

# 20 Years Ago JFK Broke the Ice . . . But

By Jim Lackey  
NC News Service

Washington (NC) -- Twenty years after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, his election and subsequent 1,000 days as president is still regarded as a momentous event in the history of American Catholicism.

Though he is still the only Catholic to have served in the highest office in the land, his election and performance in that office diminished but did not erase the anti-Catholicism of his day. According to at least one public opinion survey, it led to a greater acceptance of Catholics in political life.

Another survey, though, found that there still may be significant resistance among Americans to another Catholic president.

Kennedy's election was a "symbolic liberation" for U.S. Catholics, says Msgr. Francis J. Lally, a Boston priest who knew Kennedy and who has worked since 1975 as social development and world peace director of the U.S. Catholic Conference in Washington.

Msgr. Lally, who was editor of The Pilot, Boston archdiocesan newspaper, when Kennedy was senator and president, said Kennedy was conscious of the contribution he was making to the involvement of Catholics in the political process. His election and his service as president lifted forever the stigma that Catholics could not aspire to high U.S. government positions, the priest added.

Expressing a similar view was Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, the Catholic University of America professor regarded as the foremost U.S. church historian.

Kennedy's election marked a "very real turning of the American mind," said Msgr. Ellis. "People saw that the republic had not been impaired by Kennedy's presidency. It put minds more at ease."

As a result, when Sens. Robert Kennedy (D-N.Y.) and Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.) sought the Democratic nomination in 1968, there was "anything but an outcry" about their religion, said Msgr. Ellis. Also, states where one might expect continued hostility toward Catholicism have since been willing to elect Catholics to Congress, he noted, citing Sen. Jeremiah Denton (R-Ala.), elected in 1980, as an example.

Kennedy's election also made it possible for a presidential candidate like Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) to say explicitly that he wanted a Catholic running mate, according to Msgr. Ellis. McGovern first chose Sen. Thomas Eagleton (D-Mo.) before settling on R. Sargent Shriver when Eagleton withdrew.

But Msgr. Ellis was not willing to attribute the acceptance of Catholics in high public office entirely to Kennedy's election. Another trend of the past two decades has been the "secularization" of American society, he said, with fewer people concerned or aware of the religious beliefs of others.

Though the reasons may vary, there has been extraordinary



President John F. Kennedy and Richard Cardinal Cushing, then Archbishop of Boston, share a confidence and a laugh at the North American College in Rome. The president visited there in 1963 following his audience with Pope Paul VI.

growth in the number of Catholics in Congress since Kennedy's election in 1960.

In January 1961, when Kennedy assumed office, only 100 of the 535 members of the House and Senate were Catholics. But since then Catholic membership has increased steadily so that after the 1982 election 141 of the 535 seats were occupied by Catholics, a new record.

But two surveys of public opinion toward Catholic politicians have shown apparently conflicting views.

The Gallup Poll, for one, has found increasing acceptance of Catholic officeholders since 1960. Asked if they would be willing to vote for a well-qualified candidate who happened to be Catholic, 71 percent of those surveyed in 1960 answered in the affirmative. That figure jumped to 87 percent by 1965, according to Gallup, and in a survey earlier this year had risen to 92 percent.

But a Lou Harris survey taken in 1980, when Kennedy's

brother, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), challenged incumbent President Jimmy Carter for the nomination, found 29 percent of non-Catholic Democrats admitting that they were concerned about the younger Kennedy's religion. That, according to Harris, was only a 1 percent drop from the 30 percent of non-Catholic Democrats who admitted concern in 1960 about John Kennedy's religion.

Harris said the percentage was higher in the South and Midwest and lower in the West and East, helping to explain why Edward Kennedy could win primaries in New York and Connecticut only to lose in Wisconsin and Kansas.

Part of that difference may be due to the way the two polling organizations phrased their questions. But it may also show that while Kennedy's election in 1960 ended nearly two centuries in which Catholics were excluded from the White House, it did not eliminate entirely the anti-Catholicism that before Kennedy was a major stumbling block for almost all Catholic politicians.

Father Bruce Ritter



## GIVING THANKS

There are some things kids can say better than adults. I mean a kid is less inclined to be artificial and complicated. They don't try to say impressively beautiful things—they

don't know how. What kids say is often inexpressibly beautiful—but more because of the ingenuous simplicity and honesty of it. (When a little kid says "I love you" and "thank you," you know he means it.)

Gratitude is better if it's simple and straightforward: the gratitude of a kid...like the 17-year-old runaway who left us this note. I never met her. She was with us only a few weeks and wrote these few sentences just before she left:

Dear Staff:

I'd like to write a few things before I leave. First, I'd like to thank you for providing me with a clean and comfortable place to live. Attitude has a lot to do with atmosphere. It's hard to be ambitious living in a dump, that's all. I'd also like to thank you for not making it too comfortable.

I'd like to thank you for putting up with me. Whether you realize it or not it has had an affect on me. Sometimes you may throw your hands up in disgust but this place is useful. Even if I do flunk school or lose my job or get run over by a herd of stampeding guinea pigs I'll always have the satisfaction of knowing I tried and that's worth more than never trying.

I'd also like to express my respect and admiration for the people who undertook this project and those that keep it running. I think that if no one cares for a kid's future, a kid's dream, then this world is in big trouble.

Again, thank you very much.

Eva

I didn't change a word of her note. It's simple, straightforward, uncomplicated. Like her need.

I wish it were as easy and uncomplicated for us adults. As we get older saying "I love you" and "thank you" isn't quite as simple and straightforward. I mean, it should be easy, on Thanksgiving, to thank God for giving us this

*Father Bruce Ritter, OFM Conv., is the founder and President of Covenant House/UNDER 21, which operates crisis centers for homeless and runaway youth.*

chance to praise and glorify Him. It should be easy to thank Him for His endless mercies and gifts and the overwhelming beauty of His providential love for us.

But then, when I write to you about my kids—the endless stream of the forlorn, helpless and hopeless burned out kids: the Bills and Tonys and Marys and Mikes and Jills and Bobs and...The stupefying misery of these children confronts the terrifying mystery of God's providential love that, to us, seems incomprehensibly selective:

Anita: 16, from Columbia, South Carolina...prostitute since 12...her mother a prostitute...came to UNDER 21 running from a pimp...raped in a Times Square flop house...hospitalized for several serious illnesses. Prognosis: unfavorable.

Christina: 17, from Iowa, running from her pimp...in New York for two weeks, raped and forced to work out of the Stadium Hotel in the South Bronx...flown out of New York to a safe house in a western state. Prognosis: questionable.

*"When a little kid says 'thank you,' you know he means it."*

Marty: 14, involved in prostitution on 42nd Street for one week prior to intake at UNDER 21...returned home to Kansas two days later...basically intact. Prognosis: good.

Walter: 18, worked as a stripper at the "Follies" (a male strip joint) for ten days prior to intake at UNDER 21...flown to his home in West Virginia. Prognosis: bleak.

Erica: 17, working peep shows and the streets of Times Square...returned home to her mother in New Jersey...supportive counselling for the family arranged. Prognosis: very poor to poor.

The lives of these kids boggle our minds and strains our faith. And giving thanks on Thanksgiving gets all mixed up with some strong guilt feelings (we do have so much, after all). Our simple desire to help kids gets complicated by an urgent need to justify our lifestyle. And especially on Thanksgiving, we don't like having our guilt chords plucked and strummed like a banjo even for the best of causes. The simple assumption or implied suspicion that we are helping needy kids out of guilt, or our own needs, fills us

with resentment. Who, on Thanksgiving, wants to feel defensive about something as dear to us as our love for children?

That kind of guilt poisons and destroys love. It has nothing at all to do with an authentic sorrow that we are led to feel for not loving the poor enough. Our sorrow is, in fact, the very love of God Himself in us drawing and impelling us to love more totally, more wholeheartedly. Repentance evokes gratitude and love, not guilt and remorse. For love is joyful and gratitude is joyful and helping my poor kids out of love is joyful—and that is what Jesus said loving Him and the Father is all about.

The number of kids coming to our doors is increasing at a frightening rate. Whatever you can do to help would mean so much.

Peace and joy and happiness to you and your family on Thanksgiving. And an authentic, simple gratitude to you for helping us. We pray for you all the time, thanking God for you all the time.

I thank God for all He has given to me and my family.

Here's my gift of: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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