

Lifting up the opposition

Douglas W. Kmiec | Mar. 23, 2010



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Commentary

"We are neither red states nor blue states, but the United States"
--Barack Obama

It is natural for those giving advice to the president to enjoy the hard-won victory represented by the passage of the health care reform. The president's tenacity in the pursuit of this measure is to be commended heartily.

In this moment of happiness for the respect for life and the dignity of God's creation represented by the health care measure, it is indeed important to give appropriate credit for those who brought us to this opportunity to have publicly provided means to show greater respect for life and the dignity of all of God's creation.

In this spirit, Michael Sean Winters [lifting up of Sr. Carol Keehan](#) [1] for leading the Catholic Health Association to make a pivotal endorsement is much, much deserved. In Mr. Winters' usual style, he gave praise cleverly and insightfully. Mr. Winters redeployed those charitably and eloquently given words by John Noonan, my former Notre Dame colleague, who spoke in lieu of Ambassador Mary Ann Glendon at last year's contentious Notre Dame commencement.

But the cleverness of Michael's quotation of John Noonan, was not, as some might at first think, to be found in using the words of someone who might be perceived as a conservative Catholic scholar to justly honor Sr. Carol's more progressive voice. It is rather that using this conservative voice calls upon the Obama administration in this moment of triumph not to gloat. It is in the present moment of our success that the real promise of post-partisan achievement may yet be found.

Those of us who defended the president and Notre Dame's decision to honor him last year missed this opportunity when we didn't commend Mary Ann Glendon's act of conscience even as we may have perceived it as disproportionate or unjustified. John Noonan bridged that oversight on our part by making reference to the former ambassador to the Holy See as "our friend," and this is what makes Michael's reference to Noonan so meaningful. Mary Ann Glendon indeed remains our friend notwithstanding the rancor and division that some partisans have sought to impose upon us. This core friendship which we share in the fullness of the faith ought never to be seen in jeopardy merely because of occasional difference over the means to achieve the common good.

Notre Dame's commencement was intended to honor President Obama and Catholic social teaching at one in the same time. It was, in my judgment, a serious error for a number of influential American bishops for whom I have great respect to have then proclaimed that dual purpose to be impossible. Despite the bishops' insistence that they did not want to have their opposition to the president's designation understood as personal disdain for the president, in the context of the moment, many of the president's allies could see it as little else. Certainly, to many of us who defended Our Lady's university, those arguing to bar the president seemed to reason more from personal politics than pastoral grace.

Whatever the truth of the matter in men's souls that which was then proclaimed impossible has now been accomplished by the health care reform legislation, and this very much needs to be remembered and said explicitly now since far too many bishops whose voices of needed leadership were silent last spring with respect to the commotion in South Bend.

But something else needs to be said: it is very likely that the strongest opponent of the president's health care initiative did so not out of animosity or disregard of his fellow man, but out of a difference of opinion as to how to improve the human condition. It is now up to us to put into action the "other cheek" admonition of modern American politics that there are not red states and blue states, but only the United States.

Sr. Carol's act of conscience will indeed be long remembered along with the likes of that of Notre Dame president Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, and if I may be permitted a more personal reference to Sister Bernadette Murphy SSL, a member of my parish in California, who passed from this earth just shortly before seeing the hopeful glimmer of universal care taken up in America. I am confident Sr. Bernadette represents many names, lay and religious, known to each of us and for whom we offer constant prayer and whose work in behalf of social justice is accomplished each day in ways less public but every bit as meaningful. Sr. Bernadette, like the long-time champion of the needs of the overlooked, Ted Kennedy, is in this moment of success also fondly remembered.

In the very same spirit as Michael Sean Winters wrote, let us each resolve in our separate ways to lift up someone who at first might not anticipate our praise or affirmation. To begin, let me mention Congressman Bart Stupak. I suspect that many reading this publication would relegate Mr. Stupak to the ranks of those opposed to the extension of health care. As Mr. Stupak saw things, however, he was championing health care for all by insisting that there be explicit protection of all life -- born and unborn -- in the legislative language and in what he did secure, a presidential executive order, which amounts to the president's constitutional bond. Not all of us saw the President's efforts at reforming health care as posing the same challenges to conscientious objection or in need for presidential assurance as Mr. Stupak did, and we worried that the congressman's opposition was again allowing the perfect to be the enemy of the good. What the Congressman saw as a defense of principle, others saw as an excuse to be ungenerous.

It turned out not to be, and just as we praise Sr. Carol, we should affirm, or at least, embrace Mr. Stupak. It is the other side that shouts out with irrational venom in the House chamber "baby killer" as the Congressman accepted the assurances of the presidential executive order, not us. Let us instead applaud, whether we thought it necessary or not, that Mr. Stupak demonstrated throughout the process an extra measure of faith, reason and political courage.

As delighted as we are with the success of the health care effort, none of us who rallied to Obama's post-partisan message in 2008 can be pleased with the persistence of the partisan divide. We can choose, however, to use the health reform success to heal the needless partisan divisions which Barack Obama's candidacy and presidency first inspired. To do so, we must be as inclusive as possible in seeing that those who opposed the president, or held out for special reassurance, are not an enemy of the good, only an advocate for it, articulated differently.

Not to grasp this opportunity for true friendship would keep us from the pursuit of the even greater common good -- on immigration reform, for example, or on peace in the Middle East where we must be unwavering in our insistence upon a two-state solution that is constantly at risk of being undermined by imprudent actions on either side.

Let us not celebrate this moment of legislative success as if it was the province of an elite in-group gathered near an oval office, but with as welcoming and as wide a circle of gratitude as the Sermon on the Mount invites.

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