

The Catholic Thing

COLUMNS

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Tim Russert: The Story Untold

By Hadley Arkes

The death of Tim Russert commanded the news coverage of virtually all of the networks on the day that it happened. And to the surprise even of his friends, it commanded the channels on the next day... and the next, leading to a wake held, of all places, at St. Albans, by the National Cathedral, a Mass at Trinity Church, and a Memorial Service at the Kennedy Center. It was the kind of death and mourning more associated with Presidents, with high figures of state, than with journalists. One could only imagine the scene when Walter Cronkite is called to that Great Newsroom in the Sky. Will he lie in state at the Capitol?

And yet why this out-of-scale display for Tim Russert? One gathers that he was a good guy, down to earth, not pretentious, and far more fair-minded, it was said, than other prominent figures in the media, affecting to be commentators on politics. As H.L. Mencken said of Grover Cleveland, he was a good man in a bad trade. In a profession slanted quite noticeably to the Left, Tim Russert seemed to be willing to ask hard questions of politicians on all sides. But not quite: in the time of Russert's ascendancy on television, the issue of abortion had become the most central, divisive issue in our politics. It was the defining issue in the "culture wars," separating the political parties. And yet, on that matter of abortion, Tim Russert never quite managed to ask questions running very deep, or suggesting even serious reflection. As one blogger managed to show, his pressing questions were reserved for Republicans who were pro-life. His discreet silences here offer clues leading back to the side of the story that remained untold, unsounded, during a week of relentless talk about him.

The part that remained unmentioned became ever more conspicuous in its absence in a week in which Russert was celebrated as a Catholic. His devotion to his family; his education at the hands of the Jesuits; his nurturing by a nun out of central casting, the female equivalent of Barry Fitzgerald--all of this was highlighted. Highlighted, in fact, to such a degree that one savvy

observer thought it was one of the rarest weeks in the America media actually celebrating Catholicism. But my own reading is that Russert was not celebrated because he was Catholic; he was celebrated because he was a celebrity.

The sense of "family" and "the faith" celebrated during the week of mourning for Tim Russert was discreetly detached from the substance of any teaching that would define the character of a Catholic family and the Catholicism it professed. The tipoff came at the very beginning of his career. His credential for a high place in the media came through his service as a devoted staffer to Mario Cuomo and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. These two political men managed to navigate their way in the liberal politics of New York by establishing their reluctance to impose, through the laws, the moral teaching of the Church on abortion. They treated that teaching, not as a teaching formed by moral reasoning and the evidence of embryology, but as a matter merely of "beliefs," which they would not claim to be true for anyone but themselves. And indeed, as the wags remarked, Moynihan and Cuomo would not even impose these convictions on themselves. My own surmise was that Tim Russert absorbed these lessons taught by the masters. And it was the surety that he had indeed absorbed them that made him plausible as a figure to direct "Meet the Press," the flagship of all news programs.

Let us suppose, however, that in his heart of hearts Tim Russert did indeed respect, as true, the moral teaching of his Church on the issue that John Paul II and Benedict XVI have regarded as the central moral issue of our day, the issue from which everything else radiates. If so, Russert's discreet silences reflected the tacit bargain for liberal Catholics in the Democratic Party and the media: they can hold their position only at the price of remaining silent on the moral issue most central to Catholic teaching and to the politics of the day. If my surmise is wrong, it can be tested easily and readily disproved: What understanding did he impart to his own family? Do they understand the issue of abortion in the way that Benedict XVI or Henry Hyde have understood it, or in the way that the Kennedys and Cuomos have taught Catholics now to understand it?

No family has done more to misinstruct American Catholics on the teaching of their own Church than the Kennedys, and their teaching began with this lesson: that one can be pro-choice and effectively pro-abortion and still be a good Catholic. This used to be called "giving scandal": it was gently telling

Catholics that the central teaching of their Church could be treated as false, or simply not that important. As my late teacher Leo Strauss once observed, when a wise man preserves his silence on a matter that others regard as important, he leads us to understand that it is not, in the end, all that important. Amidst all of the mourning and celebration for Tim Russert, the most critical thing he imparted as a public man was that the central moral teaching of his Church was not, in the scale of things, all that important or true.

Hadley Arkes is the Ney Professor of Jurisprudence at Amherst College.