ExactingEditor.com **Q&A** (this is the Sidebar)

James J. Kenneally, Stonehill College Professor Emeritus of History

James J. Kenneally, Professor Emeritus of History, holds a B.S. and Ph.D. from Boston College and an M.Ed. from Tufts University.

He is the author of *Women and American Trade Unions, A History of American Catholic Women* (select as an outstanding academic book by *Choice*) and coeditor of *Gender Identities in American Catholicism* (an honorable mention from the Catholic Press Association) as well as many articles in American history in journals, anthologies and encyclopedias.

Kenneally's 2003 book *A Compassionate Conservative: A Political Biography of Joseph W. Martin Jr., Speaker of the U.S. House of Representative*s is discussed at length in www.ExactingEditor.com/Kenneally-Martin.html

(1) Fifteen Hundred Biographies

FRANK GREGORSKY: To set the stage, I let the author offer a professional self-portrait -- very truncated, of course. But -- can you explain your development as a historian, why you chose the field, and some of the principles you've sought to carry out?

JAMES J. KENNEALLY: Well, I chose the field really [pause] by mistake. I wanted to be a History teacher; and so, after the Korean War, I went to use the G.I. Bill to get a Masters in History. And the VA refused because I had a Masters in Education -- [which was earned] before I entered the military.

And so the gentleman at the VA suggested: "Why don't you get into a Doctorate program, and when you get a Masters in History [on the way to a Ph.D.], you could drop it -- drop out -- and we wouldn't really care." He said that's the only way I could get a Masters in History [on the G.I. Bill].

FG: Um-hmm.

KENNEALLY: So I ended up getting a Doctorate in History -- and obviously changing my whole career focus.

FG: In other words, you kept going -- you didn't drop out.

KENNEALLY: That's right.

FG: All that extra time to earn the Ph.D. -- and what specific aspects were you diving into at that point?

KENNEALLY: I was primarily interested in American History, but obviously I had to offer other fields, European -- and more or less social history. By the time I'd finished graduate courses, I knew what I wanted to do for a dissertation -- which was women's history. And that in itself was fortuitous.

FG: The Ph.D. was completed in what year.

KENNEALLY: Nineteen sixty-three.

FG: That was fortuitous -- just at the beginning of the great liberation phase.

KENNEALLY: It was just plain good luck that I turned to women.

I wasn't sure I wanted to get a Ph.D.; and when I started a program, [for] one of the early research papers I did, I wanted to use manuscript sources in a subject in which I knew absolutely nothing. So I looked at the Massachusetts Historical Society to see what kinds of collections they had that no one had used, where the time limit had [run its course] and they'd be open to the public.

FG: Um-hmm.

KENNEALLY: They had a group of papers on a woman's organization opposed to woman's suffrage -- I knew nothing about it. And I thought: "Well, I can successfully research that topic then maybe this might be the career for me." So I did a research paper on that subject for the course -- and out of that grew a dissertation and an interest in women's history.

So I was "in there" early. I started doing the research, the dissertation, in the '50s. Got called back into the Air Force in '61, when the [Berlin] Wall was built. I was early into women's history -- but not because I had a great vision of anything. I stumbled into it. And women's history [became] what I did.

Then I became interested in the Catholic Church, in the sense that there seemed to be so much opposition to woman's rights. I had a group of students

do a study -- I think we did 1,500 biographies of women that lived in 1915, who had made a commitment -- one way or the other -- to woman's suffrage.

And then we tried to establish what was the most significant variable. We concluded the most significant variable was church. Those that were in highly structured churches tended to be disproportionately opposed to woman's suffrage. And the further the church was to the left, the more sympathetic they were.

FG: Um-hmm [appreciating the detective work].

KENNEALLY: So then that raised all other kinds of questions as to why and so forth. My wife and I were also raising a daughter [chuckling], which helps keep one interested in women's history -- particularly a Catholic daughter.

FG: And your wife -- Catholic, and very religious? What is her role in your adult development here?

KENNEALLY: I was more of a feminist than she. She is a traditional Irish Catholic woman who went to Catholic college and -- politically, theologically -- women's issues were slightly to her left. She's moved pretty much to where I am now, but I'm still a little bit to the left of her.

(2) Catholics in the New Land

FG: Reading about Elizabethan England during the 1580s and 1590s, I see the statement that only 2% of England was Catholic, and I'm always amazed at the lowness of that figure. I had the same sensation when your book says that, at the end of the American Revolution, the colonies had fewer than 25,000 Catholics. How sure are you of that figure? Not that I have a different one to cite -- but, in a new USA of something like four million, that total is astonishingly low.

KENNEALLY: That's the estimate of the first Catholic Bishop. Obviously there's no Census data (from the 1780s) on religion. But he estimated about 25,000 -- with about 16,000 of those in Maryland. Many of them were beginning to move into Kentucky.

You're probably aware that Maryland started as a Catholic colony but, when the Glorious Revolution occurred, they had a revolution in Maryland. Catholics lost control [of the colonial government], and soon they were discriminated against

and faced additional taxes. From what I gather, many of them apostatized, and left the Church.

FG: Um-hmm [conveying "yes, this is news to the interviewer"]. And does the bishop's figure of 25,000 "ring true" to you, given everything else you know the early USA experience?

KENNEALLY: Yes, it does. I have no reason to question it. I never stopped to try to figure out how many there were in my own right. I take the Bishop's word. He had to make reports. Maybe he even exaggerated, to make himself more important.

FG: That makes the survival of Catholicism -- in the first five or six decades of the USA -- something of a heroic story, I guess.

KENNEALLY: It's a very interesting story, because there weren't very many priests to take care of these people. And it resulted in the women assuming the religious leadership within the family.

FG: Now, this is something I never asked anyone but always wondered about: How far back can we trace "feminism" as a term, in the sense of being sort off a political label?

KENNEALLY: It's a term that came from the French, and it was relatively common in England during the 1890s. One woman historian has attempted to do in part what you asked -- and she said the first time she could find the word used in the United States is 1906.

FG: Aha.

KENNEALLY: And by 1914-15-16, it is being used pretty commonly. It was used in part to distinguish the more "radical" women from the more conservative women who were interested in woman's issues. Suffragists sometimes only wanted to obtain [the vote], and thought all [else] would follow from that -- whereas feminists wanted equality. Some of the suffragists were not feminists, but all of the feminists were suffragists.

FG: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

KENNEALLY: It makes sense. So the word was used by women themselves, and by critics, [to define those women] who were more "radical" than the suffragists.

(3) Lobbyists for Traditional Values

The History of American Catholic Women (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990, 286 pages -- ISBN-10: 0824510097, ISBN-13: 978-0824510091)

From *Library Journal*: "This book is important not only for Roman Catholics and feminists but also for sociologists and historians. From the colonial period to today, Kenneally reveals the biographies of women who lived lives of deep faith while struggling within the religious roles to which a patriarchal church has confined them. Their courage, independence, and healthy self-images, and the compromises they had to make, come across very clearly as Kenneally shows the diversity of these women, acknowledging the traditionalists while focusing on the feminists. Quite valuable for academic as well as seminary and public libraries."

FG: Given that your e-mail said you are on the left, I thought the book was fairly balanced. Despite a dismissive comment here or there, I didn't sense you really trying to "stack the deck" against the conservatives in this long saga of American Catholicism.

But here's the bone I'd like to pick. At various points in the book, you chide conservative female activists for being in violation of their own implied meek-homemaker code. This implies that the opposite of "feminism" is to be inert and passive. Yet can't you oppose a political movement, in this case the feminist agenda -- whether in 1890 or 1980 -- by doing nothing.

What if, in fact, "feminism" is really the opposite of traditionalism -- which it of course is -- and therefore to oppose feminists requires activism? A certain number of women have to raise the flag and battle for traditional values.

KENNEALLY: I think you read a little bit too much into that than I meant. I enjoyed the fact that they were active and doing these kinds of things.

FG: A couple times you sort of say that they're in a contradiction because [the conservative females] are engaged in lobbying and writing articles, holding countermarches and all that, and come quite close to saying that "if they really believed in their values they'd be at home takin' care of the kids" rather than have any political role. As long as the kids are properly nurtured, why is 10 or 20 hours a week of political activism or journalistic campaigning a violation of family loyalty?

KENNEALLY: What struck me is [pause] a woman testifying before a legislative committee saying that women are not fit for politics -- in that and other ways,

they're using political means to achieve the end to keep women out of politics. That's where I was coming from.

FG: It might be an irony, but is it a fundamental contradiction?

KENNEALLY: Ohhh [pause] -- yeah, I think it is. If you are saying "we do not belong in politics, and I'm gonna use politics to keep [us] out," it certainly is a contradiction. But I think it's a great one, myself. It's better than not caring about the issue. I am glad that they would do that.

FG: [Laughter] Well, sure you're glad, because you think it weakens their fundamental philosophy!

KENNEALLY: You know, one of the first women to testify before Congress [offered] a petition of a thousand women objecting to woman's suffrage. "They weren't fit to vote, they should not do this kind of thing" -- and yet she had gone ahead, collected the signatures, made arrangements to go before Congress, and testified along those lines. As I went into the research, it just struck me as ironic -- it just doesn't fit.

FG: But you don't go so far as to call it hypocritical.

KENNEALLY: Oh no! [Laughter] -- but I do find it fascinating.

FG: Well, I think you can sometimes use the tactics of the enemy to defend your own position. It happens all the time. I don't think [the conservative female activists pre-1920] were in total contradiction of their values -- but certain of the situations were ironic; I'll go with you that far.

(4) A Mindset that Existed Before *Vatican II*

Now, an even larger inquiry about U.S. Catholicism. I was also raised Catholic, and never told what to think. I mean that quite literally. Instead, it was all what to do. No meat on Friday, take part in confession, 15 minutes on your knees each after lunch each day in May to say the *Hail Mary*…

By the time I was 15, and had a few Mormon friends, I was astonished how they had a doctrine and a worldview behind their faith. There was an entire structure of concepts behind their behavior -- these ideas drove their behavior. But I had no idea of the conceptual framework behind Catholicism. As expressed to me at

the age of 10 and 12, religion was almost all behavioral, as opposed to conceptual or intellectual.

That very focus on “do these 12 things every week and don’t think about ‘em” -- doesn’t it allow Catholicism to take hold very early in a person, but then invite some kind of intellectual rebellion as adulthood nears? And isn’t the extreme “smorgasbord” nature of the worldwide Catholic community effectively a result of people wanting to keep the behaviors but insert their own ideology into them as adults?

KENNEALLY: Most of that has occurred, I think, as Catholics became better educated, and the priest -- who was at one time the expert on everything in the world -- lost some of his authority. *Vatican II* took away the mystical nature of the priest, by having him face the congregation, and say Mass in English. Some of the mystery then goes. [Kenneally reminds us: "Vatican II was the Church Council that met from 1962 to 1965 and whose purpose, according to Pope John XXIII, who called it, was an 'updating' of the Church."]

FG: Okay.

KENNEALLY: *Humana Vitae* really weakens the authority of the Church -- in this country, particularly, to such an extent that we now have so many who select the doctrines they want to hold on to and reject the others.

FG: Isn’t this why we see people like Pat Buchanan and Eleanor Smeal -- who agree on nothing politically -- saying in unison that “we’re good Catholics!” [Laughter]

KENNEALLY: Those two each represent a whole different mindset in Catholicism -- a whole group of Buchanans and a whole group of Smeals -- and they are both what critics (particularly critics on the right) call “cafeteria Catholics." I’m sure Pat Buchanan doesn’t agree with the Church teaching on capital punishment -- and so he selects in the same way that Ellie Smeal selects.

FG: But it’s still important to both of them to stay “within the faith.”

KENNEALLY: Yeah! Sometimes I think it’s historical. Most of my friends that are “ex-Catholic” are still Catholic very much in their mindset, if you know what I mean.

FG: I definitely do.

KENNEALLY: They've abandoned the Church. They laugh at it. They think much of it's ridiculous; in some cases they're more Unitarians and agnostics than anything else! [slight laugh] That's perfectly okay. Yet, when push comes to shove, they still find an attraction at certain times.

FG: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

KENNEALLY: And I think maybe there's a solace -- to continue to have faith and still be able to "interpret"; and so on.

What has happened now is that most conservative Catholics -- "conservative" in the sense of theology, not necessarily politically -- think that *Vatican II* went too far. What they're tryin' to do now is to go back, essentially, to a mindset that existed before *Vatican II*. And I think the Pope is perfectly willing to go do that. He'd rather have a couple of million people who say "yes, Pope," then have 10 million people that think for themselves and remain in the Church.

FG: Not only that, but he has at least 200 million new Catholics on the continent of Africa, a whole phenomenon you never see written about.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's where the Church is growing now. That's where many of the priests are coming out of -- is Africa. It's very interesting that you have missionaries coming to the United States again.

(5) Dorothy Day

FG: Theme-wise, especially when it comes types of activist, the book holds together. Yet one thing makes it awfully hard to keep all these names straight: How come no pictures?

KENNEALLY: [Pause] The editors didn't ask [laughter]. There are many I would've suggested, but -- I never thought of submitting pictures with the book. There are lots of ones I'd like to have had in there -- but they didn't ask.

FG: Well the two [female activists] that really stayed with me -- don't know what they look like, but I'd pick up a biography of either one of these -- are Dorothy Day and Margaret Buchanan Sullivan. Day started *The Catholic Worker* newspaper and an organization of the same name. Living from 1897 to 1980, she saw two different feminist eras in this country, one when very young and another during her final 15 years.

KENNEALLY: There's a great biography of Dorothy Day by a man named Miller [William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day -- a Biography*; Harper & Row, 1982, 527 pages]; and a good selection of her writings by a guy named Robert Ellsberg. She wrote so much that if you ever wanted to read all she'd written, you'd spent the next three or four years doing it.

And she is an absolutely fascinating woman. I met her on one occasion and talked to her, and I was as fascinated then as I have ever been since. An effort has been made to canonize her as a Saint in the Church -- and she would be appalled at that.

FG: Why?

KENNEALLY: It cost money to do that kind of thing, and the money would be spent for the wrong purpose.

I didn't mention it in the book, but she had an abortion early in her life, and that's one of the things that led her into Catholicism. Later on, she had a child in a common-law marriage. And she never figured that she'd have a child. She thought: "This child is a miracle, and she should have more stability than I've had." Dorothy Day was at one point a socialist-communist, an extreme supporter of women's suffrage; she was jailed in Washington [for that cause]. At any event, she had the child baptized, as a Catholic.

Day's parents were Episcopalian. And at one point she did room with three women who were Catholic, and was kind of impressed they went to Mass on Sunday, and so she did some reading. After baptizing the child, she herself entered the Church later on -- but held on to her commitment for the poor, which stemmed in part from the radicalism in her early years.

She challenged Cardinal Spellman during a cemetery strike. He was using seminarians to break the strike -- and she raised Holy Cain about that.

In the book I mentioned her opposition to World War Two and the Cold War. She wouldn't participate in air-raid drills -- things of this type. And all this time in *The Catholic Worker* she is pushing for racial integration. In her late seventies, she was out with farm workers, was imprisoned with some of them. She's just an absolutely fascinating lady.

> Initially Day lived a bohemian life, with two common-law marriages and an abortion, which she later described in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Eleventh Virgin*

(1924) -- a book she later regretted writing. She had been an agnostic, but with the birth of her daughter, Tamar (1926-2008), she began a spiritual awakening which led her to embrace Catholicism, joining the Church in December 1927, with baptism at Our Lady Help of Christians parish on Staten Island. In her 1952 autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Day recalled that immediately after her baptism, she made her first confession, and the following day, she received communion. Subsequently, Day began writing for Catholic publications, such as *Commonweal* and *America*.

SOURCE -- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Day (December 2010)

FG: So during, let's say, her 50 adult years, her economic views were on the left and they pretty much stayed on the left?

KENNEALLY: Oh absolutely, they never changed. Neither did her pacifist views. She objected to the U.S. declaration of war after Pearl Harbor.

FG: But on a few social -- or let's call them cultural -- issues she was on the traditionalist Catholic side?

KENNEALLY: Yeah. At the end of her life, she was very disappointed in the woman's movement. She thought it had become too oriented [toward] sexual freedom.

FG: And what did she think about *Roe v. Wade* and pro-abortion?

KENNEALLY: She's absolutely opposed to it.

(6) Margaret Buchanan Sullivan

FG: Now, Margaret Buchanan Sullivan, 1841 to 1903.

KENNEALLY: There's not much on her. When writing the book, I found no collection of papers or manuscript sources on her. What I got were people that knew her at the time and wrote things.

But she's fascinating, and husband is just as interesting. At one point, she was a Principal in the Chicago schools. And when she began to write, she attacked the public schools in Chicago. And she wasn't a principal of a Catholic school, it was a public school.

FG: What was her grievance?

KENNEALLY: She didn't think they were educating the students properly. At one point she served on the city council [and received] a devastating letter saying she had a "vested interest" in doing this -- the letter went on and on. To make a long story short, her husband rose to defend her, argued with a council member, it broke into a fight, and her husband shot and killed him. He was found not guilty in the trial in self-defense.

He was a strong proponent of Irish freedom using any means to get it. From what I can figure out, he influenced her in terms of her views on Irish freedom. But she did a great deal of newspaper reporting. And she wrote one book on Catholic women -- trying to show that there were always strong Catholic women. She cited people from the middle Ages, and in some cases used saints where necessary, just to say that Catholic women should continue --

FG: Sounds like she was a previously born soulmate of yours, then, in terms of the historical research.

KENNEALLY: Yes.

FG: And what was her husband's name?

KENNEALLY: Alexander Sullivan.

FG: One reason Mrs. Buchanan lodged in my mind is this part from your book, page 125: "The Fenian Brotherhood, organized in 1859, emphasized force and military methods [and] thus confined its membership to men. Although the association was often condemned by the clergy for its adherence to violence, a Fenian Sisterhood was instituted almost immediately. This was one of the first large-scale organizations of women in the United States for political purposes... It was probably because of the sisterhood's unflinching loyalty that Irish men, as traditional as any, shattered precedent and at the National Irish Republican Convention...in 1869 endorsed female suffrage."

JJK: Most of the people at those National Irish Republican Conventions were Catholic. And most of the Churchmen -- in 1869 -- were opposed to women's suffrage. And it's one of the first male Catholic groups that supported women's suffrage.

FG: And "National" in this instance means "American" -- we are talking about a group based in the U.S.

KENNEALLY: Yep, it is.

FG: Was that a large group? Ten thousand or more?

KENNEALLY: No [slight laugh]. It's hard to get numbers, but -- not large.

FG: Still fascinating. This country never ceases to maze me.

KENNEALLY: God, it’s an amazing country. I am sooo glad I live in it.

(7) A Book Can Only Go So Far

FG: What was the feminist reaction to your book in the early 1990s?

KENNEALLY: I can’t cite any “feminist reaction” as such. The book reviews were all very good. And the book was selected by *Choice* as one of the academic books of the year. And most of the reviews were by feminists.

FG: Okay.

KENNEALLY: There still was a little bitterness about men working in women’s history at that point. When I first started, nobody worked in women’s history. And then women discovered it, and there was resentment among males. I was made to feel very uncomfortable at a convention of historians working in women -- things of this type. A couple of the reviews had hints in there -- “this would’ve been better if it were by a man,” that sort of thing.

But most of them were very favorable; and in every instance of the ones I read, they were feminists; I could recognize the names. So the reaction in that sense was good.

FG: So when you say "no feminist reaction as such,” you mean no organizational --

KENNEALLY: Not that I know of -- not anything of that type.

FG: What if you had published the book in 1975 as opposed to 15 years later? Were you able to dent what seems to be a standing assumption among organized U.S. feminism that Catholicism *per se* is part of the “enemy camp”?

KENNEALLY: In terms of who I was trying to reach [by writing that book], it was more Catholic women -- to let them know, the ones who were pushing at the

time, that they had a legitimate history of active Catholic women who had pushed for equality and change and [to refute the notion that] all of them were having 10 children, were exhausted from it and couldn't do anything else; and was subject completely to her priest and her husband.

My object was to encourage Catholic women to be more active. Obviously I have no idea whether [the book] did that.

Secondly, I had hoped that Catholic hierarchy would read the book, and think mote about the positions they were taking. And again, I don't know whether that happened, either.

I did speak to some groups after I had done the book. I was active for many years in St. Joan's Alliance, an organization for equality of women in church and state. The only thing they pushed was ordination of women -- there was nothing else in terms of equality on all these other issues. So I tried to "spread the gospel" of [their objective] a little more, and when I spoke somewhere, I'd give out some applications.

But [laughter] -- I don't think I dented it.

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