harvard Brahmin. He was no Brahmin but he brought to the rough Irish protective fraternities a high minded purpose and grace that Catholic immigrants experienced in their high minded liturgy celebrated in their ornate churches. Cosmic purpose and working class solidarity— Kennedy knew them in Church and he elicited them in his oratory. Kennedy’s wife was glamorous and the Kennedy women knew how to campaign but the dynamic thrust of his leadership was a band of brothers who had earned their rights to leadership by their battles in a distant land. There his older brother and many others of his generation had paid their blood sacrifice, and he represented the dead as well as the living. A new generation tested in war was now asserting a claim on leadership.

The living tradition of the Catholic communion of saints was deeply ingrained in Kennedy’s civic picture of the nation. At every rally, he could

see more citizens present than those gathered in that day's congregation. In his personal life and public oratory he implied that those who had fought at the side of those who had died exerted a claim on the population as a whole. This military brotherhood is deeply resonant with the call of Christ to his apostles. He had built his Church on a communal brotherhood of courage and loyalty. When all his compatriots failed the test he gathered them back and renewed them with the Spirit. They answered with a conviction sealed in blood proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand. Christ's band of brothers outlasted the Roman empire and a few dynasties after that. If such a military notion of the Catholic priesthood seems incomprehensible today, it was not to Kennedy. The immigrant religious culture that Kennedy grew up in was served by a much more masculine clergy than the corrupted Europeans or the lavenderized clergy of the American seventies.

Kennedy, like all Catholics of his generation, knew veterans who became priests and military chaplains who became pastors. He was raised on the stories of both American and Irish martyrs of the faith. In the Catholic imagination of the time Isaac Jogues and the fighting O'Sullivans all melded in a composite of American Catholic manhood. In the *Bells of St Mary* Fr Bing Crosby taught the schoolyard boys to fight-but fight fair. That was the Catholic way. Kennedy had a unique capacity to love men—to call them into a common adventure as brothers in arms. Ronald Reagan told the American story as a grandfather reminding us of a proud past. Kennedy told the story as a man leading a charge calling other men (and he meant men) to

join him in the adventure. Kennedy had a strong sense of ecclesiology. He never mistook the Catholic Church for the American nation. Likewise he had a defined and strong sense of American identity and the role of authoritative leadership in identifying the group and defining its mission. Like a good Catholic he did not think the American mission was his creation. The “performance was encoded by others” who had gone before him. He was not creating something new but trying to live up to something we had been given. The day he was killed he was to speak to Texans about the entrusted mission: ***“We in this country, in this generation, are -- by destiny rather than choice -- the watchmen on the walls of world freedom.”***

If the Church was to carry on a mission initiated by the sacrifice of Christ and carried forth by the priesthood, then the nation was compelled to carry on the military mission bequeathed by the battlefield sacrifices of men before us. The Catholic Church was led by a fraternity of *paters* and John Kennedy would lead America with a fraternity of patriots. Communal mission, a sense of the obligations of an office, a sense of public gathering and ritual –this was liturgical man- the Catholic Kennedy - even if he voted against an ambassador to the Vatican. Eventually he even arranged a Mass in the White House (on Nov 23, 1963)-someone else could assign an ambassador.

King David and Uriah- The Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem

The hardest story to tell about John Kennedy was his worst sin—a public one. It is the betrayal that Lyndon Johnson said led to his assassination as an act of divine retribution. It is Kennedy's great betrayal as a Catholic leader and almost no one knows the story. The instigators of the crime were a famous secular newspaper, a State Department icon and a haughty Brahmin ambassador. Kennedy allowed the crime as sure as King David pulled back the troops when Uriah was fighting and let that great souled warrior be murdered. So John Kennedy betrayed the Catholic nationalists Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu.⁽⁵⁾ They were killed in a Catholic Church after a coup instigated by members of the US State Department encouraged by our ambassador and inflamed by the *New York Times*. The military, CIA, and Vice president were all against the betrayal. Kennedy did not initiate but acquiesced in the plan. There were several assassinations of unfriendly leaders in the multiple fronts in the battle against atheistic communism. There was only one assassination of an ally. Diem's Catholicism had a lot to do with his murder as secularists and ossified Protestants thought it impossible that Asians might become Catholic or that a Catholic premier could legitimately rule in a country with a majority of Buddhists. It is an ugly tale and may not be fully heard until Communist Vietnam itself remembers the Ngo brothers as the nationalist martyrs they were. The war against communism was a war of an atheist empire against free nations. Diem understood the spiritual traditions of

Confucianism and Catholicism were a much truer blend to express the soul of the Vietnamese nation than the godless materialism of the Marxism. As long as Diem was the leader, Hoi Chi Minh could not wave the nationalist banner alone. The murder of the Ngo brothers put the US. on the wrong side of the nationalist divide. The blood did not wash off. The two Catholic Vietnamese brothers were inspired by the same French personalism that animated the future Polish nationalist Pope John Paul II. They were followed in death in that November month of the dead by John Kennedy. He was assassinated 3 weeks after the brothers were killed. The mandate from heaven fell five years later against the other Catholic brother as Robert Kennedy was slain by a Palestinian Christian who was angered at RFK's support for Israel. The greatest public betrayal by John Kennedy was not against "Catholic principles" but against two Catholic brothers who were leaders of the great Christian explosion that continues today in Asia. When King David tried to get Uriah to sleep with his wife Bathsheba to cover the possible progeny of David's adultery, Uriah refused his beautiful wife because his men were in the field and he considered it improper to "lie and drink with my wife while others sleep outside in the fields of war." Ngo Diem was a lifelong principled celibate, thoroughly incorruptible and dedicated to his nation's cause and the Catholic Church. He lived in a rough neighborhood and used force on the job. Betrayed by fellow warriors under the influence of scheming officials, Uriah was murdered. Kennedy was sickened when he heard of the murder of the two brothers. When he was told they committed suicide, he dismissed the lie because he knew their faith

and the code it entailed. When the bullet ridden bodies of the brothers were displayed in photographs, their bound hands behind their backs convinced others who needed a different kind of evidence. 53, 000 “baby boomers” paid with blood for the betrayal of the Vietnamese hero by our prince warrior. He would pay his price too.

Populations in Hostage: The Catholic Soldier Repudiates MAD

Kennedy was killed in the same month of the dead that he betrayed his Catholic brother from Vietnam. But before he died he initiated a military strategy which released the world from the nuclear blackmail which prevailed at the beginning of his presidency. He altered our national defense strategy from a singular response system depending on the total war of nuclear population strikes. This deep Catholic sensibility was not attained from reading policy papers from the American Bishops conference. Nor had he called any of the Midwest bishops who twenty years later were fancying themselves experts on all things economic and nuclear. Their own fascination with turning the Bishops conference into a kind of clerical Joint Senate-House Committee probably was a status envy response to the emergence of the Catholic President as the most authoritative figure in Catholic public life. That was a dramatic change for the Catholic hierarchy in America who had socially ruled the American Catholic roost for 150 years.(6)

Kennedy's profound moral virtues of prudence, courage and justice were best displayed in his greatest "Compromise." He secretly pulled the population threatening US missiles based in Turkey as part of the Cuban missile settlement. This showed to our adversaries that it was not simply nuclear threats to *our* population centers which were unacceptable. This was a major conceptual breakthrough whose logic was not really aggressively pursued again until the presidency of Ronald Reagan. This act alone should engender a respectful piety among his grandchildren. "Compromise"—that is a good word when the technology has so outrun the men that multiple populations face incineration if someone states a principle in a way that a man in another language misunderstands. Men of postured high principle still criticize this wise and just act as "Kennedy's wink." Before the Cuban missile crisis Kennedy had a unique understanding that it was not simply diplomats but a more creative and engaged use of men in arms on the ground that would allow a pullback from the doctrine of mutual assured destruction. As he told the West Point graduates in June, 1962:

"To cite one final example of the range of responsibilities that will fall upon you: you may hold a position of command with our special forces, forces which are too unconventional to be called conventional forces which are growing in number and importance and significance, for we now know that it is wholly misleading to call this "the nuclear age," or to say that our security rests only on the doctrine of massive retaliation."

The Left at Home and Free Nations Abroad

It was not just the principled rigidity of high altitude nuclear warriors

which Kennedy had to repulse. John Kennedy came from the party of Henry Wallace and Alger Hiss and a host of men sympathetic to the atheistic socialist view of the Soviet Union. These secular intellectuals felt the Soviet Union had committed excesses, but they graciously excused the necessity of egg breaking for the socialist omelet. They concurred that national and religious loyalties were atavistic and rested on the psychological root of all evil—the authoritarian personality. Their's was a more malleable creed that saw such narrow loyalties being superseded by an international order of economic democracy and international law. All of this was quite inevitable—the natural evolutionary products of progressive history. From Lenin the Marxist to Lennon the Beatle enlightened thinking elites imagined a world with no borders and no religions. Catholic Kennedy saved the Democrats from themselves and the Air Force from Curtis Lemay. He could do this because he lived in a moral universe in which there was God who loved in a communion of persons and an Evil One who prowled about the world seeking the ruin of souls. He could do this because he was a certain kind of man capable of acts of love and acts of war. In his Berlin speech he challenged those who saw no difference between the communist and free nations---“let them come to Berlin.” And in Modesto, California he answered a Protestant heckler with his simplest creed, “May I say that it seems the great struggle today is between those who believe in no God and those who believe in God.” Kennedy lived as the Catholic Church was renewing its own consciousness as a historical actor with the convening of the Second Vatican Council. He identified with the desires of new nations to

replace colonial rule. He did not want the aftermath of World War II to be a competition between a new communist empire and the old colonial system.

To those new States whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom—and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.(11)

Like Kansas born Dwight Eisenhower, he was proud of America's identity as the first national liberation movement against an empire far away. As an Irishman he did not see America as an extension of the British Empire but as the first of her revolutionary offspring. He was sympathetic to the nationalist aspirations of emerging nations and the duties of the young military national leaders like Nasser in the Mideast. At the same time as a true religious nationalist he knew there was a special relationship America had with Israel and it had nothing to do with a Jewish lobby.

“Israel was not created in order to disappear - Israel will endure and flourish. It is the child of hope and the home of the brave. It can neither be broken by adversity nor demoralized by success. It carries the shield of democracy and it honors the sword of freedom.”

John Kennedy bore the corporate consciousness of two great actors in history's drama- the Catholic Church and the American nation. He knew them both, loved them both, had obeyed the commands of both and now

sought to lead one of them. He understood the claims the Church made on him as a man and the institutional claims it could not make on him as an office holder. John Kennedy was the Christian prince who emerged with the sword of freedom after the sundering of Christendom into the Church and the nations. He gathered men together in the fighting formation needed for the battle ahead. While Kennedy knew the future battlefields could never be perfectly clear, he made it abundantly clear that we would enter those battlefields as a united nation. For as Christian history had unfolded, it was the nation who carried the protective sword.

Jack Kennedy appealed to the intellectuals and the working men. He reminded us that Catholic or Protestant, black or white, we share a common identity, duty, and heritage as American men. Under his leadership we raised our hearts in a noble quest: at home for justice among citizens; abroad for freedom among nations; and in space for adventure among the stars. He showed us that men are perfected in community and the nation was a community of men united under God to worship, fight, and work together.

We still miss him.

Who carries His memory?

A certain generation says enough already about John Kennedy. Why idolize him? They are tired of “hero worship” of a man they do not consider a hero and think quite possibly a scoundrel. It seems like another hangover not about Kennedy but of the wallowing lingering memory of that

despicable gang-the worst generation-- the baby boomers (Just as an aside since this is a one generation to another lecture-- the really worse generation in both the Church and American political life are the folks in between the baby boomers and the WWII generation. Their birth cohort is roughly 1933-1945). If the baby boomers loved John Kennedy and the baby boomers are really the cause of all our problems, then why indulge another of their preoccupations? The generation that said “do not trust anyone over thirty” was half right—the new orthodox say, “don’t trust anyone over sixty.” Ignore dad and forget grandpa.

Maybe though, our twenty something new Catholics with their “uncompromising Catholic principles” will remember what Pope Benedict has said, “Christianity is not a set of propositions-- it is an encounter with a person, a response to an event.” Possibly history is like that too—it is an encounter with a person. The first Catholic president is a person that maybe this bright generation, facing jihadists in the Mideast and atheists in Europe with cultural disintegration at home, might want to encounter.

Who can tell the story of John Kennedy? Probably not his brother. The Camelot of John Kennedy which his wife wanted remembered was not Lancelot’s love triangle. She was absolutely right that Camelot is definitely the way to remember him. So for a moment leave the tabloids behind and remember that once there was a spot---called Camelot. This certainly is the public, countercultural, and necessary story for young men today--of King Arthur’s Round Table of Knights using might for right. I remember telling my dad once that our generation wanted to change history. The Marine

explained: “You want to change history-get a large group of armed men in agreement.” That is what King Arthur did. That is what Kennedy experienced in World War II and how he led as commander of chief. That is precisely the kind of purposeful historical community that the young men of this generation have not experienced. Several million of their cohort are in prison. Their socializing experiences are couples, mixed gender friends, and corporate offices. Even a good deal of military life has become more like a college campus than a training ground for war. Today’s young men more than ever need to hear of Camelot and find their way onto the Round Table with their American brothers. It is hard for young men to truly hear the story of Kennedy and WWII or Vietnam or Arthur and the Roundtable when they have no collective masculine memory. Indeed young men can no longer think about certain realities because the masculine vernacular has been softly outlawed by the feminist implant which rests in every American brain.

Who can tell his tale—who can say Camelot without a knowing smirk? The Democratic Party is a tad tongue tied in telling the story of Arthur-- of men united as brothers pledging to use might for right? The Republicans are equally mute, preferring grandfather Reagan and the marvel of free markets. The Protestants see no need to recall the papist warrior when they are still trying to forget Oliver Cromwell. Kennedy’s home state of Massachusetts is embarrassed that he was no feminist and that his notion of male civil unions was more the militia of Concord than the quaint perversion they now mandate. So it is hard to tell of Kennedy’s life except- “he was witty and a

good speaker.” His death has been no easier to explain. It was a hard pill for a liberal media to tell the Oswald story coherently because they expected a bullet from the right wing down South in Dallas. Their big story was civil rights as a liberal Northern campaign against the conservative racist South. But the assassination came from an articulate atheist who was a Marxist who had lived in Russia and demonstrated for Cuba. He was probably “for civil rights” and in fact had shouted to the press that his rights were being violated. Whoops! Kennedy was shot by the Left. Thanks to Jack Ruby who also acted on his own—the assassin from the hard left was portrayed as a loner with unknown ties and motives. This journalistic ambivalence has led to half a century of trying to pin the murder on some mythical right wing authority figure. Like Stalin’s death tolls, the role of atheistic Jews in the Bolshevik coup, and the role of homosexuals in the Catholic clergy abuse scandal—some stories are harder to tell than others. The hardest story of all about Jack Kennedy was his betrayal of Ngo Diem that precipitated the war in Vietnam. But we must tell the whole story to rescue the real memory. Because now, more than ever, we need a living memory of our first Catholic president.

The Father of my Father: His Lesson for Catholic Men Today

To lead our nation today to wage war righteously we need an uncommon leader of bravery and eloquence. John Kennedy was such a

leader not so long ago. Today's young men are once again entrusted with the nation's sword to fight our enemies abroad and to reform ourselves at home (10). Once again we call nations to join us in a fight against an enemy which seeks to destroy territorial free nations. This time our enemy is not a party who for class and history wages war against God and the nations. Now our enemy declares in the name of God that to establish a just community (ummah) and a righteous law (sharia) there must be a war against the nations. But he is not our only foe. In the East, the tyrannies of Communism still rule. In the West the Marxist monster has returned as a sevenfold demon denying God and gender and replacing nation and family with a faceless bureaucracy and a souless individual. And to our south-our Christian brethern of the American nations -- await an honest and fraternal alliance to face the world together. The ship we sail has hazards on every side and many nights even the hazards cannot be seen. We cannot sail alone and we cannot sail without a captain and he cannot lead without his crew. When young American men understand their deepest political identity is the national brotherhood of protection which Kennedy evoked then we will be ready for these rough waters ahead (8). It is then also that we will establish a culture of life. Nothing will end the cult of abortion more definitively then a return to this national masculine protective identity. It binds our soldiers to our priests, our policemen to our pastors, our sports heroes to our firemen, and our high school football players to our national purpose. It binds the living with the dead. Protection begets protection—that is the real culture of life. To build brotherhood under the Sovereign establishes a haven for the

sacred. This is the form and purpose of both Catholic and national brotherhood. Political life is not winning an argument by applying principles to issues. It is applying men of character to events in history. Who will carry the memory of John Kennedy if it is not the good hearted still to be challenged young Catholic men of our day? John Kennedy has had his share of poor imitators. Yet, as our Catholic father, he deserves to be imitated. To keep his memory, to requite his noble death, to repent for our sins and his - all this we owe our forefather.

“For when a great man dies, we lesser men must become a little greater ourselves to fill the void which he has left” (9).

NOTES

1) Kennedy knew of concordats that the institutional church signed with dictators in WWII and the anti-nationalist decrees of a century of Popes. Without judging the morality or wisdom of those church policies it seemed quite prudent to declare that a Catholic's duties as a president could not be dictated by the policies of church officials. For church officials, especially in politics, are often acting in the interests of the church as an international

institution not as the Bride of Christ. In his Houston speech he had clearly stated that while he highly doubted that there would be such a possibility, he would resign his office if he felt his conscience shaped by his religion conflicted with his duties as the protector of the national interests.

Kennedy's declaration wears well today as multiple papal pronouncements seem to embrace a kind of de facto pacifism and reliance on international discussions as endless necessary options before military force is used. This seems much more the product of a European denationalized and emasculated culture than the mandate of the Gospel. For a responsible nation to adopt this effete posture would be an abdication of civil office.

A parallel abdication of authority is the American bishops' disinclination to act with fraternal assertion in cleaning the priesthood of its ever sickening homosexual subculture. The personality of the homosexual, the quasi-institutional embrace of pacifism, and the reluctance to exercise authority in both church and civil life are not unrelated. John Paul II of course was the most manly pope in a century, but his experience under the two great totalitarian regimes of our times biased his teaching toward the dignity of the individual somewhat at the expense of the communal requirement for authority. This is no problem as long as Catholics in the cesspools of moral anarchy know that the "dignity of the person" as a first principle can too easily morph into "the autonomy of the individual" which is not a solution but the problem facing the modern northern democracies. Pope John Paul in his writing continually relates freedom to truth and the mystery of the person with the identity of Christ. This however is not true in

the “social teaching principles” of U.S. Bishops. They seem embarrassed by mention of God, unaware of free religious expression as a social good, and ever zealous in articulating a deChristianized language to win them some anonymous Christian award if such a ceremony could be held in public. They apparently have read neither Common Sense by Tom Paine or Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe—two pretty powerful public arguments for social justice in American history that did not shy from Scripture or the Living God. Separated from Scripture, their social pronouncements are quite mute about the duty to worship, the necessity of Authority, obedience to the Law, and military obligation.

2) In the 1930’s, Catholic social justice movements were represented by two Catholic priests - Msgr. John Ryan and Fr. Virgil Michel. Msgr. Ryan—the monsignor of the New Deal— was an Irish pol who helped forge the blending of urban democrats and Catholic working men into the unlikely coalition of the New Deal. His progeny are the Church employees of the USCCB and Catholic Charities who have linked arms with the sexual revolutionaries of the Democratic party building an impressive government funded social justice network which has effectively written religion, pro life and marriage stability out of the justice and peace vocabulary. Monsignor Ryan would not recognize his grandchildren. His passion was justice for the manual laborer to insure that his wife could keep a home. The good monsignor would not recognize government lobbyists as modern day prophets or lifelong church employment as “a justice issue.” He would see something horribly adrift

when God is mocked, the infants slain, and degenerates honored.

There was another vision of social justice more radical and less well known. Its champion was a Benedictine monk (Virgil Michel) who was a pioneer in the liturgical movement. He held a radical vision of the brotherhood experienced in liturgical life animating an associational civic life that overcame the individualism he associated with capitalism and the loss of freedom in totalitarianism. He died an untimely death at 43 (1938).

3) Vince Lombardi has several excellent biographies but the best mayor of the twentieth century—Richard J. Daley—awaits an author perceptive enough to take the full measure of the man.

4) The American clergy was plenty masculine in the sixties—they were rebellious but manly, and the heterosexual dissidents mostly left to get married or secured in college tenure. The fellows who stayed tipped the gender scale till a clergy that had always contained secretive social climbing homosexual cliques now became an overt gay cult.

5) The merging of Confucian philosophy, Vietnamese nationalism, and Catholic personalism which informed the intellectual framework of the Diem government was totally lost on the high society Protestants—Averill Harriman of State Department and Henry Cabot Lodge, the newly appointed ambassador to Vietnam (A riveting account of this is the work by foreign policy ethicist Francis Xavier Winters—The Year of the Hare). These men

had no appreciation for the sophistication of the Ngo brothers' thought or the symbolic and authoritative measures needed to nation build in the midst of a brutal war. Lyndon Johnson complained that the left wing liberals who were berating him on Vietnam were the ones who had engineered the fatal coup in the first place. "They started out and said 'We gotta kill Diem, because he's no damn good. Let's knock him off And we did'" Johnson told Taylor (this is from a taped phone conversation with General Maxwell Taylor, an ambassador to Vietnam before Lodge). "Yeah, that's where it all started," the general agreed. "That's exactly where it started!" Johnson replied, his anger palpable. "And I just pled with them at the time, 'Please don't do it.' But that's where it started and they knocked him off."

The nationalism of the Ngo brothers (like John Paul II's Polish patriotism) united a local country's spiritual and military traditions with Catholic personalism: (For JP II see Memory and Identity. For the Ngo brothers this is an excerpt from Diem's Final Failure by Phillip Catton).

"Nhu's comparison of personalism and Confucianism aimed at revitalizing elements of the country's heritage. As a conservative, strongly influenced by tradition, Diem did refer to the family as a vital pillar of society, yet the Ngos evidently rejected the notion that patriotic citizens and a modern state could be created by a "family morality writ large." This aspect of Confucianism observed the Personalist scholar Nguyen Huy Bao

was all too closely associated with the perils of “family individualism” and the sentiment of “perish the nation so long as my family prospers.”

Personalism offered a more expansive conception of social relations in which the individual was also a citizen with ties to the rest of society.” This forging of the nation while respecting the kinship patterns of Confucian society would only be won by struggle. This emphasis on struggle (dau tranh) had been a prominent feature of Vietnamese nationalist thought since the 1920’s. From Ngo Dinh Nhu, “The personalist conception holds that freedom in an underdeveloped society is not something that is simply given or bestowed. It can only be achieved by militancy and vigilance. Human rights and human dignity are not static phenomena. They are only possibilities which men must actively seek and deserve, not just beg for.”

This philosophy led to the Diem strategy of building up hamlets and dealing with village elders, not just individuals as the American electoral model proposed. They began all male village militias similar to the original American military model fostering the extra kinship protective obligations necessary for war and the fraternal matrix needed for nation building.

Diem himself was a priest/mandarin to the nation (Lodge criticized his “medieval” pretensions as Diem increasingly adopted traditional dress in his official capacity as head of state). Diem never married, and even his enemies never accused him of personal impropriety. Ho Chi Minh and General Giap, his military opponents, admired him as an authentic Vietnamese patriot. Like John Kennedy, Diem’s political sensibility was born in a fraternity of

sacrifice. His brother was his closest advisor, he cultivated a military-religious view of the nation, and he had a brother killed by his enemy in the 1940's.

Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Khoi, and Khoi's son had been killed by Communists in a systematic assault on non-communist nationalists—they were buried alive. Khoi was joined by his martyred brothers when they were assassinated on All Souls Day, 1963, hours after they had received communion.

6) How many papers, lectures, and conferences have been devoted to the bishops' theoretical considerations, and yet how many Catholic adults or high school history students know how Kennedy pulled us back in the real world from the MAD (mutual assured destruction) strategy? This is another example of propositionalism as social policy run wild when there are real men and events to study and learn from.

7) This principled offer to resign in such a dilemma was an important addition to Kennedy's position from an earlier Life magazine interview where he said obeying the oath of office was his highest duty. The young lady who gave the talk on the Kennedy compromise quoted liberally from the talk but left this line out. When I pointed that out to her as she was signing autographs—she said “obviously you think that line is more

important than I do.” When she talked with another fellow about my objection she said it was an important line but the next line of his speech negated his position. Here is the text of his “conscience clause” and the next line that supposedly negates the first. I also include his rousing conclusion that reminded the ministers not only that they were citizen warriors together but that this covenant was “under God.”

“But if the time should ever come-and I do not concede that any conflict to be remotely possible –when office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign office and I hope any conscientious public servant would do the same. But I do not intend to apologize for these views to my critics of either Catholic or Protestant faith-nor do I intend to disavow either my views or my church in order to win this election. If I should lose on the real issues, I shall return to my seat in the Senate satisfied that I tried my best and was fairly judged. But if this election is decided on the basis that 40,000,000 Americans lost their chance of being President on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole nation that will be the loser in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people. But if, on the other hand, I should win this election, I shall devote every effort of mind and spirit to fulfilling the oath of the Presidency -- practically identical, I might add with the oath I have taken for fourteen years in the Congress. For, without reservation, I can, and I quote "solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States and will preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution... so help me God."

8) The nation is the fence around the temple. It is the men in arms who keep the sacred goods of worship, free speech and labor, family and property

inside the homeland safe from the crush of the world without. Chesterton explained this best and if you have a friend who cannot read all these pages to be reminded of the nature of the nation -- refer him to footnote 8.

From Orthodoxy:

“Go back to the darkest roots of civilization, and you will find cities knotted around some sacred stone or encircling some sacred well. People first paid honor to a spot and afterwards gained glory for it. Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because men loved her. In so far as theories of social contract meant that there is at the back of all historical government an idea of content and cooperation, they were demonstrably right. But they really were wrong that men ever aimed at order or ethics by a conscious exchange of interests. Morality did not begin by one man saying to another, “I will not hit you if you do not hit me.” There is no trace of such a transaction. There is a trace of both men having said, “we must not hit each other in the holy place.” They gained their morality by guarding their religion. They did not cultivate courage. They fought for their shrine and found they had become courageous. They did not cultivate cleanliness, they purified themselves for their altar and found that they were clean. The history of the Jews is the only early document known to most Englishmen and the facts can be judged sufficiently from that. The Ten Commandments which have been found substantially common to mankind were merely military commands; a code of regimental orders, issued to protect a certain ark across a certain desert. Anarchy was evil because it endangered the sanctity. And only when they made a holy day for God did they find that they had made a holiday for men. “

9) From a Catholic boys high school yearbook in June of 1964 dedicated to John Kennedy.

10) Mark Steyn finished his book America Alone with a conversation

between two British characters in an Arthur Conan Doyle novel:^{ABRIDGED}
“It’s my opinion that we have been the policeman of the world long enough. We policed the seas for slavers and pirates....There is never a mad priest or firebrand who does not report his presence by sniping the nearest British Officer. If there is military mutiny in Egypt, or a jihad in Sudan, it is Great Britain who has to set it right. And all to the curses a policeman gets when he seizes the ruffian among his pals. We get hard knocks and no thanks. Let Europe do its own dirty work.”

“Well,” said the Colonel “I don’t at all agree with you. I think behind national interests and diplomacy and all that there lies a great guiding force—a Providence, in fact—which is forever getting the best out of each nation and using it for the good of the whole. When a nation ceases to respond, it is time that she went into the hospital for a few centuries, like Spain or Greece—the virtue has gone out of her. A man or nation is not just meant to do what is pleasant or profitable. It is often called upon to do what is both unprofitable and unpleasant, but if it is obviously right it is mere shirking not to undertake it.”

(Steyn’s book is a sharp worthwhile demographic analysis of the suicide of Europe and the rise of Islam and yet the first of his “solutions” is advocating more education for women in Muslim countries. Now I am a charter member of the “let the women read club” but our political problem is how the men in arms will be led and with whom they will be allied. Steyn had the great sense to quote Doyle and then ends his book like a good Canadian saying a great “civilization” must not shirk its duties. But civilization does not have duties. Men of nations have duties—that is who will die and how they will die—as Americans responding to our present role under Providence. He says nothing of Christianity and the revitalization of nations as the response to Providence. Steyn is a great columnist. But like Peter Jennings

he is a Canadian and there is still something about the relationship of masculine duty, Divine Providence and “the best of a nation” for Americans which he doesn’t quite see. All of that was much clearer to the good Dr. Doyle.)

11) JFK Inaugural