

A CATHOLIC IN THE WHITE HOUSE

LIKE MILLIONS of other Americans, I watched the inauguration of the new President on television. It was a memorable and moving experience.

For any citizen of this country, the historic transfer of power from one President to another and from one political party to the other is always impressive. But for me, a Catholic as well as an American, the inauguration of John F. Kennedy was doubly so. I don't see how any Catholic could fail to feel something of this, even among those who preferred Vice President Nixon last November.

I know there were Catholics who feared the prospect of a Catholic President, on the grounds that it was "too soon," that the country was not ready for it, that all Catholics would be blamed for any mistake a Catholic President might make. I was not among them. The breakthrough had to come; as far as I was concerned, the sooner it came the better.

If anyone needs the reassurance, this does not mean that I would have voted for a Catholic no matter what he stood for. If in this election Mr. Nixon had been the Catholic, Mr. Kennedy would have got my vote just the same. But with that on the record, I can say I am very happy with the way things turned out.

During the last year I spoke a good many times before Protestant and Jewish groups. As the election came closer and closer, questions from the floor on the Catholic-for-President issue grew more and more numerous. This was natural enough, and I had no objections, for I have always thought Catholics should face such questions frankly. But it did seem to me that many of the questioners seriously underestimated the individual Catholic's emotional stake in this matter.

I had no hesitations then and I have none now in explaining why I felt deeply on this issue, and not just because of Mr. Kennedy, although I supported him with enthusiasm. But I was always somewhat surprised that any explanation was necessary.

Most Catholics in this country are the children or grandchildren of immigrants, and immigrants who did not receive a very hearty welcome at that—witness the anti-Catholic riots which took place in the United States not so many decades ago. It is obvious even today that a considerable body of anti-Catholic feeling persists in America, and few Catholics are able to go through life untouched by it, just as it is a rare Jew who can escape the bitter fact of anti-Semitism.

I am as ready as any man to admit Catholic shortcomings. But every Catholic knows there are jobs he cannot get because of his religion. He knows there are clubs which will not admit him for the same reason.

He knows, especially if he studied at a Catholic university, that there are colleges where he is not welcome to teach.

As a Catholic, I too know all these things; I would have to be completely insensitive not to. They are part of the facts of life, and I have to live with them. But no one can persuade me to like them.

In the same way, from childhood on I heard it said that any American boy could grow up to be President, as long as he was not a Catholic or a Jew or, it should have been added, a Negro. No matter how often I heard this dictum, though, I could never reconcile myself to the easy way people accepted it as a fact. And no one, certainly, could ever make me believe that such exclusion from full participation in the nation's life was anything but a betrayal of the American idea.

Stripped to its essence, the Catholic-for-President argument, it seemed to me, came down to this: do we Americans accept the Constitution, the whole Constitution, or not? My own feelings on the "religious issue" were quite simple. There were Protestants and Jews I would not vote for, just as there were Catholics I would not vote for. But I would not vote against them simply because they were Protestants or Jews, and I could not accept easily the notion that people would vote against a Catholic simply because he was a Catholic.

That is why the inauguration of John F. Kennedy was so important to me, as an American and as a Catholic. To emerge from second-class citizenship is no small thing; yet I think that is what we have done. And if this event is a memorable one for Catholics, it must be counted even more as a victory for the American idea.

As for those who feared that a Catholic President might use the power of his office to advance "Catholic interests," I am convinced they will soon come to see that their fears were groundless. Many Catholics have long felt unfairly treated on the school-aid issue; no one should expect them to change their minds simply because a Catholic is now President. But I do not believe that Catholics will under a Catholic President ask for anything they could not ask under a Protestant or a Jew. And if any were foolish enough to do so, I have no doubt about the reception they would receive.

Unless I am mightily mistaken, the new President's words for all his fellow-Americans will always be those he used in his Inaugural Address: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." This is as it should be, certainly, and I for one do not believe Catholics would have it otherwise.

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