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More on the Hierarchy & the Media

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 13, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, we commented [1]upon what happens when the Vatican does a bad job of getting its message out because of a failure to understand how the media works. Today, let?s focus on what might happen if the Vatican and the bishops did a better job with the media.

My colleague John Allen has called attention [2]to the success the Vatican had in rolling out Pope Benedict?s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* last year. The release was timed to coincide with the G-8 summit meeting being held in Italy and, subsequently, with the visit of President Obama. The encyclical received not only favorable editorial comment in the Catholic press but also in the secular press, with the notable exception of George Weigel who penned one of the worst essays he has ever written that poked fun at what he deemed the incoherence of the text. In fact, as Archbishop Giancarlo Maria Bregantini of the Italian Bishops? Conference said in an interview Allen reproduces, ?What?s striking in the encyclical is the deep logical coherence, even ontological coherence, between respect for a baby in its mother?s womb and respect, for example, for creation, for the migrant laborer, for everything God has created.? I would add one adjective to Bregantini?s encomium. The coherence of the encyclical was also accessible. It did not rely on citations to canon law or make obscure theological points. The Pope?s lucid prose could be read and understood by any reasonably educated Catholic.

That accesible coherence had the further advantage of challenging both the dominant liberal and the dominant conservative worldviews in contemporary political life. To the left, the Pope said, in effect, that a social justice that does not express a foundational concern for the protection of unborn life is a radically flawed sense of social justice. To the right, the Pope said that the economy, not just the pelvis, is a proper concern for the moral imagination of humankind. There was no way to pidgeon-hole the Pope?s encyclical into typical political categories. *Caritas in Veritate* should make the platform committees of both political parties think again. That fact gave editorial writers pause, too, which is why the encyclical received thoughtful analysis: By not fitting into any preconceived political ideas, it caused people to evaluate it on its own merits, not as a set of political talking points. The Church must preach the truth in season and out of season, but it must be mindful of not appearing to be too partisan one way or another.

Let?s take another example, an intervention that should have been a slam dunk and instead, resulted in a PR nightmare. Last year, during negotiations with the D.C. City Council over its proposed same-sex marriage law, the Archdiocese of Washington warned that it might have to withdraw from its contracts for the provision of social services with the city. This was, of course, front page news. A neighbor who is Catholic called me literally in tears. The thought that the Church would pull back from its multi-faceted engagements with the needs of the poor and the destitute shook her faith deeply. Of course, the Archdiocese had no such intent, but this is how the matter was presented in the press. At the Cathedral the following Sunday, a priest apologized to the congregation for the horrible way the Archdiocese handled the issue in the press.

In its effort to secure a religious exemption from the provision that would have required the church to give marital benefits to same-sex couples, the Archdiocese had an unlikely ally, the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU exists to protect the First Amendment and it recognized that the proposed law threatened the

religious freedom that Amendment guarantees. Imagine how differently the issue would have played out if Washington?s Archbishop Donald Wuerl had held a joint press conference with the head of the ACLU. The storyline about a repressive, out-dated, reactionary hierarchy would have a hard time explaining a front page photo of Archbishop Wuerl standing side-by-side with the head of the ACLU. The story would not have focused on what was perceived as a hardball political tactic and, instead, on the issue that animated the Church?s concern, the right under the First Amendment to govern our own Church. No matter what you think of the issue of same-sex unions, and no matter what you think of First Amendment jurisprudence, I submit that the Church could have presented her concerns in a better light, certainly in a more effective light.

You often hear the complaint from some more conservative circles that the Church?s teachings have not been presented clearly enough. I think this charge is hogwash: Is there anyone who doesn?t know the Church?s teaching on abortion? The problem is not clarity; the problem is people disagree. Conversely, some on the left are prepared to snipe at any effort by the leadership of the Church to set any kind of standards. Yes, truly, there are things that cannot be reconciled with the profession of the Catholic faith. What the roll-out of Caritas in Veritate achieved, and what my wished-for press conference with the ACLU would have achieved, is to present the Christian proposition in way that invites people, Catholic and Non-Catholic alike, to think more deeply about an issue. The way to persuade those who disagree, and the way to encourage the faithful to a fuller expression of their Catholic faith, must always entail going deeper, looking at things differently.

There are those for whom nostalgia is the only prod, and they have EWTN. For the rest of us, the Vatican and the bishops need to be conscious of how they perform their role in a superficial media culture. Like it or not, no one reads the diocesan newspaper anymore, and priests are often reluctant to preach about controversies in the news. The result is that the Church?s decisions are going to be communicated largely by the secular press. (Would that all Confirmation sponsors would purchase for their confirmandi a subscription to NCR!) As some commentators pointed out last week in the Q & A, the leaders of the Church must explain, explain, explain if they want their message to get through, no matter what the issue or crisis. And, once they get the hang of it, they will discover the possibilities of today?s new media culture.

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