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Christopher Kennedy

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The Church Has Lost its Way

A Renewed Commitment to Service

By Christopher Kennedy

My first experience as a Fordham University student was one that I will not soon forget. It was three days before new student orientation began, and I had arrived early to participate in the “Urban Plunge” program, run by the community service program, now known as the Dorothy Day Center for Service and Justice. The idea of the program was to immerse us—new freshmen from primarily suburban communities—into the largely working-class neighborhoods of the Bronx that surrounded Fordham. We participated in a variety of service projects, and some of my best friends today are people I met then.

Those three days taught me what it meant to be a “man for others”—someone motivated by his faith to, as St. Francis of Assisi put it, “preach the gospel, using words when necessary.”

Thus, I would hope that any sort of future church reform would reemphasize the importance of service to others, especially the poor.

It seems like the church has lost its way on this issue in recent years. For example, we see priests or bishops condemn a politician for his or her position on abortion or same-sex marriage, while ignoring or neglecting the politician’s views and actions on social programs to assist



the least fortunate among us. This confuses and angers many people my age. Moreover, my peers look at church decisions such as the recent “Doctrinal Assessment” of the Leadership Council on Women Religious, and ask why the sisters’ strong emphasis on social justice is criticized rather than lauded.

Further, I have seen that when the American church gets wrapped up in partisan politics, other issues that may be appealing to young people fall by the wayside. In a discussion in my religion and politics class, many people were surprised to find that Pope Benedict’s position on environmental issues is far to the left side of the political spectrum.

However, my classmates were familiar with Rick Santorum’s attack on Barack Obama’s environmental policies, especially since Mr. Santorum had said that they were based on a “phony theology.” Perhaps if the church could somehow become less partisan, its preexisting commitment to service and justice could shine through the negative political rhetoric thrown around in every campaign season.

This is not to say that the young Catholic community here at Fordham disrespects the church hierarchy, or desires to completely abandon church teaching on social issues. In fact, many of us are guided by Pope Benedict’s words in his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, in which he writes, “Charity always manifests God’s love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world.”

But I have gotten the sense over my four years here that the Catholicism we can all relate to, and the faith that brings so many of us together on Sundays, is one that reminds us of our duties to the least of our brothers and sisters. As my fellow theology major Mike Finucane explained to me, “I am a Christian because God uses me as an instrument of his wonderful love for us. That’s what service is: love in action.”

Thus as the church and its global membership of all ages moves further into the 21st century, I can only hope that it will develop a renewed focus on service to those in need. Here at Fordham, it was this aspect of the faith that transformed me and so many of my classmates. With adequate support, it can transform the lives of other young Catholics here and abroad. ■

Christopher Kennedy is a theology and urban studies major at Fordham University.