

# RFK's faith three-dimensional in books, but two-dimensional on screen

NEW YORK — By all accounts, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, shot down June 5, 1968, as he ran for the Democratic presidential nomination, was the most devout Catholic among his siblings.

A former altar boy who sometimes spoke of joining the priesthood, Kennedy's faith, drawn inward after the 1963 assassination of his older brother the president — and somehow not diminished by a growing belief in existentialism — informed his political views and his compassion for the poor.

All good elements for a TV or film biography, right? So far, apparently not.

In the 44 years since the somber TV docudrama "The Missiles of October" created a sensation with actors, and not impressionists, using the famous family's idiosyncratic accent to bring the Kennedys to dramatic life, it's been mostly campaign rallies and White House corridors for Robert, the former attorney general and U.S. senator from New York.

Here's a moment in the blink-and-you'll-miss-it category: In the 1985 TV miniseries "Robert Kennedy and His Times," based on Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s 1978 biography, Kennedy's mother, Rose (Beatrice Straight), on a windswept beach at Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, tells Robert (Brad Davis) after the assassination of President Kennedy, "It's up to you now to lead us forward."

She's clutching a rosary. That's it for Catholicism.

The new Netflix documentary series, "Bobby Kennedy for President," has a brief clip of the senator at an outdoor Mass for striking immigrant farm workers in California — and nothing else.

Kennedy, who was just 42 when he was assassinated in Los Angeles, came of age

long before Washington politicians proclaimed their adherence to any particular faith. And Protestant opposition in 1960 to John F. Kennedy as the first Catholic president was a very large and well-organized force.

So the younger Kennedy likely would have considered it unseemly to announce in speeches, as House Speaker Paul Ryan has done from time to time, that any of his political philosophy was rooted in Catholic social doctrine.

As for TV and film dramatizations, they are necessarily stuffed with political pageantry and a cast of oversize characters that includes Sen. Joseph McCarthy, President Lyndon Johnson, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Rich opportunities for colorful speeches and hammy character actors don't leave room for quiet moments of reflection and Catholic discussion.

But the next go-round of biopics (and with Kennedy family lore, there's invariably a next go-round) may finally give fuller dimensions to Robert Kennedy's life. Recent biographies have dived into his faith, and as they're adapted into dramas, the Catholic elements should be folded into those as well.

One problematic element in the writing of these profiles is the divide that has grown ever deeper, in the years since Kennedy's death, between social (as opposed to economic) liberalism and Catholic teaching. Since Kennedy was and is a towering figure for the left, authors celebrating him seem uncomfortable portraying Kennedy as straightforwardly pious.

Here are samplings from a couple of new biographies:

— Larry Tye, "Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon" (Random House, 2016).

Tye writes that, following JFK's assassination, "religion helped, too, but on his terms, not the church's. He kept a missal beside him in the car and thumbed through to prayers he found consoling. Instead of attending Mass mainly on Sundays and days of obligation, as had been his adult routine, he was in the pew nearly every day. His faith helped him internalize the assassination in a way that, over time, freed his spirit."

Tye's best religious anecdote, related by former Kennedy aide John Seigenthaler, centered on a 1964 discussion Bobby and wife Ethel had with Holy Cross Father John Cavanaugh, a former president of the University of Notre Dame, about whether President Kennedy was in heaven or purgatory, since he wasn't able to confess his sins before he died.

Ethel wanted an assurance that John was in heaven, but Cavanaugh, Tye writes, "equivocated." Finally, Bobby spoke up: "I don't think that's how God gets his kicks."

— Chris Matthews, "Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit" (Simon & Schuster, 2017).

The colorful MSNBC host, also the product of a bumptious Catholic upbringing, concludes that Bobby was not only the most religious of the Kennedy children, but also the "least assimilated."

Growing up, Bobby "couldn't help but reveal himself if circumstances evoked it," Matthews writes. He once fired off an angry letter to Boston's archbishop, Cardinal Richard Cushing, complaining about a priest, believed to be anti-Semitic, who had interpreted too strictly the doctrine that outside the church there is no salvation.

Matthews includes the wry comment made by Jacqueline Kennedy during the 1960 campaign, and reprinted many times since then: "I think it's so unfair of people to be against Jack because he's a Catholic. He's such a poor Catholic. Now, if it were Bobby, I could understand it."

Bobby also left St. Paul's, a Protestant New Hampshire boarding school, after just two months because both he and his mother disliked its exclusive use of the King James Bible.

As for Catholic social teachings, Matthews writes that Bobby, long before he began his presidential campaign, "drew upon an old reservoir ... illuminated by Dorothy Day and Michael Harrington."

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