

Defending the Red Mass

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 2, 2009 NCR Today

The Rev. Barry Lynn, head of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, is all in a tizzy because of this Sunday's Red Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew, the Apostle here in Washington, D.C. as reported below in the Morning Briefing. "The truth is this was set up as a way to basically lecture and give information to the justices. There is no other institution that has this special way to talk to the justices on the Supreme Court," he told CNN.

I will set aside the rather funny coincidence that the Rev. Lynn is ordained in the United Church of Christ which was the last ecclesial body to be disestablished in the United States. In Massachusetts and Connecticut, the UCC was established by law into the early decades of the nineteenth century because the Bill of Rights did not then apply to state constitutions.

We can set aside, too, the odd charge from a preacher that there should be preaching, aka "lecture and give information" at a service of Christian worship. One wonders what they do at Rev. Lynn's church? Actually, as I write those words my imagination begins to run wild. There are some things it is better NOT to know and the liturgical goings-on at Rev. Lynn's church fall into that category.

What is insidious, however, in Lynn's charge is the suggestion that the Red Mass is some kind of cabal and an affront to the First Amendment. There is no coercion involved in the Red Mass: Jurists and Lawyers and the President are invited to come but they need not attend. Yes, they will hear a sermon and they will sit through a Catholic Mass. And, they will get some mediocre quiche at the brunch afterwards, but that does not lead anyone to suspect the chefs of exerting undue political pressure.

The Mass certainly combines religious and national symbols in ways that are strange. At the beginning of the Mass, a color guard presents colors and the congregation sings the National Anthem, a song that is unsuited to the liturgy. Happily, a few years back, the color guard was instructed to no longer bring rifles, only flags: Precisely, the sound of the rifles clicking inside of a church was very upsetting. In France, where the Red Mass is the only Mass held inside the Sainte Chappelle, the army and navy officers proudly remove their ceremonial swords at the entrance to the church, recognizing that the house of God is no place for a weapon of man.

I love the First Amendment as much as anyone, but when alarms are raised in silliness, I worry that groups like Rev. Lynn's will not be taken seriously when there is genuine concern about our constitutional protections. But, then, don't look for Rev. Lynn to be fighting for conscience protections for religiously motivated health care workers either. Alas, here is an irony we can not pass by: Liberals who have forgotten that the protection of conscience is a liberal concern, not just a Catholic one. At least the jurists gathered at St. Matthew's in two days will likely have this fundamental liberal concern addressed from the pulpit.