

Q & A: Professor Matthew Green

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 28, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

All this week, we are looking at the controversy that surrounded Shirley Sherrod last week. Today, we heard from Professor Matthew Green of Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies.

The question: What does the Shirley Sherrod controversy tell us about race and politics in the age of Obama?

Matthew Green:

Two things come to mind. First, not only is there still a lot of suspicion (if not prejudice) towards African-Americans, but arguments about race haven't changed much since the end of the civil rights movement. Before the 1960's, those who opposed civil rights for blacks argued that blacks were either incapable (e.g. biologically "inferior") or ideologically suspect (i.e. communists). Afterwards, the rhetoric shifted to complaints about "special" benefits (e.g. affirmative action) and reverse racism. In this case, the Obama administration seemed worried about the second issue (Sherrod wouldn't help a white farmer) but also about the first (failure to fire Sherrod would mean Obama "protects his own").

Second, the incident shows just how much politicians worry about short term events in the public sphere. When the video of Sherrod first threatened to break, Obama was scheduled to sign the financial regulation bill within days - a potentially huge media boost for the president. By firing her, the Obama administration doubtless hoped to quell a potential distraction from the president's legislative accomplishment. (Ironically, they accomplished the reverse.)

Folks inside the Beltway have long been obsessed with the "mini-dramas" of Washington politics. (Anyone who's watched an episode of *The West Wing* can attest to this - in fact, the whole incident felt like an episode of the show.) However, the 24-hour media cycle, along with the insta-pundit world of the internet, has exacerbated politicians' fears that any negative event will have immediate and devastating political repercussions. Alas, Sherrod was but the latest casualty of this obsession, which -- in my opinion -- trades deep, careful thinking for a crisis mentality.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Father Anthony Chandler, pastor of St. Martin of Tours in Flaherty, KY and Saint John the Apostle parish in Brandenburg, KY.

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