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Celebrating Immigrants

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 12, 2009 NCR Today

Apologies to our regular readers for my failure to post yesterday. I attended a swearing-in ceremony for new citizens that took much longer than anticipated.

If you have ever been to a naturalization ceremony ? and I had not previously ? find out when your local courthouse is next having one. It is very moving. About two dozen people, almost all of them with families in tow, waited for the court clerks to process their forms, make sure their names were spelled correctly, etc. Everyone received two small books, one that contained the text of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the other which included the words to patriotic songs, listed some prominent American immigrants, including Mother Cabrini, and Ralph Waldo Emerson?s ?Concord Hymn,? which I had not read since high school, but the opening stanza of which came back from some distant recesses of my memory with ease: ?By the rude bridge that arched the flood, Their flags to April?s breeze unfurled; Here once embattled farmers stood; and fired the shot heard round the world.? That shot was heard metaphorically in the Baltimore courtroom as the new Americans, no less than the farmers of Lexington and Concord, made a conscious decision in favor of one form of government over another, self-government over monarchy and freedom over despotism that remains the most attractive form of government in the history of mankind.

The new Americans were African, Caribbean, Arab, Asian, Eastern European. They all stood and recited the oath which, like all oaths administered by the federal government except that of the President, includes a reminder of the anti-Catholicism of British law in its requirement that the oath-taker vow he or she is not practicing ?mental reservation.? Catholic moral theologians had justified the taking of oaths in lands where they faced persecution, but mentally reserving a critical piece of interpretation that allowed them to swear the oath without lying, even with the person administering the oath was left to put their own interpretation on the words.

The judge gave a short speech. I suppose she was a Republican appointee because she quoted George W. Bush four times and Barack Obama only once. But, the quotes were on point for the ceremony and her encouragement of the new arrivals was heartfelt. She even spoke of her own difficulty learning Spanish in middle age, and voiced her sympathy and encouragement for those learning English in their middle years. When she was done, the newly sworn in citizens were given their naturalization certificate.

Sitting in the courtroom watching the proceedings, I wondered where the animus against immigrants comes from, animus that underlay the outburst of Congressman Wilson during President Obama?s speech to Congress on Wednesday. One has to possess a very warped understanding of American history to see these immigrants as threats. Our Church has been at the forefront of the counter-movement to defend the rights and dignity of immigrants, whatever their legal status, in the 1920s when anti-immigrant laws were passed and today when the Lou Dobbs of the world try to frighten the native-born. The Church, not the Know Nothings, truly embody what is best in America?s traditions. And, yesterday, at this very moving ceremony, two dozen more individuals earned the right to vote. I hope they will get politically active and help the Church beat back the nativists. It is the right thing to do. It is the American thing to do.

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