

## Article by Msgr. M. Francis Mannion

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Earlier this year, Paul Kennedy, a professor of history at Yale University, wrote an essay in the New York Times titled “Which Catholic Church?” in which he expressed frustration about the issues non-Catholics constantly ask him about. Their obsessive interests are in the questions: [With the new Pope] Will the Church split even more into conservative and liberal camps? Will there ever be female priests, then bishops? What about the declining attendance of European congregations? What will the new Pope’s attitude be to divorce, abortion, the Jews, secularism in Italy? What about financial laxity at the Vatican?

This, Kennedy says, represents “one view of the Catholic Church, the church of hierarchy, tradition, formalism, its bursts of reform soon restrained by a return to conservatism. It is the church so familiar to the minds of secularists, pagans and anti-Catholics everywhere. It is the church of the 19th century popes. It is the church of infallibility, incense, candles, and of Latin Masses. Pushing it further, it is the church of financial corruption and sexual abuse. It is the church of stereotypes.”

Kennedy proposes a different way of thinking about the church: “On Wednesday last week, I went, as I usually do, to work in the lunchtime soup kitchen of the St. Thomas More Catholic chaplaincy at Yale University in downtown New Haven, Connecticut, founded almost 30 years ago to meet the needs of the poor and hungry.” The helpers at the soup kitchen are “the Yale students who also work in the downtown evening soup kitchen, or in the men’s overflow night shelter. A number of them “are going off to Guatemala [during the university break] to help rebuild a village still hurting from the civil wars.” “This,” he says, represents “not a dead or decaying church. It is vibrant and pulsing. . . . It is our Catholic Church. Nobody is leaving it. What happens in Rome is well, distant.”

He continues: “The litmus test [of Christian faith] is whether you help the unknown, the desperate-looking person at the soup kitchen, the beggar on the street.” Quoting the Yale Catholic chaplain, “all else is footnotes.” “What matters is your reaching out to help. That’s the sole question you will be asked when you reach the Pearly Gates.”

Kennedy goes on to ask: “Does this mean that Catholics do not need a worldwide church structure? Not at all. We need the parish, the parish priest, the parish church. . . . We need the Church Physical, . . . just as we need the Church Social.” But, “no one launching an attack upon the papal elections, Vatican finances, sexism and the rest should think they are attacking Catholicism per se. From my perspective, our Catholic Church is vibrant, helpful, intellectual, and working in so many ways to fulfill the message to love God and to love the neighbor, and reach out to, to one’s unknown neighbor. Everything else is, well, footnotes.”

In my view, Kennedy is fundamentally correct. While the liturgy is, as Vatican II put it, “the source and summit” of Catholic life, love of the poor neighbor is the fundamental social calling of all who call themselves “Catholic.”

We need the hierarchical Church and its many Spirit-led sacramental and organizational structures. The doctrine and moral traditions of the Church are essential. But at the primary level we need the Church of service to the poor. This is Kennedy’s fundamental point —and the constant message of Pope Francis—one with which I couldn’t agree more.

[Source](#) — Intermountain Catholic