

FAITH AND THE FACE-OFF:
JOHN F. KENNEDY, RELIGION, AND
AVERTING NUCLEAR WAR DURING THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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The decisions made by President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 likely prevented the outbreak of World War III. Understanding the president's possible motivations behind those decisions, including any possible religious motivations, is key to a more complete understanding of the eventual peaceful resolution of the crisis. Kennedy's was a complex religiosity from childhood, further complicated by anti-Catholic prejudice and his own assertions of the firm separation of church and state during the 1960 presidential campaign. While keeping his religiosity a private matter, those closest to the president documented their memories of his words and actions during the crisis. Using these recollections, it is possible to get a sense of what things the commander in chief may have taken into consideration when deciding which course of action to pursue. From statements made by the president to the manner of his interactions, evidence of his attitudes and concerns during the crisis provides inferences into the character of his conscience. These inferences suggest that Kennedy's decisions may have

been influenced by the empathy he was able to feel for others, that he may have been guided by a conscience of peace formed, in part, by his religious faith, and that he may have weighed his actions using tenets of the Catholic Church, particularly the four cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. The papal encyclical issued by Pope John XXIII in April 1963, *Pacem in Terris*, lays out as official Church doctrine the need for universal peace through Catholic virtues such as justice and truth. This encyclical appears to echo some of the attitudes that, according to those closest to him, President Kennedy took on during the Cuban crisis, further supporting the idea that Kennedy's faith influenced his decisions.

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Introduction

“I know there is a God, and I know He hates injustice. I see the storm coming, and I know His hand is in it. But if He has a place and a part for me, I believe that I am ready.”

-Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Keyworth Stadium, Hamtramck, MI

October 26, 1960¹

During a Michigan campaign speech, in the waning weeks of the 1960 presidential campaign, then-Senator John F. Kennedy recalled the words spoken by Abraham Lincoln during his own presidential campaign, one hundred years earlier, in 1860, in which Lincoln asserted his knowledge that God had a role for him in the preservation of liberty.² In early 1961, the same quote was found on a discarded piece of paper on the floor of Air Force One, having been scribbled by Kennedy as he was returning from the tense Vienna Summit in 1961, just months after the young Senator’s inauguration as America’s thirty-fifth president.³ There was no way to know, during his campaign speech or on his flight home from Vienna that, within two years, John Kennedy would face a storm in the form of a nuclear showdown with the Soviet Union, where the choices of the leaders of the two great superpowers would mean the difference between a nuclear holocaust or a tentative peace. If God had a place and a part for John Kennedy in the preservation of liberty, that part may have included his readiness as a leader who

¹ John F. Kennedy, “Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Keyworth Stadium” (speech, Hamtramck, MI, February 9, 1961), The American Presidency Project, accessed February 27, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=74225>.

² Henry Ketchum, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, chapter 19 “The Election,” accessed April 8, 2018, <http://www.authorama.com/life-of-abraham-lincoln-21.html>.

³ Thurston Clarke, *JFK’s Last Hundred Days: The Transformation of a Man and the Emergence of a Great President* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 16-17.

valued virtue and peace. The desire for peace and the will to work for that peace is not a prerequisite for world leaders. For much of history, it can be argued, the opposite holds true as those who sought and fought wars of conquest and superiority were lauded as great leaders. The end of the Second World War, a war fought against men who desired power more than peace, produced two world superpowers. The United States and the Soviet Union, despite having been allied during the war, faced an ideological standoff that would stretch from war's end, across five decades and nine American presidential administrations, including the thousand-day presidency of John F. Kennedy, America's first and, thus far, only Catholic president.

History shows that the early 1960s was the most challenging period of the entire Cold War era and that this ideological standoff included the role religion played in the respective societies of both the Soviet Union and the United States. Though John Kennedy said he did "not regard religion as a weapon in the Cold War,"⁴ it seems likely that his personal faith played a role in his foreign policy decisions during his administration, including during the Cuban missile crisis.⁵ By understanding the background of Kennedy's religious faith from his childhood to his presidency, and examining the public and private responses to the various developments during the Cuban missile crisis, it is possible to show that Kennedy's religion may have played a role in moving the world away from nuclear annihilation. Kennedy's administration coincided with the pontificate of John XXIII during these most anxious of days and, while the latter

⁴ John F. Kennedy, "Remarks at the Dedication of the International Christian Leadership, Inc.," (February 9, 1961), in *Religious Views of President John F. Kennedy*, ed. Nicholas A. Schneider, (St Louis: B. Herder Book Co, 1965), 6.

⁵ Thomas Carty, "John Kennedy, Religion, and Foreign Policy." *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 51.

served as the leader of the world's Catholics, the former was a Catholic by heritage who maintained a separation of his private religion from his political and public life.

Kennedy's religious sentience, though, may have helped avert a worldwide disaster in October of 1962. These attitudes were shaped by his experiences with religion as a child, including his learning the *Catechism* and its four cardinal virtues, his evolving understanding of the role religion should play in his public life while in Congress, his attitudes on the morality of war, shaped by his own war experience, and by the ethos of American civil religion. Similar attitudes and principles found an overtly Catholic expression in 1963 upon the publication of Pope John XXIII's landmark *Pacem in Terris* encyclical, which appealed to all people, regardless of faith, towards a conscience consistent with a rational peace.

The White House- October 1962

By October of 1962, less than two years after being elected the first Catholic president of the United States, John F. Kennedy had already dealt with a crisis in Cuba brought on by his own decisions as commander in chief. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion in May of 1961 made Kennedy acutely aware of those he had around him in advisory roles, particularly military advisers, and whether he could rely on their advice in future crises. While many of the decisions for the invasion had been made before he took office and he faced no strong opposition from those within his administration, Kennedy accepted responsibility for the decision and its failure, but also gained a deep mistrust of the bureaucracy and its ability to provide the best responses to crises.⁶ It was a tragic but

⁶ John Kenneth Galbraith, recorded interview by Vicki Daitch, September 12, 2002, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://archive2.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Galbraith,+John+Kenneth/JFKOH-JKG-02/JFKOH-JKG-02-TR.pdf>, 21.

teachable moment for the young president. He learned to question the advice provided to him and weigh it against his own opinions and beliefs and the opinions of those he trusted most, regardless of their position in the bureaucracy. It was a teachable moment for a deeply intellectual president, who learned “deeply and wisely” from the experience.⁷ But it was also a genuinely emotional moment for an apologetic Kennedy, not because of the loss of political collateral with the American electorate and in with Congress, but for the loss of life that resulted from the failed invasion.⁸

As a man who had been raised in the Catholic Church, Kennedy also held tightly to the traditionally Judeo-Christian belief that each person is entrusted with responsibility for all others.⁹ By failing to fully protect the CIA-trained Cuban rebels tasked with carrying out the invasion, Kennedy bore some responsibility for their deaths and for those that were later held for 18 months as prisoners of war. In hindsight, John Kenneth Galbraith, Kennedy’s Ambassador to India, suggested that “we should look back with satisfaction on the Bay of Pigs” because it was the lessons from this failed attempt at foreign invasion which focused the president on how to best handle international incidents.¹⁰ It was no longer adequate, in exceptionally dangerous situations, to rely on the advice of those charged with finding solutions. Kennedy told *Washington Post* editor and good friend, Ben Bradlee, after the crisis was over that the one piece of advice he would give his successor is that they could not simply trust the generals, even on military

⁷ Galbraith, Interview, 23.

⁸ Galbraith, Interview, 22.

⁹ Lawrence Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism* (New York: Meredith Press, 1967), 223.

¹⁰ Galbraith, Interview, 23.

matters.¹¹ Kennedy may have learned as a result of the Bay of Pigs invasion that as president, he would have to rely on methods he'd employed to make decisions since he was a young man, mainly his own skepticism. After the Bay of Pigs event, when faced with decisions that might have drastic, world-altering consequences, Kennedy would ask for the opinions of those he trusted most, regardless of the amount of knowledge they had on a subject, and he would rely on his own beliefs and his own conscience to make judgments. This process of discernment, partially informed by Kennedy's conscience and religious beliefs, may have been what prevented the ultimate nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban crisis of October 1962.

The discovery of nuclear warheads in Cuba was a frightening turn of events for the Kennedy Administration, but that these weapons were supplied by the Soviet Union made the situation a waking nightmare. At 8:45am on October 16, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy informed President Kennedy that aerial reconnaissance photos confirmed the presence of Soviet missile bases near San Cristobal, Cuba. Kennedy's immediate reaction was not recorded but his comments soon thereafter indicated his belief that bombing the sites would probably be the only viable option.¹² Kennedy had already been shamed on the world stage by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev when they met at the Vienna Summit and Khrushchev lectured the young president about the inevitable triumph of world Communism.¹³ Khrushchev again felt he gained an advantage over a novice leader with the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961.

¹¹ David Detzer, *The Brink* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1979), 137.

¹² Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 370.

¹³ Sheldon Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 19.

Now, just over a year later, Khrushchev was installing weapons 90 miles from the American shore and Kennedy was going to be forced to take some sort of action. Only a month earlier, the president had taken a hardline stance against any further entrée of Communism into the Western Hemisphere and was particularly harsh regarding what would happen if the USSR began installing offensive missiles in Cuba, saying it would raise “the gravest issues.”¹⁴ After being informed of the missile build-up on October 16, President Kennedy reportedly remarked that he “should have said that we don’t care.”¹⁵ Kennedy now felt that he was locked into a set of actions and quickly assembled a group of advisers who had little more in common other than that the president valued and respected their opinions.¹⁶ This group would come to be known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council or, simply, the ExComm. In the fifty years since the Cuban missile crisis, scholars studying the crisis, particularly since the declassification of secret recordings President Kennedy made of the meetings, have determined that the ExComm was made up of two schools of thought regarding the behavior of the Soviet Union. One school of thought believed that America’s nuclear superiority would force Khrushchev to accept Kennedy’s demand to remove the weapons, while the other school believed that any action, particularly an air strike, could potentially unleash the full power of the Soviet arsenal.¹⁷ Yet, on October 16, as the world began to move towards the dangerous precipice of nuclear war, President John F.

¹⁴ Robert K. Landers, “Statecraft as Stagecraft.” *Commonweal*, October 26, 2012, 21.

¹⁵ Landers, “Statecraft as Stagecraft,” 21.

¹⁶ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Bantam, 1966), 760.

¹⁷ Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years* (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), 450.

Kennedy, the first Catholic president of the United States, believed military action would be the only way to solve the newest crisis in Cuba.¹⁸

For the first week of the crisis, the president chose to work under the most secret of circumstances. From Tuesday, October 16 until Monday, October 22, only a handful of people in the world knew of the missiles in place in Cuba. The positive relationship between the press and the White House allowed for a squelching of stories about a possible nuclear buildup in Cuba, until the president had made a decision on which course of action to take. During the first weekend of the crisis, President Kennedy made the decision to use a military quarantine to try and force the removal of the Soviet weapons and to prevent any more buildup of weapons. On Monday, October 22, he would address the American public on what the next steps were during this most perilous time. The quarantine would go into effect on Wednesday, October 24. By Friday night, October 26, after a Russian ship had stopped without attempting to breach the quarantine, Khrushchev sent a letter expressing his desire to end the crisis. Before the administration responded, though, Khrushchev made a public pronouncement demanding the removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey before he would remove Soviet missiles from Cuba. Even though the president had enquired several times about their possible removal during his presidency before October 1962, for the Kennedy Administration, giving up the Turkish missiles as part of a *quid pro quo* with the USSR, was a less than attractive proposal. The president would send his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to meet with the Soviet ambassador and publicly accept Khrushchev's first letter. In reality, an agreement

¹⁸ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 2003), 547.

was reached where the Turkish missiles would be removed, pending the removal of the Cuban missiles. This agreement, however, would not be made public to avoid the appearance of being a deal.¹⁹ In the end, Kennedy had been able to resolve the crisis without the use of missiles and nuclear weapons. It was in these two weeks that Kennedy was faced with making the toughest decision of his political life, but ultimately, his patience and sagaciousness resulted steps toward peace.

The Vatican- October 1962

By October of 1962, less than four years after being elected the bishop of Rome, Pope John XXIII had shattered the idea that he was going to serve as a transitional pope who would use his pontificate to simply help move the church from the two-decade long papacy of Pius XII, who had led the Church through the Second World War, to the next long-term pope who would take the Church through the 1960s and 1970s. But this was not the only type of transition that Pope John XXIII wanted to initiate. Instead, “Good Pope John” understood the need for the Church to be brought into the present so that it could continue into the future.²⁰ Bill Huebsch would later write that John XXIII felt that God was “nudging him to lead the church to greater overall unity” and to help draw the world together, across all religious affiliations and non-affiliations.²¹ By the late 1950s, it

¹⁹ The compendium of timelines for the Cuban missile crisis is vast including: Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969); Elie Abel *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1966); Stern, *Week the World Stood Still*; “The World on the Brink: John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/>; et al.

²⁰ Gerald S. Twomey, “Anniversary Lessons: Ten Lessons from ‘Good Pope John,’” *America*, October 7, 2002, 12.

²¹ Bill Huebsch, “John XXIII: The Accidental Saint,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 25, 2014, 11, 13.

was clear to many Catholics around the world and, particularly in America, that changes needed to be made in the Church. Many social concerns which were becoming increasingly problematic in the modern era, had not been reexamined by Church for many decades, if not centuries, and while there was agreement that changes were needed, Catholics seemed divided on how these issues should be addressed.²² Since the early part of the twentieth-century any move towards the slightest liberalization of the Church was met with opposition from the highest reaches of the Church. This was evident during papacies like that of Pope Pius X who believed, during an era that brought out progressive leaders like Theodore Roosevelt, that progressives needed to be, in Pius' words, "beaten with fists."²³ By 1960, even conservative Catholics were calling on the Vatican for change.

American Catholicism, in particular, was at a crossroads, with many parishioners desiring a more outgoing and positive Church for the dawning 1960s, but all knew these changes would have to come from the highest post in the Catholic hierarchy.²⁴ In 1960, Pope John XXIII²⁵ answered these calls when he convened the Commission for the Promotion of Christian Unity, which brought together representatives from multiple Christian denominations as a preliminary step towards making changes within the Church.²⁶ Good Pope John was popular with many Catholics for his efforts to open the

²² Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 145.

²³ John Wilkins, "The Odd Couple: Canonizing John XXIII & John Paul II," *Commonweal*, April 11, 2014, 14.

²⁴ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 141-142, 149.

²⁵ Pope John XXIII became Pope Saint John XXIII in 2014 when he was canonized by Pope Francis.

²⁶ Wilkins, "The Odd Couple," 13; Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 149.

windows of the Church and “let in a little fresh air,”²⁷ but possibly more telling of Pope John’s impact is that he was also very popular with Catholics and with Protestants, as well.²⁸ For John XXIII, his self-proclaimed motto of “See everything; turn a blind eye to much; correct a little”²⁹ seemed to exemplify his role in bringing Roman Catholicism into the mid-twentieth century. Had it not been for these changes that moved the church away from some of its antiquated beliefs, it seems even more unlikely that a Catholic, no matter how loosely he held to the doctrine, could have been elected to the United States presidency.

Just days before the discovery of the Soviet Missiles in Cuba, Pope John XXIII assembled the Second Vatican Council. This Council, sometimes referred to as Vatican II, would eventually be charged by the Pope to examine all matters related to the Church brought before them, regardless of the Church’s previous positions. Between October 1962 and 1965, more than 2,000 bishops, sisters, laymen and laywomen, and observers met to create sixteen documents laying out a reconciliation of the Church with its place in the modern world. More than fifty years later, the effects of those documents created out of Vatican II are still felt today by Catholics around the world, in the way they worship and how they interact with other Christian denominations.³⁰ These actions, along with

²⁷ Norman Cousins, *The Improbable Triumvirate* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), 61.

²⁸ Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 687.

²⁹ Wilkins, “The Odd Couple,” 13.

³⁰ John Paul II, “*Pacem in Terris: A Permanent Commitment*,” *America*, February 10, 2003, 18; Huebsch, “John XXIII,” 13; William A. Norgren, “Memories of Vatican II,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 204; Gregory Baum, “Grateful Remembrance of Vatican Council II,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 21; Twomey, “Anniversary Lessons,” 12-14; Jordan G. Teicher, “Why is Vatican II So Important?,” *National Public Radio*, October 10, 2012, accessed March 4, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2012/10/10/162573716/why-is-vatican-ii-so-important>.

Pope John's welcoming spirit, gave hope to a generation of Catholics wanting to see the Church move towards a more modern and uniting faith.

While Pope John XXIII was welcoming bishops and observers during the first weeks of the Second Vatican Council, he was also paying close attention to what was happening with the Cuban situation. Of greatest concern to Pope John were the imminent decisions of the Communist Khrushchev and the Catholic Kennedy and how their forthcoming actions would affect, and perhaps devastate, the entire world. It was Pope John's prayerful hope that the two men would find some way to agree to a peaceful solution to the crisis. John XXIII did not wish to do nothing at this critical time but wanted to do all he could "to help save the peace."³¹ Yet, in his apprehension about the Cuban missile crisis, the pope wanted to only intervene in the most appropriate way and called upon the leaders to do everything possible to prevent an escalation in tensions by calling for a stoppage of the military shipments, but also an end to the quarantine. John XXIII's message read, in part: "We beg all governments not to remain deaf to this cry of humanity. That they do all that is in their power to save peace...Promoting, favouring, accepting conversations...is a rule of wisdom and prudence which attracts the blessings of heaven and earth."³² While both Kennedy and Khrushchev welcomed the intercession of Pope John, Kennedy felt his statement did not meet the central issue of the crisis: the weapons already present in Cuba. Any effect that the Pope's appeal made on either the

³¹ Cousins, *An Improbable Triumvirate*, 11.

³² Pope John XXII, quoted in Ronald J. Rychlak, "A War Prevented: Pope John XXIII and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Crisis Magazine*, November 11, 2011, accessed March 4, 2018, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2011/preventing-war-pope-john-xxiii-and-the-cuban-missile-crisis>.

American or Soviet government was not apparent.³³ Peace would not be achieved solely through the plea of a religious leader.

The pope appealed to the better natures of both men, using a moral argument by reminding the men that the fate of all the world's peoples could not be disregarded. He would also appeal to their egos but reminding them that history would long remember the leader who would help make peace possible.³⁴ It is not an accident of faith that, just six months after the Cuban crisis, on April 11, 1963, Pope John XXIII released his most famous encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. As its name suggests, the statement was centered around the idea of peace on earth and how it could possibly be achieved. The encyclical was borne out of the Cuban missile crisis when the “nuclear sword of Damocles” was “hanging by the slenderest of threads” over the entire world.³⁵ Though the pope was in the unique situation to be able send an appeal for peace to both men at the height of the crisis and have that appeal be well received by both leaders, as an outside observer, Pope John XXIII could only wait like the rest of the world and wonder if the president's faith would help to cultivate peace or if international politics would push the world towards nuclear war.

³³ Cousins, *The Improbable Triumvirate*, 17.

³⁴ Cousins, *The Improbable Triumvirate*, 18.

³⁵ John F. Kennedy “Address at U.N. General Assembly,” (speech, New York City, September 25, 1961), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed February 25, 2018, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/DOPIN64xJUGRKgdHJ9NfgQ.aspx>.

Secular Decision Making in the Cuban Missile Crisis

The decisions John F. Kennedy was forced to make during the Cuban missile crisis were, inarguably, some of the most harrowing faced by any president during the decades-long Cold War. The significance and worldwide implications of the Kennedy's future decisions on this crisis, raised the event to critical historic importance.

Graham Allison's seminal studies of the process of decision making lay out how different approaches towards analyzing decision making produce different results.³⁶ Allison suggests three models for how decisions were made in the Cuban crisis: the rational actor model, the organizational behavior model, and the governmental politics model. The rational actor approach is closest to the typical decision-making style of John Kennedy, as he was known to often try to put himself in someone else's shoes in order to understand their motivations and the consequences of his decisions regarding their actions.³⁷ The second of Allison's models is the organizational behaviors model, in which a large organization or several organizations divide the tasks associated with an issue in an effort to be responsive to problems facing the organization. The coordinated efforts to reach decisions, however, may be constrained by the lack of originality of thought that is often associated with larger groups and organizations. The third model is the governmental or bureaucratic politics model, which is almost a combination of the first and second models. This model involves more nuanced decisions because it involves

³⁶ Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *The American Political Science Review* 83, no. 3 (September 1969): accessed January 17, 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/1954423.; Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999).

³⁷ R. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 124.; Detzer, *The Brink*, 211.

multiple players who share a certain amount of power even if that power is the access they have to the main decision maker, in this case, the president.

According to many of those around him, Kennedy was not one to leave decision making to others. Instead he was much more likely to reach decisions himself.³⁸ However, during the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy wanted all of the information to which he could possibly have access.³⁹ This desire for information is likely one reason he depended so much on the ExComm during the crisis. Kennedy was also not bound by departmental confines, but rather cut across departmental lines to ensure he had the best minds working on problems.⁴⁰ Not only did he seek out the thoughts of those officials closest to him, but it was also during this crisis that the president even inquired of his secret service agents their thoughts on the situation, like he was hoping “somebody would come back with a solution his advisers had overlooked.”⁴¹ That the president wanted a committee made up of a diverse group of individuals and sought out opinions from others around him, demonstrated that Kennedy understood the seriousness of the situation and knew that bringing together members of his New Frontier could help flesh out all possible solutions, one of which may save the world from nuclear holocaust.

That is why it seems most plausible that, in October 1962, Kennedy used a combination of two of the models Allison described: the rational actor and the governmental politics models. Though Kennedy’s initial reaction was military action, he stepped back from this decision because he said he wanted to try and understand the

³⁸ Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 546.

³⁹ Ralph G. Martin, *A Hero for Our Time* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1983), 403.

⁴⁰ Detzer, *The Brink*, 102.

⁴¹ Gerald Blaine, *The Kennedy Detail* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010), 96-97.

“why” behind Khrushchev’s actions.⁴² Kennedy, for the thirteen days of the crisis, surrounded himself with those whose opinions he most valued, so his decision-making appears to be influenced most by the third model. Allison’s models do not reason through other factors that seem obviously to have come into play for Kennedy’s October decisions, namely the influence of Kennedy’s religious beliefs on his actions.

⁴² Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 547; Stern, *Week the World Stood Still*, 51.

Kennedy's Religious Development

John F. Kennedy did not credit his personal religious faith for the peaceful outcome of the Cuban missile crisis. Neither Cardinal Cushing, nor any of Kennedy's close associates, ever suggested there was a connection with his decisions during the crisis and his religion, nor was there any mention of religion on the hours of recordings of the ExComm. Historians, therefore, tend to agree that religion played no role in the resolution of the crisis. However, to say that there were no religious undertones inherent in moments of the crisis is denying a possible path towards a greater understanding of the crisis. While his outward motives might not have been religious, there are instances of religiousness can be found in Kennedy's handling and response to the Cuban missile crisis.

Hugh Sidey, former reporter for *Time* and *Life* who spent many years covering John F. Kennedy said, in relation to the president's multi-faceted past, "There are, I have found, many compartments within the souls of men who rise to great power."⁴³ This seems especially true in the case of John F. Kennedy and his complicated and often conflicted religious beliefs. If religion played any role in influencing the decisions which evaded nuclear war in the early 1960s, it is necessary to first gain an understanding of the internal faith of John F. Kennedy and how tenuous his faith in Catholicism could be. It was also Sidey who asserted that, at the highest level of the American government, policy positions in the presidency come "out of the heart and mind of the President" and that these ideas are "tempered by his personality...convictions and passions are almost

⁴³ Hugh Sidey, introduction to *Prelude to Leadership: The Post-War Diary of John F. Kennedy Summer 1945*, by John F. Kennedy (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 1995), xx.

invariably linked to early impressions gained from family and school and youthful experience.”⁴⁴ If policy is believed to be formed in the heart of the president, then it follows that decisions on matters of the most extreme importance would, as well. Therefore, an exploration of the development of Kennedy’s private faith during his early life and the role he allowed his Catholic faith to play in his public life while in Congress, builds into an understanding of how he may have used religion to avert disaster in the Cuban crisis.

The Young Kennedy’s Faith

Jack Kennedy grew up in a world of prestige and power, thanks to the political successes of his grandfathers and the financial successes of his father, but he also grew up in a home surrounded by and steeped in religion, stemming from the Irish-Catholic roots of his immigrant great-grandparents. Named for his maternal grandfather who had twice been elected mayor of Boston and to the U.S. House of Representatives, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was baptized before he turned two months old and was confirmed in the Church at age ten.⁴⁵ By the time of his confirmation, John already spent much of his childhood surrounded by religion: at home, during Mass, and throughout his constant stream of childhood illnesses which often left him gravely ill. Religion was not just a balm for the sick in the Kennedy household, though. The youngest of the nine Kennedy children, Senator Edward Kennedy, recalled that the family “prayed together daily and attended Mass together at least weekly” and described the patriarch, Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. as

⁴⁴ Sidey, introduction, xx.

⁴⁵ David L. Holmes, *Faiths of the Postwar Presidents: From Truman to Obama* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), 50.

being “deeply religious.”⁴⁶ The family matriarch, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, attended daily Mass and, at times during her life, was known to attend Mass twice a day.⁴⁷ Rose, undoubtedly, encouraged her children to practice their faith in the same ways she did, but her ritualistic devotion may have ultimately caused her children to view religion as being more ritual than substance and more performance than conviction.⁴⁸

As a young man, John Kennedy’s relationship to his faith was shaped by his mother’s focus on piety, but he still maintained a sense of skepticism about his personal beliefs. While John approached religion somewhat skeptically, his younger brother, Robert, came closest to the religious piety of their mother.⁴⁹ Bobby, as he was better known, would go on to serve as Attorney General in his brother’s administration and be one of his brother’s closest advisers, particularly during the Cuban missile crisis. John, however, was not interested in piety like his mother, but was still an active, assertive, and individualistic pursuer of faith.⁵⁰ While the Kennedy matriarch was pushing her children towards the rituals of Catholicism, the family patriarch, Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. would attend Mass weekly with his family and relied heavily on his faith during times of crisis. Joseph Kennedy nurtured in his sons, not the faith of their mother, but the rewards that could come from American political power. Whether it was from his choices in their schooling or in his no-nonsense way of encouraging competition even among the

⁴⁶ Holmes, *Faiths of the Postwar Presidents*, 46.

⁴⁷ Holmes, *Faiths of the Postwar Presidents*, 47-48.

⁴⁸ Gary Scott Smith, *Faith & the American Presidency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 260.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Faith & the American Presidency*, 260.; Thomas J. Carty, “Religion and the Presidency of John F. Kennedy,” in *Religion and the American Presidency*, ed. Gaston Espinoza (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 285; Holmes, *Faith of the Postwar Presidents*, 49.

⁵⁰ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 205.

siblings, the Kennedy patriarch supported his sons in asserting a certain level of independence from the constraints often placed upon them by Catholic theology.⁵¹ In their father's brand of religion, the Kennedy children may have seen beyond the mere ritualistic performance of the faith, but towards the possibility for freedom of thought and expression in American Catholicism.⁵²

This encouragement of freedom of thought allowed John Kennedy to question his faith as he grew older, while still maintaining his Catholic traditions. Evidence of Kennedy's church involvement while at Harvard comes from a diary he kept while touring Europe in which he frequently mentioned attending Sunday Mass and from a classmate who later reported Kennedy attending Mass on holy days of obligation.⁵³ More personal reflections come from "Lem" Billings, Kennedy's friend and roommate, who commented that, while he didn't think JFK was "a dedicated Catholic," he did feel that his friend was "a good Catholic." Billings is also noted for saying he "never, never, never remember in my life Jack's missing his prayers at night on his knees."⁵⁴

It was just a few years later, while serving in the Navy, that John Kennedy's letters home to his mother would begin to show his somewhat ironic, doubtful, and playful stance towards Catholicism. His faith, while still essentially Catholic, was becoming one tempered in the realities of war, including his older brother, Joe Jr.'s death, and his own brush with death in the waters off the Solomon Islands in August 1943.

⁵¹ Carty, "Religion and the Presidency," 287, 286.

⁵² Jason K. Duncan, "John F. Kennedy and the Irish Catholic Political Tradition," *The Forum* 11, no. 4 (December 2013): 687, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/for-2014-0004>.

⁵³ Holmes, *Faiths of the Postwar Presidents*, 51.

⁵⁴ Carty, "Religion and the Presidency," 286.

While he appreciated the prayers of his mother and her strong belief in the protective power of prayer, he wrote to her expressing his hope that it would not be seen as “a sign of lack of confidence in you all or the Church if I continue to duck.”⁵⁵ Though Kennedy was most likely light-hearted in his criticisms of his mother’s belief, he was serious about the need for a reevaluation of his personal faith. Rose’s son made clear that, while he maintained a sense of all she taught him, John Kennedy was going to be his own kind of Catholic.

Congress and Cushing

As Kennedy began his political career, his attitudes on faith became more clearly defined, not so much from personal discernment, but from the need to please constituents from a predominantly Catholic district. His decisions were so closely aligned with his Catholic constituency that Catholic publications called him a “white knight in the crepuscular haze” or a “Galahad in the House.”⁵⁶ Despite this praise, today it seems obvious that, like his father, Jack Kennedy’s personal belief system was not concerned with a strict adherence to Catholic dogma. Yet, despite his moral failings and his continued personal skepticism about Catholicism, John Kennedy was still a friend to Catholic laymen, priests, bishops, and, even, Cardinals. It was as he was running for Congress in 1947 that John Kennedy became acquainted with Richard Cardinal Cushing, who would become a trusted Catholic counselor for the future president throughout the rest of his life. Cushing, who would be made a Cardinal in 1958, was serving as Archbishop of Boston when he became a personal confidante to the Kennedy family.

⁵⁵ Carty, “Religion and the Presidency,” 286.

⁵⁶ Carty, “Religion and the Presidency,” 288.

Cushing, who little more than 15 years after meeting the young Congressional hopeful from Massachusetts would help perform the slain president's funeral Mass, recalled that his first impressions of Kennedy were of his being a young man who was great at listening to people and understanding the needs of his constituents.⁵⁷ Yet, he also remembers a young man who was always wanting to get the ideas and opinions of those around him and whose opinions he trusted. This would be a sentiment shared by many who knew Jack Kennedy, particularly during the Cuban missile crisis, when he would seek out the opinions of a myriad and diverse group of people before making the most difficult decisions of his public life.⁵⁸ According to Cushing, the "love of God and love of country are linked together in the heart of every true Catholic."⁵⁹ This statement indicates that Cushing believed that the values of the Church would possibly have some influence over the decisions made by American Catholics, in relation to their love of country. Seemingly, this influence on decision making could also include an influence on political decisions made by John F. Kennedy.

Catholics and Communism

During the precipitous rise of anti-Communism in the early years of the Cold War, there was little doubt that the young Irish-American Catholic Congressman would respond, as typical of American Catholics, with vehement opposition to any communist

⁵⁷ Richard J. Cardinal Cushing, recorded interview by Edward M. Kennedy, 1966, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://archive1.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Cushing,++Richard+Cardinal/JFKOH-RCC-01/JFKOH-RCC-01-TR.pdf>, 1.

⁵⁸ Blaine, *Kennedy Detail*, 96-97; Martin, *A Hero for Our Time*, 403.

⁵⁹ Richard Gribble, "An Anticommunist Polemic: The Case of Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22, no 4 (Fall 2004): 85, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25154934>.

influences in the country. In the years leading up the McCarthy-Army hearings, American Catholics had gained a reputation for being “the backbone of American anti-Communism.”⁶⁰ Even before World War II, the Church, took a stand against Communism around the world, with Pius XI asserting that Communism was the greatest threat against the Church in its history because communist atheism ostensibly destroyed not only the rights and liberty of humans, but also the very dignity of those forced to live under its ideology. The end of World War II saw the Communist Party overtake the Russian Orthodox Church, resulting in the persecution of churches and the arrest of bishops who did not fall into line with the Party.⁶¹ Because basic beliefs of Christianity were being impeded by Communism, Catholics were expected to be fundamentally opposed to its practice and propagation. Pope Pius XII, with whom Kennedy had private audience in 1951, was strongly anti-Communist.⁶² Immediately after World War II, in a Christmas encyclical in 1945, Pope Pius XII responded to these events by condemning Communism. As more Americans became aware of the apparent threat of Communism, American Catholics, who had been warning of an approaching Communist threat to the United States, saw an opportunity to assert their place as “true” Americans, despite a century of prejudice against them and the belief by some Protestants that it was possible to be both American and Catholic.⁶³ The anti-Communist stance of Catholics in America

⁶⁰ Quoted in Gribble, “Anticommunist Polemic,” 82.

⁶¹ Karim Schelkens, “Vatican Diplomacy After the Cuban Missile Crisis: New Light on the Release of Josyf Slipyj,” *Catholic Historical Review* 97, no. 4 (October 2011): 684, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cat.2011.0153>.

⁶² Carty, “John Kennedy, Religion, and Foreign Policy,” 52.

⁶³ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 127; Gribble, “Anticommunist Polemic,” 82.

allowed for both a defense of tenets of the Catholic faith and a defense of the basic principles of American democracy.

At the Vatican, Pope Pius XII would repeatedly make condemnations of communism throughout the 1950s, as repression of Catholics and other religious minorities continued, even as Khrushchev's de-Stalinization efforts continued across the USSR. Though efforts at the Kremlin were intended to give the impression of bring about changes in the ability of Russians to freely practice their religion, like including "religious liberty" in the USSR's constitution, this freedom was a formal liberty and did not allow for true religious freedoms.⁶⁴ Tensions continued under the papacy of John XXIII, but as was typical of the new pope's program of *aggiornamento*, or updating, of the Church, Pope John was interested in how he could extend some form of reconciliation, even to Communists. In preparation for Vatican II in October 1962, many bishops called upon the council to make clear condemnations of communism but, in the end, Pope John would agree to have Russian Orthodox observers present at Vatican II, despite their being controlled by the Communist Party. This inclusion was only possible because of a secret correspondence that had been occurring between John XXIII and Khrushchev since 1961. This correspondence was not an attempt to change ideologies, but simply to grow mutual trust and openness between the two ideologues.⁶⁵ In keeping with his welcoming spirit and hope for reconciliation among all the world's people, "Good Pope John" was working to understand the threat of communism, not as a way to pit the world against its evils, but as a way to help Communist leaders and atheistic

⁶⁴ Schelkens, "Vatican Diplomacy," 684-685.

⁶⁵ Schelkens, "Vatican Diplomacy," 697-698.

Communists understand the more welcoming and pastoral approach of the modernizing Church.

From 1947 to 1961, John Kennedy's Congressional voting record shows that he was quite cognizant of how his votes and his role as a policymaker would affect the Catholic Church. While he was undoubtedly influenced by the wishes of his constituents and by his own feeling on what would be the best for Massachusetts and the nation, it is also possible that Kennedy's own background in Catholicism influenced his opinion on the issues of the day. But, he also asserted that he did not want to be seen as "the white knight" for Catholicism, as some had made him out to be, particularly during his time in the U.S. House. Instead, Jack Kennedy wanted to be a public servant, basing his judgments and decisions on what was in the best interest of the nation, not on any personal, narrow ideological belief.⁶⁶ This distancing himself from his faith may have stemmed from his own religious doubts, but, after losing the vice-presidential nomination in 1956, John F. Kennedy may have also realized the need to move towards a more neutral stance should he have any chance to move to the top of the Democratic ticket in 1960.

⁶⁶ Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 147.

Religion and the American Public

Anti-Catholic Prejudice and the 1960 Presidential Campaign

Though some have posited that John XXIII's more liberal papacy during the campaign of 1960 was "an inestimable gift to Kennedy's hope" for election and that the Pope had brought American Catholics to a crossroads in urging a more outgoing, positive version of Catholicism, most non-Catholics still harbored a deep uneasiness about the possibility of electing a Catholic president. While it is true that a certain amount of "liberal hope" came from the Vatican during this time, it was too early in John's papacy for the full extent of his modernization efforts to be understood or felt worldwide.⁶⁷ The lack of recognition of Pope John's movement of the Church likely negated some of the potential positive effect these changes may have had on Kennedy's campaign. In order to try to assuage some of the concerns that he would use his faith to govern, JFK returned to the individualism encouraged by his father and portrayed his faith as an aspect of his life which could be compartmentalized from his governing self. Kennedy continued to downplay the role his religion would play in his decision-making as president. During the campaign, he did not forsake nor embrace his religious background, but he distanced himself from his religion unlike any candidate before him. In September 1960, Kennedy delivered a speech to provide what many considered his definitive stance on the "religion issue," questions around which created a diffuse, yet persistent, issue for Kennedy as he campaigned around the country.

⁶⁷ Mark Jay Mirsky, "Kennedy on the Mount of Olives," *The Massachusetts Review* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 168, accessed January 9, 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/25092034; Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 149.

While speaking before Houston's Ministerial Association two months before the election, John Kennedy asserted his strict version of the separation of church and state that would quiet some of his detractors. Though it did not silence all of the critics, the speech did help the campaign nationally as Kennedy assured the public that he was "an American by choice, and a Catholic by chance."⁶⁸ Kennedy pointed out that he had already risked his life and dedicated his career in service to America and that questions of his ability to be loyal to the United States were new to his presidential campaign. There had been no questions concerning his Catholic loyalty to America during World War II when he fought in the Pacific or when his brother, Joe Jr., died while serving in Europe.⁶⁹ Advisers to Kennedy believed that the depiction of him as a potential puppet of the Catholic Church was unfair because it was not really aligned with JFK's beliefs about religion. According to those closest to him, John Kennedy's most important personal qualities and beliefs had been developed on his own and his own discernment led him to believe that not all virtue lay solely in the Catholic Church. Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's aide and close adviser who worked with him from his early years in Congress until the assassination, said that although Kennedy was a friend to Cardinals, he was never in awe of the Catholic hierarchy.⁷⁰ Though Cardinal Cushing said that he believed

⁶⁸ John F. Kennedy, "Address of Senator John F. Kennedy to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association" (speech, Houston, TX, September 12, 1960), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/ALL6YEBJMEKYGMCntnSCvg.aspx>; Stephen A. Newman, "From John F. Kennedy's 1960 Campaign Speech to Christian Supremacy: Religion in Modern American Politics," *New York Law School Law Review* 53, no. 4 (2008): 710-711, accessed January 8, 2018. HeinOnline; Carty, "John Kennedy," 53.

⁶⁹ Mark S. Massa, "A Catholic for President: John F. Kennedy and the Secular Theology of the Houston Speech, 1960," *Journal of Church and State* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 312, accessed January 9, 2018. HeinOnline.

⁷⁰ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 17-20.

John Kennedy was as good of a Catholic as the Cardinal himself, this statement seems to be influenced by the Cardinal's friendship with Kennedy and his desire to paint him in a positive light within the Church.⁷¹ Jacqueline Kennedy, who was not only Kennedy's wife but someone he felt was his intellectual equal and another of his most trusted advisers, is said to have wondered why there was such a fervor over her husband's religion because "he was such a poor Catholic."⁷² Kennedy admitted that he had not read, nor would he be bound to, all of the doctrines and documents of the Catholic Church. He approached and met with Popes, Cardinals, priests, and other Catholics no differently than he did any other religious or lay leader, nor did he value the opinion of one group over another.

In the Houston speech, Kennedy made it clear that he did not speak for his Church and his Church did not speak for him in an attempt to reassure a worried electorate about the influence of the Catholic hierarchy.⁷³ However, the Catholic hierarchy that many feared was, actually, the mechanism that had allowed Catholicism to take a stand on social issues throughout the early 20th century. Kennedy did not focus on the more liberal social justice aims that had long been the position of the Church, such as the unionization of workers and the desegregation of Catholic churches and schools, while speaking in Houston.⁷⁴ He no longer touted the long-held Catholic opposition to Communism. He

⁷¹ Cushing, Interview, 12.

⁷² Newman, "From Kennedy's 1960 Campaign Speech to Christian Supremacy," 712.

⁷³ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 181; Newman, "From Kennedy's 1960 Campaign Speech to Christian Supremacy," 711.

⁷⁴ Michael W. McConnell, "Is There Still a Catholic Question in America- Reflections on John F. Kennedy's Speech to the Houston Ministerial Association," *Notre Dame Law Review* 86, no. 4 (August 2011): 1646, accessed January 9, 2018. HeinOnline.

also did not remind Protestants that, in addition to these ideologies already espoused by the Church, it was the current Catholic hierarchy under the leadership of Pope John XXIII, that was working to bring the Church into the 1960s. But rather than focusing on these positive aims of the Church or the liberalization that was seen as coming into the Church, Kennedy separated himself further from his religion, in terms of how it would influence his political life. In separating himself so severely from the Church in the Houston speech, Kennedy missed the opportunity to promote the social teachings of Catholicism that may have been seen as positive influences on his decision making as chief executive, including how these teachings would affect foreign relations.

Kennedy believed the issues that were most pertinent and threatening to the American people were being overshadowed by the continued discussions about his religion. Issues of foreign relations, particularly those involving the specter of Communism and its encroachment into the Western Hemisphere via Fidel Castro's Cuba, would be what would define the next president's administration and, yet, they were not foremost in the American public's mind.⁷⁵ Would religion play such a major role in these international affairs that discussions surrounding Kennedy's beliefs should surpass discussions surrounding America's place in the world community? Kennedy, the Catholic, revealed more of his ironic stance towards his religion when he admitted that, while all law comes from God, "that has nothing to do with international law."⁷⁶ While he hoped that statement would make clear that he would not govern from a religious position to America's friends not to her foes, others have taken this statement further and

⁷⁵ Massa, "A Catholic for President," 311; John Kennedy "Greater Houston Speech."

⁷⁶ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 21.

opined that morality stemming from church teachings has little bearing on foreign relations.⁷⁷ This opinion seems overly prosaic because it dismisses the conscience of the decision maker. While assuring that his religion would not play a role in his decisions, Kennedy also asserted in Houston that his personal conscience would be his guide in making decisions in the national interest. The Catholic periodical, *America*, published an article one week after the Houston speech that reiterated Kennedy's point by saying "a man's conscience has a bearing on his public as well as his private life."⁷⁸ This would, ostensibly, include decisions on foreign relations. The question remains, though, of how much separation a man can make between his personal conscience and his religious beliefs. For Kennedy, having been encouraged by his father to take an individualistic approach to Catholicism, his religious beliefs and conscience may have been more closely linked because his belief system was not grounded in the traditional theology to the extent that his aide and adviser Ted Sorensen remarked that Kennedy "cared not a whit for theology."⁷⁹ Despite this lack of interest in Catholic theology, Kennedy did not address how his conscience had been informed by the Catholic teaching he received from his parents, his priests, and from his own personal discernment and how this would, possibly, play a part in his decision making during the times of greatest crisis during his presidency.

Civil Religion

Despite distancing himself from his Catholic faith during his terms in the Senate and his insistence during the presidential campaign on maintaining a strict separation of

⁷⁷ McConnell, "Catholic Question in America," 1646.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Victor Lasky, *J.F.K. The Man and the Myth* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1963), 278.

⁷⁹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 20.

church and state in his future administration, it was impossible for John F. Kennedy to remove from his presidency the force known as the American civil religion. The origins of the idea of civil religion can be traced to Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, where he laid out the civil religious dogma, the basic tenets of which include the acceptance of the existence of God, reward and punishment based on actions, and a strong dislike for any sort of religious intolerance.⁸⁰ More recently, the idea of the American civil religion has been described as a form of idolatry, instituted during the early years of American history, that created "a sacred dimension to American ideology and institutions" and that can be viewed, according to Philip Gleason, as a sort of "superreligion."⁸¹ Civil religion can be thought of as "the religion of patriotism."⁸² American civil religion is separate from any private religious faith that a person or leader may have and, while it is a generalized version of more traditional religious faiths, it should be considered as seriously as any other religion. It is an idea that borrows from both the religious and secular tradition, so that the two are not mutually exclusive. The civil religion is not against traditional religions, as found in churches, synagogues, and mosques, but, because it borrowed from these traditions and never set out to do harm to the more traditional institutions, it has grown alongside and has even been welcomed as part of some faiths.⁸³ In another conception of civil religion, Daniel Boorstin posited the idea of

⁸⁰ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 43.

⁸¹ Quoted in footnote 24 in Thomas L. Shaffer, "Nuclear Weapons, Lethal Injection, and American Catholics: Faith Confronting American Civil Religion," *Notre Dame Journal of Ethics, Law, & Public Policy* 14, no. 1 (2000): 12, accessed January 21, 2018, HeinOnline.

⁸² Shaffer, "Nuclear Weapons," 7.

⁸³ Bellah, "Civil Religion," 50.

“givenness” as being “the belief that values in America are in some way or other automatically defined.”⁸⁴ Some of these beliefs include the idea that America is exceptional in all the world and that the nation upholds the values outlined in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. The idea that the motives of the nation are pure and the great desire is to advance the cause of freedom around the world and the idea that God, though not specifically the Christian God, is always an ally of the United States extend the idea of the virtue of the American civil religion.⁸⁵ These ideas, that equate America to being inherently good, lead to a level of national unity that further helps define civil religion, an adherence to which is almost a prerequisite for anyone wanting to hold political office.

Kennedy became an American cultural hero, even before his tragic death, partly because of the masterful way he was able to weave together the nation’s civil religion and the “givenness” of American society, and how he was able to intertwine his religious upbringing and his own version of his Catholic faith with the “religion of Americanism.”⁸⁶ As president, JFK invoked the image of God often, even from the moment he took office. In his inaugural address, though not specifically calling upon the Christian God, he mentions “God” three times and, in each of these instances, God is called upon as a provider, protector, or the nation’s ultimate guiding force.⁸⁷ Even though

⁸⁴ Boorstin quoted in Richard C.C. Kim, “A Roman Catholic President in the American Schema,” *Journal of Church and State* 3, no. 1 (May 1961): 34, accessed January 16, 2018, HeinOnline.

⁸⁵ Harvey Sicherman, “Virtue, Interest, and Works in American Foreign Policy,” *Society* 44, no. 6 (October 2007): 114, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12115-007-9024-x>.

⁸⁶ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 201.

⁸⁷ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 41.

he had campaigned on the promise that his religion would not instruct his governing, within minutes of becoming president, Kennedy was invoking religion. But, he was not declaring anything explicit about his Catholicism, its doctrine, or its theology. Rather, he was seemingly invoking the God associated with civil religion and the “givenness” of America, along with the deep personal devotion he felt to the national interest. After taking the oath of office, Kennedy reminded the American people that his obligation was now sworn not only to the Constitution, but also before God. Despite the resistance to the election of a Catholic as president and the fear that surrounded his possible use of Catholicism in his administration, Kennedy’s invoking God was not interpreted as an endorsement of his personal spirituality, but rather as his devotion to the idea of civil religion. His true intent in invoking God, though, can never be known.

Kennedy also invoked God during his address to the American people before signing the quarantine order on October 22. After delivering the hard facts of the situation, and the seven-step plan of the government to meet the crisis, Kennedy addresses the American people. Khrushchev criticized the address, saying that it was a serious threat to peace.⁸⁸ Kennedy, however, was convinced that this was the only way towards peace. In light of his conviction of America’s “givenness,” the president persuasively employed the idea of civil religion and America’s moral superiority when he equated the chosen path as the one “most consistent with our character and courage as a nation.”⁸⁹ His fervent hope that the goal be “not the victory of might but the vindication

⁸⁸ Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 560.

⁸⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Build-up in Cuba” (speech, Washington, DC, October 22, 1962), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-041-018.aspx>.

of right...both peace and freedom” set up his last statement, in which he invokes God by name and assures America that “God willing, that goal will be achieved.”⁹⁰ Again, though this was not necessarily the Catholic God to whom he was referring, there is the strong undercurrent of personal faith and virtue present in this statement, even when the statement is meant to appeal to Americans of all backgrounds.

⁹⁰ Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report.”

Kennedy's Faith and the Cuban Missile Crisis

Kennedy made clear his belief in the American civil religion, it is much more difficult to assess the actual faith of the man who had been elected America's first Catholic president. In speeches, Kennedy would reveal a faith that was reminiscent of the faith of Abraham Lincoln or that would be the basis for the prayers of George Washington. The thirty-fifth president's faith was seen to be based upon "a simple trust in a benign God whose hand moves in a shadowy but benevolent way in the affairs of men."⁹¹ The similarity between Kennedy's public faith and that of two stalwarts of American civil religion provides compelling reason for Robert Bellah's conclusion that the invocation of "God" in Kennedy's inaugural was intended to be a reference to the generic ideology that unites God and country and not one that was intended to be specific to the Catholic faith. While in the case of Kennedy's inaugural, it seems clear the difference between Kennedy's civil and religious beliefs, it is impossible to truly know a person's spiritual intent, particularly for someone whose faith was as complex and as private as John F. Kennedy's. According to Ted Sorensen, in all of the years he knew him, JFK never disclosed his personal views on man's relationship to God nor did he ever hear him pray out loud. Sorensen felt that Kennedy was a Catholic by "heritage, habit, and conviction."⁹²

The liberal Catholic weekly *Commonweal* reported that one must "acknowledge that the teachings of the Church are of prime importance" to President Kennedy.⁹³ However, it was also during his presidency that *The Economist* asserted the president was

⁹¹ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 222.

⁹² Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 20.

⁹³ Quoted in Lasky, *J.F.K. The Man*, 278.

“close to being a spiritually rootless man” and that he only performed “the prescribed devotions of his faith.”⁹⁴ Kennedy was troubled by assertions made that he was not religious because, in reality, he was more deeply religious than he appeared and more religious than he wanted to appear.⁹⁵ Those closest to president and who had known him for many years knew that he would attend Mass every Sunday, no matter where he was in the world, even during periods of intense campaigning or on visits to meet with foreign heads of state. He would not alter his religious practices for political convenience, either.⁹⁶ He did not like being photographed going to or leaving Mass and would often go to different churches for Mass and sit in the rear pew, for he believed the relationship between God and man was a private one.⁹⁷ For Kennedy, faith was a private and quiet matter but his actions, particularly during a time such as the Cuban missile crisis, provide an idea of how his faith was expressed through his works.

Empathy, Family, and Religious Observation

Not only did President Kennedy adhere to his faith quietly, but his was also a quiet strength and a quiet concern for the world around him. Though his life had been full of tragedy, losing siblings and children, facing his own death multiple times, and seeing the horrors of war, Kennedy was not one to broadcast his losses or how he worried about those around him. His concerns were his alone, though if he shared them with his God during his nightly prayers, it would not have surprised those who knew him the best. His concern for others came from an unusual empathy with which he was imbued. This

⁹⁴ Lasky, *J.F.K. The Man*, 326.

⁹⁵ Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, “*Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*” (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1972), 358-359.

⁹⁶ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 20.

⁹⁷ Cushing, Interview, 12.

empathy made it possible for him to sense what others needed from him and what was appropriate for him to say or how to act towards other people.⁹⁸ This characteristic was likely part of the reason that Kennedy was widely known as great candidate and politician, much like his great-grandfather. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. believed that John Kennedy showed little emotion in public for the simple reason that he felt too much emotion to display it appropriately.⁹⁹ It was also this characteristic empathy that may have caused such a shift in his decision making from the Bay of Pigs to the Cuban crisis. It is well known that the outcome of the Bay of Pigs caused a grave mistrust between Kennedy and his military advisers. But the empathy he felt for those whose lives were lost and those who were taken prisoner expressed itself in front of Cardinal Cushing who, for the first time in their long friendship, saw Kennedy's eyes fill with tears when the two discussed the tragic outcome of May 1961.¹⁰⁰ The Bay of Pigs, coupled with the Berlin crisis, also appeared to have a substantive influence on Kennedy's faith. Hugh Sidey commented that, to those who watched him through the crises of his first few months in office, the president's "church attendance and the reference in his talks to prayer had become less mechanical and more meaningful."¹⁰¹ It is possible that the president re-discovered, through the tribulations of his first year in the presidency, the part of religion that was more than mere ritual. If this occurred in 1961, then it is possible that he was still finding deeper meaning in his prayers and attendance at Mass in October of 1962 and the Cuban missile crisis.

⁹⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 3, 14, 13.

⁹⁹ Martin, *A Hero for our Time*, 405.

¹⁰⁰ Cushing, Interview, 9.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Clarke, *Last Hundred Days*, 17.

Any presidency is “an act of faith” but for John Kennedy, that faith was tempered by the prejudice he faced for being a Catholic, even if he wasn’t a strong Catholic.¹⁰² Most likely, Kennedy wholly believed in God and accepted church dogma, but merely kept his personal theology and relationship to God to himself.¹⁰³ Much like Sidey’s observation of Kennedy after his first ten months in office, Cardinal Cushing believed that President Kennedy became a more “prayerful man” when he became president than he had been at any other time he’d known him.¹⁰⁴ Cardinal Cushing also revealed the pride Jack Kennedy felt in the dog tags issued him when he became president. Unlike the ones he wore when he was serving in the Navy, the dog tags issued him in 1961 are still unique in all of history as they say, simply: “Kennedy, John F., Commander in Chief. Religion- Roman Catholic.”¹⁰⁵ Though a dog tag does not tell of a man’s faith, the pride he purportedly felt in those tags reflect the prayerfulness and religiosity of the Catholic president.

Many of the struggles Kennedy experienced during the Cuban missile crisis appear indicative of the conscionable morality that the Catholic Kennedy was attempting to apply to the grave situation. The president’s demeanor during the thirteen days of the Cuban missile crisis elucidates the stressful, yet quiet, moments he experienced. These moments, though not overtly religious, are full of indicators that Kennedy was wrestling with how to reconcile his actions with his conscience, which had been formed through his experiences both religious and secular. The president’s connection with those closest to

¹⁰² Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 20.

¹⁰³ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 207.

¹⁰⁴ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 207.

¹⁰⁵ Cushing, Interview, 4; Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 207.

him, his deep understanding of those around him, his dedication to finding a peaceful solution to the crisis, and his empathy, led to Kennedy's being able to navigate the struggle for peace in which he was engaged. Knowing Kennedy's religion likely helped result in his quiet strength, a strength that came also from a lifetime of loss and tragedy, it is possible to say that his religious background may have helped buoy his personality during this most difficult time.

Those around Kennedy, even before being aware of the danger the nation was facing, sensed that something was wrong with the president, beginning on October 16. From his secret service agents to his press secretary, those who were not involved directly in the ExComm meetings knew their Chief Executive was dealing with something that was weighing heavily on his heart and mind, creating an atypical solemn mood around him. Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, who would not be informed of the missile placement until later in the week remembered observing the president's "black mood" and noticed in meetings with him he had no smile and was almost constantly drumming his fingers on his teeth, a sign of his nervous energy that was especially apparent when he was wrestling with difficult decisions.¹⁰⁶ These moments, that would become more frequent over the next two weeks, were indications that the normally outgoing president was turning inward, in an attempt to center his struggle for peace in his own conscience.

Part of this inward turn was to surround himself with his family, more so than at any other time during his presidency. In trying to keep as normal a schedule as possible,

¹⁰⁶ Blaine, *Kennedy Detail*, 95; Martin, *A Hero for our Time*, 404; Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 249.

both for the public perception of normalcy and his own hope for the return to normal, the president spent more time with Jacqueline, read to Caroline daily, and made frequent trips to check on John Jr. who was in bed sick the entire first week of the crisis. He would occasionally take dinner with friends and even made trips to Hyannis, where he would walk alone, especially when he had to “think unthinkable thoughts.”¹⁰⁷ Those around him noticed many instances where the president would sit alone, seemingly deep in thought.¹⁰⁸ While his introspection would often be done in private during the moments when he was forced to make hard decisions, he would also turn to those closest to him to help him through these quietly contemplative moments. Of all the people who surrounded him during crisis, though, Kennedy sought out his two most trusted advisers most often: his wife Jacqueline and his brother Bobby.

Retreating from the harried world of ExComm meetings and secret sessions, times with those people he most trusted and who shared his political and religious beliefs provided the president the opportunity to work through both his political and religious consciences. Mrs. Kennedy stayed in the private quarters most of the time during the Cuban crisis, so she could be near if the president needed her. She and the president would often take walks around the Rose Garden during the 13 days of the crisis or dine together so she could learn of the latest developments and he could share his thoughts and garner her opinions.¹⁰⁹ On the first Saturday of the crisis, when he had returned home suddenly from campaigning in Illinois to meet with the ExComm, and before the nation

¹⁰⁷ Detzer, *The Brink*, 209; Martin, *A Hero for our Time*, 410.

¹⁰⁸ Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 64.

¹⁰⁹ Clint Hill, *Mrs. Kennedy and Me* (New York: Gallery Books, 2012), 196; Martin, *A Hero for our Time*, 412; Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 204; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 794.

knew of the threat 90 miles off the coast of Florida, John Kennedy called his wife at their family retreat of Glen Ora and asked her to come back to the White House with their children. He wanted her closer to him for the stressful days to come and to be near, in case the unthinkable happened.¹¹⁰ Having herself been raised in the Catholic faith, any spiritual reassurance she may have offered would have been true to the Catholic faith, as well.

Much as he did with his wife, the president spent considerable time during the crisis with his brother, Robert. They would tell stories and reminisce about their younger days as a distraction and a way to talk through the stress of the events facing the nation.¹¹¹ Bobby Kennedy, not only the president's brother, but also his Attorney General, was the first call the president made after being told of the photographic evidence of the missile placement. Among the other officials in the ExComm, John Kennedy was somewhat isolated in his own government, leading some to proclaim "thank God for Bobby during the Cuban missile crisis."¹¹² The Kennedy brothers were never closer than they were during the crisis because Bobby, unlike any other ExComm member, could tell the president exactly what he thought.¹¹³ Bobby could also suggest concerns or solutions to the ExComm on his brother's behalf, even when the president was not sitting in on the meeting, something he did occasionally throughout the crisis to give ExComm members full freedom to speak.¹¹⁴ It was the uniquely close nature of their relationship and how well they knew one another's beliefs which allowed John and

¹¹⁰ Detzer, *The Brink*, 160.

¹¹¹ Martin, *A Hero for our Time*, 406.

¹¹² David Talbot, *Brothers* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 170.

¹¹³ Martin, *A Hero for our Time*, 403.

¹¹⁴ R. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 13.

Robert Kennedy to share many of the same ideas and the same concerns. Because the brothers knew one another so well, though, they both also shared a sense of premonition about a violent end to the Kennedy administration. Much like Abraham Lincoln, another president known for his nebulous views on religion, John Kennedy spoke often about the possibility of an assassination.¹¹⁵ Yet, this fatalistic thinking can be thought of as a religious trait, as well, because it was not something they dwelled on as a fear, but as an inevitability and something which only the two of them could truly understand. It was for this reason that Kennedy brothers confided in one another, like they could with no one else. They had been raised in the same household, though their versions of faith were vastly different. Unlike his older brother, Robert Kennedy had a more outwardly pious relationship to his faith, more aligned with his mother's piety. Bobby was also more reactionary against Communism, and, therefore, more "hawkish" during the crisis.¹¹⁶ This also made him a much more "antiquated" form of Catholicism, not yet moving along the path of his brother's more liberal faith and in the direction that Pope John XXIII was beginning to take the Church. The fact that he confided in Bobby so much during the crisis would imply that some of the president's thinking was influenced by the younger brother, advising the older, from a place of Catholic devotion very different from the way the elder Kennedy was accustomed to thinking.

The Cuban missile crisis made many demands on John Kennedy's time. However, the president continued his lifelong dedication to attending Sunday Mass. Reports from those who were present at the time show that Kennedy attended church services at least

¹¹⁵ Talbot, *Brothers*, 93,

¹¹⁶ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 32.

three times during the thirteen days of the crisis. On the first Wednesday of the crisis, days prior to the American public being aware of the Cuban missiles, Kennedy decided to stop at Saint Matthews Church where a National Day of Prayer service was being held. Dave Powers, who also did not yet know about the missiles, was with the president and questioned the stop. As the two men knelt in the back of the church, Kennedy responded to Powers saying that “we could use all the prayers we can get.”¹¹⁷ Kennedy’s statement is evidence that, even if he did not subscribe to the theology of the Church, he, at least, spoke to a belief in the power of praying to God during times of intense pressure, in the same way his mother had prayed for him while he was serving in the Navy.

President and Mrs. Kennedy attended Mass together on Sunday, October 21, less than a week after the president was told of the missiles and the day before he would address the American public about the Cuban situation.¹¹⁸ Between Mass on the 21 of October and Mass on the 28 of October, the world would become aware of the threat from the Soviet missiles, the crisis would reach its climax, and Khrushchev would agree to remove the missiles from Cuba. Bookended by Sunday Masses, though, were the most dangerous days of the Cold War, days which would test the young president, his advisers, and his principles, both in public and private life. There is no record of Kennedy attending Mass or going to Saint Stephen’s, Saint Matthew’s, or any other church during the week. Any strength or sense of peace that Kennedy may have gained from the ritual of organized Catholic Mass, would have had to carry him through the trying week.

¹¹⁷ O’Donnell and Powers, “*Johnny*,” 358.

¹¹⁸ Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 100.

By the evening of Saturday, October 27, the quarantine was in effect, a U-2 plane had been shot down and the pilot killed, and there were two communiques from Khrushchev, one demanding tougher Soviet demands in order to end the crisis. The meeting of the ExComm that evening was tense, with military leaders pressing Kennedy even more fiercely to immediately take military action against the Cuban missile sites. The arguments and “sharp disagreements” between the ExComm members that night took such a toll on the members that they “almost seemed unable to communicate with one another” and made the meeting on October 27 the most depressing of his entire presidency.¹¹⁹ After Bobby went to meet with the Russian Ambassador about the letter to Khrushchev and to suggest the secret potential of the removal of the Turkish missiles, John Kennedy and Dave Powers watched the movie “Roman Holiday” before the president went to bed. Before he left, though, he told Powers that they would be going to the 10 o’clock Mass at Saint Stephens in the morning and that “we’ll have plenty of hard praying to do so don’t be late.”¹²⁰ The pressure of knowing that he might be forced to take military action was obviously weighing on the president and he was recalling prayer, just as his mother had taught him, as the way to ease the troubled heart, mind, soul, and conscience. If Kennedy meant this statement as another ironic mention of his mother’s ritualistic piety or if he was sincere in his desire to find absolution in prayer, can never be known, but the plan to attend Mass, with all else swirling around him showed a dedication to the prayerfulness of John Kennedy’s faith. The next day, Sunday, October 28, was the Feast of Christ the King, a Mass which acknowledges Christ’s reigning over

¹¹⁹ R. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 102; O’Donnell and Powers, “*Johnny*,” 386-387.

¹²⁰ O’Donnell and Powers, “*Johnny*,” 387.

all heaven and earth. In the Catholic faith, Christ the King rules over all governments, as well, and all the decision-makers therein. In essence, the Feast of Christ the King would be offering prayers to a heavenly leader for His continued reign. Not only were Catholic churches worldwide celebrating the Christ the King Mass, the U.S. Catholic Bishops also declared that Sunday as a National Day of Prayer for President Kennedy and his government.¹²¹ The prayers of the nation's Catholics would be focused on guidance for the Kennedy's decisions and the outcomes of those decisions, as well.

The outcome of Kennedy's decisions was known before he was able to get to Mass on Sunday morning when McGeorge Bundy informed him of Khrushchev's acceptance of the American deal. Though Kennedy took this news with "tremendous satisfaction" he insisted on reading the message from the Soviet Premier while on his way to Mass.¹²² Kennedy told Dave Powers, as they prepared to leave, that they now had extra reason to pray.¹²³ The president was possibly indicating to Powers that prayers of thanks would be said on this morning, as opposed to the prayers of intercession for which he planned to have a need just a few hours earlier. Kennedy, one ExComm member noticed, "walked with a lighter step" as he prepared to go to Mass on Sunday morning and the president himself admitted to feeling like "a different man" than he had during the previous two weeks.¹²⁴ While the crisis was not completely over, as the missile sites would remain in Cuba for another several weeks before finally being removed, the most perilous moments of the crisis had passed. That Sunday night, before getting in to his

¹²¹ Lawrence J. McAndrews, "Parallel Paths: Kennedy, the Church, and Nuclear War," *American Catholic Studies* 199, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 10.

¹²² Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 807.

¹²³ Martin, *A Hero for Our Time*, 417.

¹²⁴ Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 205.

bed, Dave Powers saw the president get down on his knees by his bedside, praying again.¹²⁵

The Weight of Virtues

C.S. Lewis once wrote that conscience has two meanings: "...the pressure a man feels upon his will to do what he thinks is right" and "his judgment as to what the content of right and wrong are."¹²⁶ For John Kennedy, the Cuban missile crisis can, ultimately, be seen as a struggle of conscience. While neither the pressure to do what is right nor his judgment as to the meaning of right developed solely out of Kennedy's Catholic faith, there is evidence of his faith's influence in helping form the president's conscience. This evidence is found in his religious background, his weaving civil religion and his personal faith into his political career, and in the personal traits he exhibited during the crisis, including his church attendance. During the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy's conscience seemed to align strongly with the cardinal virtues of the *Catechism*: fortitude, justice, prudence, and temperance. As a child, before being confirmed a member of the Catholic Church, Kennedy would have been taught the *Catechism*, the basic tenets of Catholic doctrine, which seek to ground the Catholic in his religious life. Though these virtues are not exclusive to Catholicism, they are four of the fundamentals of the faith. According to the *Catechism*, fortitude is the virtue which "ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of good"; justice is "the firm and constant will to give God and neighbor their due"; prudence can be the "practical reason to discern...our true good and to choose the right means for achieving it"; and temperance is the virtue that "moderates

¹²⁵ Martin, *A Hero for Our Time*, 417.

¹²⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 65.

the attraction of the pleasures...and provides balance...”¹²⁷ These virtues may have played a role in the forming of the President Kennedy’s conscience, pressuring him to do the right thing in respect to the pursuit of the common good, while maintaining the rights and dignity of others.

Hugh Sidey believed that the horror of war was the single biggest influence on Kennedy’s later leadership. He saw the impact of war on individuals, nations, and societies and believed that the impact was never a positive one. In fact, the president’s concern over the effects of nuclear war “ran even deeper than his considerable public rhetoric on the issue.”¹²⁸ Throughout his presidency, John Kennedy made comments and public statements about the horrors that would arise from the use of nuclear weapons. Kennedy’s response to an early briefing on the effects of nuclear weapons was to turn to Secretary of State Dean Rusk and say “And we call ourselves the human race.”¹²⁹ In 1961, the president wrote that his understanding of the impacts of a nuclear exchange were such he felt “that it would be among the dead than among the quick.”¹³⁰ When shown a 20-megaton bomb, Kennedy turned pale and inquired, “Why do we need one of these?”¹³¹ It is not a stretch to infer that the impacts of war which effected Kennedy so deeply did so because they, in part, violated the four cardinal virtues of the *Catechism* which he was taught to uphold.

¹²⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed March 13, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm, 1837, 1836, 1835, 1838.

¹²⁸ Sidey, Introduction, xxix.

¹²⁹ Philip Nash, “Nuclear Weapons in Kennedy’s Foreign Policy,” *The Historian* 56, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 288. accessed January 9, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1994.tb01309.x>.

¹³⁰ Nash, “Nuclear Weapons,” 288.

¹³¹ Nash, “Nuclear Weapons,” 288.

Kennedy's fortitude and resoluteness also may have helped him make the decisions not to immediately pursue a military path to end the crisis. Though Kennedy's first reaction to the proof of missiles in Cuba was that the U.S. would have to revert to an air strike or invasion to remove them, throughout the course of the crisis, after more thought, he became opposed to using such military action.¹³² This opposition became more difficult for him as his military leaders, particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were putting increasing pressure on the president to take military action, including both air strikes and an invasion.¹³³ General Curtis LeMay went so far as to say Kennedy's reluctance to use military force was soft and that the American people would think the same when they discovered he could have taken military action but refused.¹³⁴ Yet, Kennedy did not agree to military action and was still hesitant, even when he knew that he would have to prepare reserve forces in case Khrushchev rejected the American offer and an invasion became necessary.¹³⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. believed that the president was able to resist the pressures from the Joint Chiefs because he had been in the military himself. His status as a war hero afforded Kennedy the self-confidence that some commanders in chief lack.¹³⁶ The president also deeply loathed the bloodshed associated with war, carnage he had witnessed firsthand, and knew that a nuclear war would likely mean the end of the world.¹³⁷ If the use of nuclear weapons during the Cuban crisis did not cause the physical end of the world, it would almost certainly cause irreparable harm

¹³² Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 547.

¹³³ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 195.

¹³⁴ Talbot, *Brothers*, 166.

¹³⁵ R. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 109.

¹³⁶ Talbot, *Brothers*, 171.

¹³⁷ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 28; Sidey, Introduction, xxiii-xxiv, xxxii.

to the people, the land, and the relationships of the world's nations, regardless of whether those nations and lands felt the direct impacts of the weapons. Kennedy's moral sensibility would not permit a strictly military response that would kill, at a minimum, hundreds of Cubans and could escalate to kill millions across the world.

The personality traits that it takes to lead a nation to the brink of nuclear war, but not over that edge, all seemed to come together under the persona of John F. Kennedy. McGeorge Bundy believed he had never seen a man so fully engaged as President Kennedy during the difficult days of the crisis.¹³⁸ Press Secretary Pierre Salinger recognized that Kennedy "depended on his smile, his courage, and his optimism that this crisis too would pass."¹³⁹ His was a stalwart persona to the world, even confidently signing his middle name on the quarantine proclamation on the evening of October 23, something that he typically did not do on his presidential proclamations, while keeping the pen with which he signed the proclamation for himself, also a rare occurrence.¹⁴⁰ At the critical and even more trivial moments during the crisis, Kennedy exceeded the expectations of what a president in such a unique and terrifying moment could do. Kennedy's friend and aide, Kenneth O'Donnell wrote that he had "dark thoughts about what could happen if the wrong kind of president happened to be occupying the White House at a sensitive time in history."¹⁴¹ Regardless of his internal struggles, Kennedy portrayed confidence to the world. It is impossible to know if his internal confidence was shaken, but his deep faith may have played a role in his public display of confidence.

¹³⁸ Hugh Sidey, *John F. Kennedy* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), 278.

¹³⁹ Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 267.

¹⁴⁰ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 105; Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 135.

¹⁴¹ O'Donnell and Powers, "Johnny," 354.

Though his physical appearance may have given away some of his weariness, at least according to the Secret Service agents around him who described him aging “a decade” during the crisis and who noticed the “hollow look in his eyes” after his national address,¹⁴² it was the president’s ability to maintain some semblance of normalcy that helped those around him stay calm. Most of those involved with Kennedy during the crisis noted how, despite the inner struggle that he was facing, he was outwardly calm.¹⁴³ Even during the contentious ExComm meetings, Kennedy’s calm and deliberate manner was evidence of a leader in charge. It was clear to all those around him that he was keeping his emotions in check, not becoming aggressive, and was tolerant of criticism that sometimes came from the meetings. In a reflection of Christian fortitude, he was composed, in command, and kept his sense of humor throughout the crisis. This composure seems even more remarkable during this trying time because of something John Kennedy had told Jacqueline Bouvier when they were engaged: that his chief flaw was his irritability. Though he likely became upset and angry at times throughout the crisis, it was his composure that impressed the ExComm the most.¹⁴⁴ It was this calmness that helped keep everyone else from becoming overwhelmed with the dangerous situation and, while this sense of peace may have come from the virtue of fortitude, it may also have come from another religious source. At the very beginning of the crisis, while he was trying to prevent the news of the Soviet missiles from becoming public, Kennedy made a campaign stop in Illinois and visited at the grave of Abraham Lincoln. He laid a

¹⁴² Blaine, *Kennedy Detail*, 95-96.

¹⁴³ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 784; Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 267; O’Donnell and Powers, “*Johnny*,” 347.

¹⁴⁴ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 794; Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 31-32; O’Donnell and Powers, “*Johnny*,” 347; Detzer, *The Brink*, 229.

wreath at Lincoln's tomb and stood quietly for several moments in front of the slain president's gravesite. Some have surmised that Kennedy was gaining strength from his predecessor, a man who had faced much adversity and during his presidency.¹⁴⁵ It could also be speculated, though, that Kennedy may have been saying intercessory prayers for the strength to handle the current crisis. Though there is no direct indication that this strength was linked to his religious beliefs, religion often provides strength to those who find their trials too extreme to handle on their own. His religion, therefore, could account in part for Kennedy's quiet strength during the most trying times of his life, including during the Cuban missile crisis.

The transcript of ExComm meetings show that there are several instances in the Oval Office when Kennedy would ask "And then where are we?" This question was followed by a period of silence.¹⁴⁶ During these quiet moments, it is possible that Kennedy was quietly in contemplation over what move to make next, using the full range of his decision-making tools, including his personal faith. At times like these, it is possible that the president was exhibiting all four virtues in his slow, deliberate, and thoughtful deliberation. These moments that allowed the president to work through his decisions through reflection and discernment during the ExComm meetings were brief. Usually during the meetings, he needed to be steadfast to stave off the growing calls for military action, something Kennedy knew would kill hundreds, if not thousands or millions of people. This is not to say that Kennedy was "obsessed with fatality figures" but he also made a conscious effort to consider every possible option that might avoid

¹⁴⁵ Sidey, *John F. Kennedy*, 279; Blaine, *Kennedy Detail*, 95; O'Donnell and Powers, "Johnny," 363.

¹⁴⁶ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 158.

war.¹⁴⁷ Just as he had done as a young man, in his attempts to develop his own brand of faith through discernment, Kennedy's reactions to the various options presented him during the crisis were varied and well-thought out. His approach was one that pivoted on taking all necessary actions and no unnecessary actions. This was no time to be "hasty, hesitant, reckless, or afraid."¹⁴⁸ The declassification of records from the Kennedy Administration, particularly tapes and transcripts from the Cuban missile crisis, have allowed a reexamining of some of the role that the president played in the crisis. It is clear from the declassified materials that patience and diplomacy can help reduce tensions and, potentially, avoid a war. It is also clear that it was the president, assisted by his brother, who played a decisive role in providing the patience that was required to prevent all-out war from breaking out during the crisis.¹⁴⁹ Kennedy's conscientiousness may have been based on his internalized knowledge of the Catholic cardinal virtues being used in concert with his decision-making process.

Throughout his public life, John Kennedy was well-known for his empathy, a quality that many credited for his ability to relate to those he was representing while in Congress and, again, during his presidency. While making decisions, he would put himself in the position of others in an attempt to understand their motivations.¹⁵⁰ This ability, coupled with his genuine concern for other people, led the president to consider the "whys" of both the Soviets and the Cubans and to feel the potential pain of loss resulting from nuclear war. Empathy, though not shared by all of the worlds' Christians,

¹⁴⁷ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 577.

¹⁴⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 795.

¹⁴⁹ Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 573; Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ Detzer, *The Brink*, 211.

is a trait espoused in the person of Jesus Christ and, therefore is encouraged in those who are capable of such deep compassion, providing further evidence of the influence of Kennedy's Catholic upbringing in his thinking during his administration in general and, specifically, during the Cuban crisis.

Kennedy's questions regarding the well-being, both physically and mentally, of those around him was demonstrative of the empathy he felt for others. He was concerned about the exhaustive schedule being kept by the members of ExComm and how that was affecting, not just their decision-making abilities, but also their physical well-being, as well.¹⁵¹ The level of exhaustion that many of the officials were experiencing was a general threat to the process of resolving the crisis, so Kennedy's concern was both for his officials' well-being and his goal of keeping the United States from nuclear war. Physical exhaustion was an issue Kennedy understood well, despite his trying to maintain a normal schedule during the crisis. But the fear of his officials' mental exhaustion weighed on Kennedy, as well, partly because it was something he possibly experienced in his quieter moments, while carefully weighing the possible actions to take during the crisis. The mental exhaustion of his officials serving on the ExComm was compounded by the fact that they were unsure of the fate of their families, while they were spending days and nights near the White House. The top government officials would be moved to the White House bunker or the off-site bunker that was designed to keep the American government functioning during a nuclear attack, only the president's family would be permitted the same protections. Kennedy felt the fear of the men around him, being separated from their families for the long days and nights in the White House with the

¹⁵¹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 794-795.

impending potential for nuclear war. Many officials made couches into beds or stayed in hotels near the White House, simply to be nearby in case the worst were to happen.¹⁵² Kennedy, however, was fortunate enough to have his family with him in the White House, but he never stopped considering the fates of the families of the men who were helping him steer America out of the crisis. With little advance warning, their families would be expected to travel to a designated location to be taken to safety. Kennedy questioned his good friend and special assistant, Dave Powers, about his wife's reaction to the events, once they were made public. He was concerned that she was frightened, being left home alone should the worst-case scenario play out across the nation.¹⁵³ The president made similar inquiries about the well-being of the families of his secret service agents, whose wives and children were accustomed to the absences of the agents and the daily concern for the agents' safety, but the worry for their own survival was a frighteningly new concern.¹⁵⁴ Kennedy's understanding of people and, more importantly his ability to place himself in a position to feel the fears and concerns of others, helped him understand the points of view of those around him and be mindful of every man's unique perspective.

After the Saturday, October 27 report that Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr.'s reconnaissance U-2 plane had been shot down over Cuba by a Soviet-supplied surface to air missile and the pilot killed, a visceral reaction from Kennedy could have resulted in the immediate commencement of the nuclear war he had been trying to avoid for the

¹⁵² Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 781; Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 260-261; 267.

¹⁵³ O'Donnell and Powers, "Johnny," 368-369, 386; Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 256-257.

¹⁵⁴ Blaine, *Kennedy Detail*, 96.

previous ten days. But, Kennedy's reaction was tempered by the loss of an Air Force pilot. His concern was not about Khrushchev, but about the family of Major Anderson, even more so when he discovered that the Anderson's had a young son, about the same age as young John Kennedy, Jr. The president was so upset by this news and the plight of Anderson family, that he began working on a letter to Mrs. Anderson, even while meeting with the ExComm. In his final letter, which he would finish the next day, after receiving word from Khrushchev that he would remove the missiles, the president expressed the gratitude and sympathy of the entire nation. In a handwritten addition, he added that he knew "how deeply you must feel his loss."¹⁵⁵ For Kennedy, though, this was no mere platitude, for he had borne the loss of a brother and a sister in plane crashes. Despite the stress of his own emotions, John Kennedy was taking on the worries of those around him while trying to also take on the greatest crisis of his presidency. His empathy for those around him during the crisis and for the Anderson family, particularly the Major's young son, was genuine and heartfelt and came from a place deep within the president's moral center, formed and informed by his Catholic faith.

President Kennedy's conscience seemed to be most burdened by the possibility of the loss of innumerable lives as casualties in a potential nuclear war, a concern consistent with the basic values of Catholicism and all four of the cardinal virtues. This concern about the deaths, particularly the deaths of civilians, was mentioned at various points during ExComm meetings, but never by the president. Instead, his brother Bobby would raise the issue, likely on behalf of his brother, to ensure the president did not look

¹⁵⁵ R. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 10; O'Donnell and Powers, "Johnny," 384, 386-387; "The World on the Brink," Day 12.

weak or overly concerned with hypothetical situations, while staring down a very real threat.¹⁵⁶ Bobby, always the more pious brother, sometimes appeared obsessed with morality, but his deep faith possibly influenced his brother's judgment on what was right and warned the president not to take any action that could possibly "blacken" his reputation.¹⁵⁷ Days before there was confirmation of Soviet missile bases, Kennedy was critical of Congressmen who were calling for an invasion of Cuba. It seemed obvious to the president that they would perfectly agreeable to send someone else's son off to fight a war, the outcome of which no one would be able to predict.¹⁵⁸ Kennedy's conscience would not permit a pre-emptive invasion, nor would it permit him to order an invasion even after the missile sites were discovered.

The idea of a Cuban invasion troubled Kennedy because it would endanger the lives of thousands of Americans on Cuban soil, just eighteen months after the Bay of Pigs invasion. It would be, in Kennedy's word, a "mess."¹⁵⁹ During the crisis, Kennedy remarked "I have the responsibility of the lives of a hundred and eighty million Americans."¹⁶⁰ But, Kennedy, guided by conscience, morality and his level-headedness during the crisis, knew that his responsibility ran deeper than the lives of Americans: His decisions would have an impact on the lives of every living person on the planet. It was the burden of not knowing the Soviet response that was the greatest strain on the president. On the last Saturday of the crisis, October 27, the ExComm unanimously were in favor of air strikes, should Khrushchev not agree to remove the weapons. President

¹⁵⁶ Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 549.

¹⁵⁷ Martin, *A Hero for Our Time*, 408.

¹⁵⁸ Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 12.

¹⁵⁹ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 61.

¹⁶⁰ Martin, *A Hero for Our Time*, 401.

Kennedy remarked that “It isn’t the first step that concerns me, but both sides escalating to the fourth and fifth step—and we don’t go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so.”¹⁶¹ There was no question that the president saw what could be approaching if the United States went down the path to war. His goal was to avoid the tragedy of war, at all costs, in order to uphold the common good for all the world.

At the beginning of the crisis, some of the members of ExComm argued that instead of, or in conjunction with an invasion, a surprise air strike could possibly take out the missile sites. For the president, though his initial thoughts were centered on an air strike or an invasion, the thought of potentially thousands of civilian deaths haunted him to the point of, eventually, vetoing the idea of an air strike.¹⁶² Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, having known Kennedy for several years, was surprised that Kennedy had ever considered an air strike.¹⁶³ Knowing the personality, the morality, and the conscience of the man, made the thought of him launching an attack that would certainly kill Cubans not involved with the missile sites, seemed incongruent with his personality and his conscience. Robert Kennedy, again possibly acting as his brother’s voice during an ExComm meeting, made comparisons between a surprise air strike on Cuba and the attack on Pearl Harbor twenty-one years earlier. The Pearl Harbor analogy would be used several times during the discussion. The moral implications of a “Pearl Harbor in reverse” helped turn some members of the ExComm from supporting the action to opposition. Douglas Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury, for instance, was convinced by the idea that America could not simply bomb the island. It would not only

¹⁶¹ R. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 98.

¹⁶² Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 101.

¹⁶³ Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 49.

be historically “self-destructive” but also morally wrong and inhumane.¹⁶⁴ In a campaign speech in October 1964, Robert Kennedy said that advisers had estimated 25,000 Cubans would have been killed if the missile sites and air bases were bombed, but “the President would have no part” because of “his belief in what is right and what is wrong.”¹⁶⁵ That the Kennedy brothers were using their own sense of morality and conscience to influence the other members of the ExComm speaks loudly to the influence Kennedy’s Catholic faith may have had on his decisions during the crisis. Though he was already opposed to the air strike, Kennedy, using his brother Bobby, was able to bring others’ opinions in line with his own. While the president made his own decisions, he typically valued the opinions of others, especially in high stress situations. His wanting to bring the members in line with his thinking on the issue shows, not only how deeply flawed he felt the plan, but also how strongly Kennedy’s conscience and personal beliefs may have been acting upon his decisions.

Pearl Harbor was not the only incident of World War II that seemed to play into the conscience of John Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis. His own experiences in war and his older brother’s death during the war resulted in his fervent hope that war could be avoided during his presidency. According to Ted Sorensen, President Kennedy so desired rational alternatives to war that he devoted more time during his presidency on deferring and preventing war, than he spent on all other subjects combined.¹⁶⁶ But, America, as a whole nation, had been changed at the end of World War II with the

¹⁶⁴ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 80; Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 386; Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 88.

¹⁶⁵ Footnote Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, 64.

¹⁶⁶ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 2.

dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One scientist who worked on the atom bomb during the war claims that the horror of the attacks created what he called “the sanctification of Hiroshima.”¹⁶⁷ The bombings took on an almost “religious significance” because of how the events stayed in the minds of the public and “strengthened the world-wide will” to never unleash their destructive power on the world again.¹⁶⁸ The fact that some of the nuclear warheads placed in Cuba were 70 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima likely made the need to prevent the use of nuclear weapons that much more of an imperative.¹⁶⁹ The goal to find a non-nuclear way to remove the Soviet missiles from Cuba was also the goal to protect millions of lives, a fact that weighed heavily on the president.

Kennedy knew he had to proceed carefully through the crisis to avoid nuclear war and this fact weighed heavily on his conscience. He had a much deeper fear of nuclear war than most around him were aware and the decisions weighed heavily on his conscience because, not only would a nuclear holocaust be John F. Kennedy’s failure, but because of the loss of life that would result.¹⁷⁰ In private moments, the president would speak with his brother or with Ted Sorensen about children. He was not speaking of his own children, or even just American children, but rather his concern was for the world’s children. At one point, John Kennedy broke down and wept in front of Bobby while trying to talk with him about millions of children being killed in the event of nuclear war. The solemnity of the president about the future of all the children in the world, prompted

¹⁶⁷ Miller.

¹⁶⁸ Miller.

¹⁶⁹ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 59.

him to tell those closest to him that he must find a rational alternative to war.¹⁷¹ Kennedy was haunted by the thought of the innocent children who would never have a chance to grow up or a chance to use their voices. The president took on the responsibility for the future of these innocents.

This unconscionable choice was one reason why Kennedy focused on the quarantine option. There were, in his opinion, more ways to avert nuclear war and more possibilities for escalation that would not involve nuclear weapons by choosing to pursue a quarantine. The quarantine option also did not back Khrushchev into a corner and gave the Soviet leader more time to change his mind about his actions in Cuba.¹⁷² It was the president's hope that the flexibility associated with the quarantine would prevent an escalation to nuclear war. As Kennedy stated, "I chose the quarantine because I wondered if our people are ready for the bomb."¹⁷³ It seems unlikely that the president himself was ready for the bomb, either. In order to further delay using weapons, the quarantine that Kennedy ordered was not a strict quarantine but allowed for the passage of food and medicine and, despite the objections from ExComm members, petroleum and oil were also allowed to pass through, as well.¹⁷⁴ Kennedy hoped these less restrictive parameters would allow for increasingly tighter restrictions, should the crisis persist. This strategy made it possible for the use of small incremental steps in terms of what items were allowed to pass through the quarantine would provide a safer alternative than increasing pressure using air strikes, invasions, or missiles. Allowing the passage of ships carrying

¹⁷¹ O'Donnell and Powers, "Johnny," 322; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 795, 1-2; Clarke, *JFK's Last Hundred Days*, 19.

¹⁷² Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 255; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 800.

¹⁷³ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 156.

¹⁷⁴ Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 82.

medical supplies and food also ensured that the president was not undertaking an action that ran counter to his conscience. He avoided an air strike because he feared the death of Cuban civilians, so allowing the free passage of medical and food supplies would alleviate any moral conflict associated with preventing Cuban civilians from receiving life-saving supplies. Similarly, Kennedy ordered that ships not stopping at the quarantine line be disabled, but not sunk. If the crisis came to the point of needing to pursue more aggressive tactics, this strategy, again, would allow for graduated timing. The president also made sure that he was going to be personally directing the quarantine.¹⁷⁵ It would ultimately be Kennedy and his own conscience that would control that actions taken during the crisis.

Throughout the crisis, President Kennedy wrote to encourage Khrushchev to continue looking for the peaceful way through the crisis. It seems as though Kennedy understood that the only way there was going to be respect earned out of the crisis was for the men to reach a solution that would lessen the danger of nuclear war. In a communication he sent to Khrushchev during the crisis, Kennedy asserted that that both leaders must show “prudence.”¹⁷⁶ Kennedy’s implication in asking for prudence was to call for a more thoughtful approach to finding a solution of the crisis. The *Catechism* provides, as an example of prudence, a verse from the book of Proverbs: “the prudent man looks where he is going.”¹⁷⁷ It is this type of prudent man, the one who would always look forward to where he is going or to where he is trying to go, that Kennedy thought would maneuver the world away from nuclear war. Thankfully, Khrushchev

¹⁷⁵ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 798.

¹⁷⁶ Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 399.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1806.

seemed to heed Kennedy's advice on prudence as both Kennedy and Khrushchev seem to have realized that no leader "in his right mind" would use nuclear weapons, at least not in an aggressive action. The human price of using nuclear force against another nation would be far too great and, what is not lost in human life, would be lost in the precipitous harsh judgment that would come from the rest of the world, and in the lasting negative view that history would take of the leader, and the nation, who unleashed such deadly force onto the world.¹⁷⁸

On the evening of Monday, October 22, when he addressed the American people prior to signing the quarantine order, President Kennedy informed the nation of the duplicity of the USSR, but also reminded all Americans that the United States did not want to conquer or push our ideologies onto other nations. In truth, Kennedy did not desire the rollback of Communism, but simply desired a way for Communism and the American way of life to peacefully coexist. There was no intent to win the Cold War during the Kennedy years, but to simply "thaw" the Cold War by achieving the underlying goals of the Cuban crisis: the victory "of both peace and freedom..."¹⁷⁹ Part of the achievement of peace, in Kennedy's mind, seems to be that neither the Americans, Cubans, nor Soviets experience any kind of indignity for the crisis, particularly on the worldwide stage. In an action which aligns with the Catholic cardinal virtue of justice towards men, Kennedy desired that the rights of all people be respected. This also included showing respect to Premier Khrushchev, despite his duplicity and the continued missile site work in Cuba. After Khrushchev accepted the Administration's proposal to

¹⁷⁸ Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 425.

¹⁷⁹ J. Kennedy "Radio and Television"; Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 214.

end the crisis for a vow to not invade Cuba, some members of the ExComm were wanting to celebrate America's "victory" over the Russians. The president admonished this thinking, urging reserve.¹⁸⁰ Kennedy, himself, was relieved and spent a quiet evening in the residence with his family, but he was adamant that no one from his Administration should be making statements that in any way make it appear that this was a victory over the Soviets.¹⁸¹ For one, there was no predicting what would really happen next, as the missiles would stay in Cuba for another month. But, he was also concerned that the nation be respectful of Khrushchev. After receiving the Soviet Premier's acceptance of the U.S. terms and a staff member suggested a "gloating victory report" to be delivered to the American public, Kennedy retorted, "Khrushchev has eaten enough crow. Let's not rub it in."¹⁸² It took much courage and humility for the Soviet Premier to agree to remove the missiles and, if the United States wanted to make any advancements on a nuclear test ban treaty, there would have to be deference paid to the sacrifice Khrushchev had made to end the Cuban crisis. Again, this respect highlights the cardinal virtues of the Catholic faith, in that he was encouraging temperance in those around him, prudence by looking at the long-term solutions, and justice in that he was exhibiting "uprightness of his conduct towards his neighbor."¹⁸³

Aspects of President John F. Kennedy's personality, including his introspection and calmness, his empathy, and his steadfastness in both his opposition to the carnage of war and his dedicated church attendance, unquestionably played a role in his decision-

¹⁸⁰ Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 571.

¹⁸¹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 809.

¹⁸² Martin, *A Hero for our Time*, 471.

¹⁸³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1807.

making skills during the Cuban missile crisis. Though his faith is only mentioned, directly, in relation to his church attendance, each of these aspects of his personality relate back to his experiences with his Catholic faith. Questioning himself and his beliefs, introspectively, was something he had done since childhood and the calm that so often surrounded him could have stemmed from the quiet peace that comes from deep faith. Empathy can be a Christian virtue and the opposition to war and dedication to Catholic ritual are indicative of a man whose faith is likely of paramount importance. These traits are all also indicative of a man whose moral conscience played a role in his decision-making during a most stressful time.

Pacem in Terris

Though it is possible to draw connections between President John F. Kennedy's faith, the cardinal virtues of the Catholic Church, and Kennedy's decisions, actions, and reactions during the Cuban missile crisis, the possible influence of this faith in his handling of the Cuban missile crisis seems even more apparent when his decisions are viewed in light of the papal encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. The statement, which would be the most famous of John XXIII's papacy, was signed by the Church's leader on Maundy Thursday of 1963, the holy day when Christians mark the occasions of the Last Supper of Jesus, as well as his betrayal and arrest.¹⁸⁴ Though, by definition, papal encyclicals were normally addressed the bishops of the Church or to the bishops and members of the Catholic faith, *Pacem in Terris* was addressed to "the whole world and to all men of good will," the first time a papal pronouncement would include those who were not members of the Catholic faith.¹⁸⁵ *Pacem in Terris* was revolutionary not only in its content and its universality, but also how it was received by all those around the world.

John XXIII was more than a "caretaker" of the Church but instead became an incredibly popular Pontiff, even amongst Protestants, for his more liberal attitudes and his welcoming spirit.¹⁸⁶ The universality of John XXIII's message is indicative of the type of pope that John had become during his papacy. Nothing exemplified this better than the

¹⁸⁴ John Paul II, "*Pacem in Terris: A Permanent Commitment*," 18; James Sweeney, "Why Students in Catholic Secondary Schools Should Study Pope John XXIII's Encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* 1963," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 7, no. 1 (January 2015): 62.

¹⁸⁵ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris: On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty*, accessed March 10, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html, 1; Sweeney, "Why Students," 62.

¹⁸⁶ Wilkins, "The Odd Couple," 17.

release of *Pacem in Terris*, when the encyclical was printed in full in *The New York Times* and Protestants commented after reading the letter that the pope finally had a Christian voice, speaking even to those believers not of the Catholic faith.¹⁸⁷ The Kennedy Administration issued an official response, the first such response to any papal encyclical, and the next week President Kennedy, while speaking at Boston College made a strikingly rare remark regarding his faith when he said “As a Catholic, I am proud of it. As an American, I have learned from it.”¹⁸⁸ According to Cardinal Cushing, Good Pope John built bridges “between people of all religions...bridges of love, bridges of confidence and charity, tolerance, understanding, and kindness.”¹⁸⁹ During the Cuban crisis, these bridges were in danger of being destroyed by weapons so powerful that the world would likely never recover.

Pope John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* builds upon the traditions set out by former popes, particularly the messages that his predecessor, Pope Pius XII, made during and after World War II.¹⁹⁰ After the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Pope Pius condemned the acts, calling them “an infernal massacre” and an “outrage against civilization.”¹⁹¹ In the 1950s, his statements on war and on peace seem to indicate his belief that there would not be peace until another worldwide war was fought, but in 1956, he made what would become the last denunciation of absolute pacifism and conscientious

¹⁸⁷ John C. Bennett, “Editorial,” *Christianity and Crisis* 23, no. 8 (May 1963): 81.

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in McAndrews, “Parallel Paths,” 12.

¹⁸⁹ Cushing, Interview, 5.

¹⁹⁰ David D. Corey and Josh King, “*Pacem in Terris* and the Just War Tradition: A Semicentennial Reconsideration,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 12, no. 2 (July 2013): 146, accessed January 24, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15027570.2013.818400>.

¹⁹¹ Quoted in Ashley Beck, “How Catholic Teaching about War Has Changed: The Issues in View,” *New Blackfriars* 96, no. 1062 (March 2015): 138, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12113>.

objection from the Catholic Church. Pius moved the Church away from the just war tradition, encouraging instead “judicial intervention” and “chastisement” as useful methods to deter aggressors from their aims. The idea of the Christian “just war” had been first put forth by Saint Augustine, but the concept continued to mature throughout the Middle Ages. The basic precepts of the just war tradition hold that armed force is “strictly justified and strictly limited” and that it could only be undertaken “on public authority and for the public good.” John Kennedy and his family had attended the papal coronation of Pope Pius XII in 1939 and, in 1951, Congressman Kennedy had a private audience with Pius, so Kennedy likely knew that Pius was moving the church away from the acceptance and justification of the use of force to fight against aggressors.¹⁹² While Pius XII moved the Church away from the idea of “just war,” John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* outright rejected using military force for any reason, including to secure peace.¹⁹³

Though Kennedy and Pope John were only in contact once during the crisis, and never met in person, the Pope’s writing was certainly influenced by the events of October 1962 and it is possible that Kennedy’s thinking may have been somewhat influenced by the modernization occurring within the Church under the lead of Good Pope John.

Cardinal Cushing, on more than one occasion, stated that he believed John F. Kennedy to be the forerunner of Pope John XXIII because neither allowed his faith to stand in the

¹⁹² Beck, “How Catholic Teaching,” 138; Carty “John Kennedy” 52; James Turner Johnson, “Just War As it Is,” *First Things* (January 2005), 1-2, accessed January 26, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/01/just-war-as-it-is>; Corey and King, “*Pacem in Terris* and the Just War Tradition,” 146; quoted in Corey and King, “*Pacem in Terris* and the Just War Tradition,” 146; Yankee Network News Service, Papers of John F. Kennedy, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPP-008-004.aspx>.

¹⁹³ Corey and King, “*Pacem in Terris* and the Just War Tradition,” 146.

way of his relationships with others. Kennedy also eschewed some of the antiquated Catholic traditions of the Church, many of which were soon to be modernized by Pope John's Second Vatican Council.¹⁹⁴ Based on this observation, it is possible to conclude that "the two Johns" shared many of the same ideas regarding the direction of the Church in other matters, as well, including some of the attempts to modernize the Church's stance on the justification of war and the content of the Pope's April 1963 encyclical.

Through *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII appealed to the conscience of mankind, though he did not mean only the Catholic conscience. The universality of the appeal meant that man could worship God according to his own conscience, so long as that conscience "safeguards the dignity of the human person."¹⁹⁵ By the end of Vatican II, in 1965, personal freedom of conscience and more individualized choices regarding faith would be seen as compatible with loyalty to the Catholic Church.¹⁹⁶ While these were new, liberal ideas to come from the pontiff, decades earlier, in what could be seen as another example of Cardinal Cushing's idea of him being a forerunner to John XXIII, a young John F. Kennedy had set out to find his own version of Catholicism that better aligned with his moral conscience, while still respecting the rights of others.

The conscience John XXIII wrote about in *Pacem in Terris* hinged upon the idea of protecting the rights of others. In his encyclical, the pope was able to weave together the natural law theory, which had been part of the Church for centuries, with the natural rights theory. Many considered this connection a radical affirmation for the papacy, most

¹⁹⁴ Cushing, Interview, 6, 10.

¹⁹⁵ Maurice Cranston, "Pope John XXIII on Peace and the Rights of Man" *Political Quarterly* 34 (October 1963), 390; John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 14.

¹⁹⁶ Fuchs, *John F. Kennedy and American Catholicism*, 236, 252; Carty, "Religion and the American Presidency," 305; Twomey, "Anniversary Lessons," 13.

notably because it seemingly reversed some policies of Pius XII, including those which restricted meetings between Catholics and communists, among other divisive rules. Instead, John XXIII uses the encyclical to call on the rights of man to be upheld: rights of conscience, right to a just wage and, most obviously, disarmament.¹⁹⁷ The Pope, being inspired to write his most famous encyclical by a crisis concerning nuclear weapons, only mentions nuclear devices twice in the whole of *Pacem in Terris*, but he is unequivocal in his statement that the weapons “must be banned.”¹⁹⁸ However, his biggest concern and the majority of his encyclical deals with the kind of peace that comes from the “special aim the recognition, respect, safeguarding and promotion of the rights of the human person.”¹⁹⁹ In other words, the pope was most concerned about the rights and dignity of all people.

At least two dozen times, the encyclical mentions “the dignity of the human person” when discussing the rights of man and the phrase “common good” appeared more than forty times.²⁰⁰ Pope John XXIII realized that it is impossible to separate peace and the principle of human rights and human dignity. The encyclical calls on all men of good will to interact with the world with a sense of justice and of love.²⁰¹ This idea reflects back to the fortitude and justice Kennedy may have used as part of his compass for decision-making. It was the president’s desire to protect human dignity, especially of

¹⁹⁷ Cranston, “Pope John XXIII on Peace,” 381.

¹⁹⁸ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 112.

¹⁹⁹ Drew Christiansen, “A Vision of Peace,” *America*, April 8, 2013, 12; John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 139.

²⁰⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, “*Pacem in Terris*: Two Views,” *Christianity and Crisis* 23, no. 8 (May 1963): 83; John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*.

²⁰¹ John Paul II, “*Pacem in Terris*: A Permanent Commitment,” 20; John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*.

the world's children, regardless of their religion, nationality, or ideology, that he often spoke of while making his decisions during the Cuban crisis. While it is impossible to say that they were the sole factors in Kennedy's actions during the crisis, it is also impossible to disregard the role that the cardinal virtues played in his decisions.

Kennedy's use of temperance, justice, fortitude, and prudence and other aspects of his Catholic upbringing in his decisions during October 1962 may have led Pope John XXIII to argue the positive influence of faith in international relations. Kennedy once quipped that God's law had "nothing to do with international law," but his concerns while making decisions during the Cuban missile crisis did seem to hinge upon, if not God's law, the virtues which were instilled in him by the Church.²⁰² John XXIII, just a few months later, wrote that the same natural laws that dictate how individuals act "must also regulate the relations of political communities with one another."²⁰³ Because the same laws regulate both man and governments, if man must be subject to moral law, then so governments must be also.²⁰⁴ If Kennedy's actions and motivations did not inspire the Pope, then the president's apparent use of moral judgment as part of his motivations, at least buttressed the Pope's assertion on the importance of virtue in international relations.

²⁰² Quoted in Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 21.

²⁰³ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 80.

²⁰⁴ John Paul II, "*Pacem in Terris: A Permanent Commitment*," 19.

Conclusion

Just thirteen months after the Cuban missile crisis, both Johns, the two most visible Catholics in the world, were dead. Pope John XXIII, having already been diagnosed with cancer before opening the Second Vatican Council and before the missile crisis, worked to imbue his encyclical with all of the hope for peace that a man could, knowing his time on earth is limited. President John Kennedy left for Texas, still hopeful that a more comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons could be reached with the Soviet Union, never thinking his life would end without the chance to broker more peace. Many have speculated on what would have happened in the world had John Kennedy not been assassinated, but few have considered what would have happened if both Johns had survived 1963. Both men were met with failures, but both also “left behind a vision of what could have been: a world of tolerance, mutual forgiveness, and love.”²⁰⁵ Both men knew the power of their Catholic faith and both men exhibited the virtues of Catholicism: John XXIII, forthrightly, as was mandated by his position, and John Kennedy, diplomatically, as was mandated by his.

Only one week after Pope John XXIII’s death, Kennedy gave what is remembered as one of his most stirring speeches in support of peace and nuclear disarmament. The 1963 Commencement Address at American University allowed President John F. Kennedy to call on a “strategy of peace” in which he announced the United States would suspend nuclear tests and resume negotiations for a nuclear test ban treaty. He also defended the Russian people, declaring that “no system is so evil that its people can be

²⁰⁵ S.J. Adamo, “1963: Two Johns Died, World Never Recovered,” *The Press of Atlantic City*, December 2, 1993, A15.

seen as lacking in virtue.”²⁰⁶ This reiterates, not only the thoughts of Pope John XXIII, but also the attitude Kennedy took during the Cuban crisis, when he thought of the people, particularly the children who would be hurt if he made the wrong decisions and his insistence on respect for the Soviets, even in minor victory.

Despite many attempts to prove him a lax Catholic or to show that his faith had no bearing in his governing, John Kennedy’s religion still plays a major role in any discussion of his life, his presidency, his decisions, and his actions at some of the most crucial points of human history. To that end, though, the depth of Kennedy’s faith and its influence on his decisions as commander in chief, is an enigma, never to be truly unraveled. John Kennedy was a man who, as many of his friends and associates noted before and after his death, no one ever really knew completely. He also never wanted to be fully revealed, either.²⁰⁷ More than 55 years have passed since the tumultuous moments of the Cuban missile crisis and it is just as impossible today as it was then to know what goes on inside the heart, the mind, and even the soul of another person, particularly one as stoic in public as John Kennedy, a man who only let his emotions show in front of those he truly trusted.

Though then-Senator Kennedy was determined during the campaign of 1960 to convince the American public that his Catholicism would play no role in his actions as president, two years later, religion may have played a role in some of the most important decisions of his presidency and, possibly, in the entire Cold War era. Some have argued that Kennedy never really relied on nuclear weapons to get himself out of the Cuban

²⁰⁶ McAndrews, “Parallel Paths,” 13.

²⁰⁷ Clarke, *Last Hundred Days*, xii.

crisis, but that his “nuclear restraint eclipsed any nuclear recklessness” and that the decisions made during crisis were not made as part of a “rational decision-making process in any traditional sense.”²⁰⁸ If Kennedy was not relying on nuclear weapons, when all indications were that the enemy was, and if the decisions were not made in any rational process, then another explanation may be in order: that Kennedy was relying more on faith than traditionally thought.

Peace is not the end goal of all world leaders. That is as true now as it was during the Crusades, the World Wars, and even during the Cold War. Yet, at the time when the Cold War was at its most heated, October of 1962, American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy moved towards peace. He often told his friends, “All I want them to say about me is what they said about John Adams: ‘He kept the peace.’”²⁰⁹ John F. Kennedy kept the peace during the turbulent moments of the Cuban missile crisis and may have been aided in making the decisions towards that peace by the religious faith that had been part of his life since infancy. While at no point did Kennedy make any statement specifically invoking his Catholic faith during the Cuban crisis, the virtues he seemed to display, including the four cardinal virtues of the Catholic Church, the empathy and respect he felt for those both for and against him, and the course he ultimately chose to follow, all speak to the faith of a leader who was determined to save the world from nuclear war, “with a good conscience” as his “only sure reward.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Philip Nash, “Nuclear Weapons,” 300; David R. Gibson, “Decisions at the Brink,” *Nature*, July 5, 2012, 29.

²⁰⁹ O’Donnell and Powers, “*Johnny*,” 390.

²¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address” (speech, Washington, DC, January 20, 1961), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/BqXIEM9F4024ntF17SVAjA.aspx>.

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